

Partnering with Communities to Prevent Violent Extremism: North Dakota Perspectives

I vividly recall a single moment from the morning of September 11, 2001, where the enormity of the events struck me. I recall sitting in the break room of my law office in Bismarck with the office staff and watching on CNN as the first Tower fell.

At that moment, the events of 9/11 seemed unbelievable.

They seemed horrific and sad.

But they also seemed very distant and removed from my everyday life.

I did not know anyone killed on 9/11.

The events did not impact my day-to-day law practice in any way.

It all seemed so far away.

At that time, and for many years, I did not realize that the events of 9/11 would come to have an impact on my career.

This connection to 9/11 became a reality for me on August 5, 2010. On that date I was confirmed by the United States Senate and became North Dakota's 18th United States Attorney.

As U.S. Attorney, I am the highest-ranking federal law enforcement official in North Dakota.

My Office prosecutes all federal crimes in North Dakota -- including cases that arise from terrorist acts.

Additionally, my Office heads North Dakota's Anti-Terrorism Advisory Council or "ATAC."

The ATAC is composed of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement officers, first responders, and public health and safety officials. The ATAC's mission is to work together to detect and prevent terrorist attacks and to promote national security.

Finally, as the U.S. Attorney, I am briefed by the FBI and the Department of Justice's National Security Division about the most serious terrorist threats facing North Dakota and our nation.

In fact, last spring, I attended a two-day conference at the National Counter Terrorism Center in Virginia which focused on this issue.

Simply put, the threat of another attack on the scale of 9/11 by violent extremists is a central part of my job.

I spend a great deal of time thinking about that threat, about what it means to us in North Dakota and about how federal, state and local law enforcement can effectively work to prevent such an attack.

However, I think most North Dakotans still see the events of 9/11 as I did at the time they occurred: far removed from daily life.

I think we have the idea that, here in North Dakota, we are protected by the many miles that separate us from recent terrorist targets like Times Square and the New York Subway System.

I think many North Dakotans think that, because of our isolation from the coasts and the relative lack of diversity here, we need not be concerned about the threat of violent extremism.

However, it is my belief that the threat from violent extremists such as al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, and those it seeks to inspire, has changed in the years since 9/11 and that we in North Dakota are, in fact, not immune from this new, changed, threat.

Nearly 10 years after September 11, 2001, we remain at war with al-Qa'ida.

Because of the success we have had in this war, the senior al-Qa'ida leadership is likely pinned down in safe havens in Pakistan's tribal region.

This was evidenced by the circumstances surrounding the recent killing of Osama Bin Laden by Seal Team 6.

Still, it remains the goal of al-Qa'ida leadership to attack the U.S. homeland and our allies abroad.

While the threat from "al-Qa'ida Core" may have been somewhat lessened, other groups, associated with or inspired by al-Qa'ida, have sprung up in places like Yemen and North Africa.

These al-Qa'ida "franchises" have increasingly turned away from the highly complicated, highly expensive terror attacks on the scale of 9/11, the Madrid train bombings, or the Mumbai attacks, and have, instead, turned to a new tactic.

They now attempt to recruit and radicalize to violent acts U.S. Citizens living here in the United States .

How do we know this?

From al-Qa'ida's own words and actions.

Al-Qa'ida makes videos, create internet forums, even publish online magazines, all for the purpose of trying to recruit Muslim Americans to the cause of violent extremism and to attack their fellow Americans.

There are several examples:

Anwar al-Awlaki was born in the United States and now recruits Americans to violence from his hiding places in Yemen as part of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

Omar Hammami, an Alabama native who joined the terrorist group al-Shabaab in Somalia, uses rap and hip-hop videos on the internet in an attempt to reach young Americans.

How does this recruitment take place?

As Denis McDonough, Deputy National Security Advisor to the President, said in a speech on March 6, 2011:

We know, for example, that not unlike gang lords and drug dealers, terrorist recruiters prey on those who feel disillusioned or disconnected from their family, community or country.

They target individuals who are perhaps struggling with their identity, suggesting to them that their identities as an American and as a Muslim are somehow incompatible and that they must choose between their faith and their country.

But we also know that this is a false choice and that it fails to resonate with individuals when they have the strong support of their families and communities; when they have faith in their ability to achieve change through the political process; and when they feel that they, too, have a chance to realize the American Dream.

Unfortunately, extremist recruiters have found an audience in the United States.

Najibullah Zazi of Denver, who conspired to bomb the New York City subway in 2009.

Army Major Nidal Hassan whose shooting spree killed 13 Americans at Fort Hood in 2009.

Faisal Shazad, who packed an SUV with explosives and attempted to detonate it in New York's Times Square in 2010.

Finally, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, several young men of Somali heritage, many of them U.S. citizens, have been recruited and radicalized by al-Shabaab, a terrorist group in Somalia with ties to al-Qa'ida. At least 20 of these young men have left Minneapolis over the last three years and traveled to Somalia to be trained by al-Shabaab.

Distilled and synthesized, these recruitments of American's by foreign extremists contain the following elements:

1. A violent extremist, affiliated with or inspired by al-Qa'ida, located anywhere in the world, who wishes to attack the U.S. homeland.
2. An internet platform for the extremist to send his message of violence into the United States.
3. A vulnerable American recipient for this message of hate.

In North Dakota, we are NOT immune from this scenario. All of these elements exist right here, right now.

To gain an understanding of this recruitment phenomenon and its potential application here in North Dakota, it is useful to construct a hypothetical:

Imagine yourself as the father or mother of a young Muslim growing up in Fargo. Your son is a United States citizen. He is entitled to all the rights, protections, and freedoms that everyone of us enjoy.

However, he attends a school where he is a clear minority, perhaps because of his ethnicity -- and certainly because of his religion.

In this situation, your son may find himself beset by re-enforcing factors that can lead him toward radicalization.

First and foremost, your son is a target for violent extremists seeking to recruit and radicalize him on the internet -- the enemies of America are looking for your son.

What are those enemies selling? They are selling violent extremism. They want your son to kill other people and likely kill himself in an act of terrorism.

What would make some one want to buy this product? What would make someone susceptible to this sales pitch?

Well, perhaps your son faces words and acts of Islamophobia in his school and community. These words and acts serve to re-enforce the message he receives from extremist recruiters on the internet about the incompatibility of his Muslim faith and the American dream.

And then one day your mosque gets vandalized.

The vandal is never caught and brought to justice.

And then one night, on the internet, your son stumbles across the web site of al-Awlaki and the words, in English, of this recruiter for al-Qa'ida in Yemen begin to gain a purchase . . .

And then . . .

And then . . .

It should be noted that the hypothetical we just used involved a young Muslim.

However, we are not at war with Islam.

Violent extremism is the tool of our enemy al-Qa'ida, but they are not the only enemy of the United States to use this weapon.

North Dakota has its own troubled history of "home grown" violent extremists that have nothing to do with Islam -- from Gordon Kahl and the Posse Comitatus to the current "sovereign citizen" movement. Homegrown extremists and white supremacists like these are also making use of the internet as a tool to recruit their fellow U.S. citizens to violent extremism.

So what do we do?

How can we counter those who would reach across the internet to sow the seeds of violent extremism here in North Dakota?

How do we answer this challenge without sacrificing those very ideals that make us American?

After all -- the slope is a very slippery one.

As FBI Director Robert Mueller has noted:

If we safeguard our civil liberties, but leave our country vulnerable to a terrorist attack, we have lost.

But if we protect American from terrorism, but sacrifice civil liberties, we have also lost.

At the Department of Justice, we have decided to meet the challenge of countering violent extremism head on. Over the past year, the Department of Justice has implemented a program of community outreach aimed at preventing violent extremism.

Working through individual United States Attorneys' Offices across the country, DOJ has reached out and engaged Arab and Muslim communities in larger urban areas on these issues.

Further, in August 2011, the White House released a national strategy for countering violent extremism. It is entitled "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States." The strategy sets forth a plan of community-based engagement to fight back against our enemies. This strategy for community outreach is the first U.S. Government strategy ever to address ideologically inspired radicalization to violence in the homeland. It emphasizes a locally focused, community-based approach and details three main lines of action:

- community engagement,
- training, and
- countering violent extremist narratives.

This strategy emphasizes that it is local communities that are on the front lines and best positioned to push back against violent extremists. The strategy also recognizes that words and deeds must counter violent ideologies at home and abroad.

In implementing this strategy, we must continue to make the case that al-Qa'ida offers a bankrupt ideology that leads only to destruction, while the promise of America is one of freedom and opportunity for all.

Our efforts recognize that actions that cast suspicion toward entire communities, or promote hatred and division, serve to reinforce violent extremist propaganda. Such words and actions can feed a sense of disenfranchisement that can spur radicalization.

It is this last point which is important. Fundamental to a successful strategy to counter violent extremism is the choice that faces everyone of us every day:

How will we treat our fellow Americans here in the United States?

How will we engage with our fellow North Dakotans on this issue?

How will we treat the young Muslim man from Fargo in our hypothetical?

Do we choose to send the message to some of our brothers and sisters that they are “less American” because of their faith? That they, because of the house of worship they attend, are not entitled to drink fully from the cup of liberty?

Do we in law enforcement send the message that we target and investigate entire communities as potential threats based on their faith?

Or do we instead honor our history?

Do we behave in the best tradition of American ideals?

Do we send the message that all Americans, regardless of their creed, are entitled to the protections in the Bill of Rights?

Do we recognize that American Muslims have played a key role in the battle against violent extremists both here at home and on battlefields in far-off lands?

Do we send the message that the President carried last summer when he honored the many, many Muslim Americans serving in the armed forces by noting:

“Part of honoring the service [of America Muslims in the Armed Forces] is making sure that they understand that we don’t differentiate between them and us, it’s just us.”

The choice is, I believe, an easy one for the thinking people of North Dakota.

Here in North Dakota we will honor America’s best ideals. We will implement a strategy to counter violent extremism by beginning a program of outreach to Muslim communities in our state.

Our program is in its infancy, but we are excited about the opportunity to move forward and have an impact on these important issues. In our outreach, we follow in the footsteps of the great work that has already been done nationally by other U.S. Attorneys and, here in North Dakota by, among others, Fargo Chief of Police Keith Ternes and the Fargo Police Department.

Through this outreach, we will work with local communities to ensure that all North Dakotans, regardless of their creed know:

that the Department of Justice stands with them to protect their civil rights;

that America is not at war with Islam as falsely claimed by internet extremists; and

that the American Dream lives here, **lives here**, in North Dakota, for all North Dakotans, regardless of the faith they choose to practice.

The seal of the United States of America is inscribed with the Latin phrase *E Pluribus Unum* -- out of many, one.

It is this fundamental concept that has seen us through so many trials in the past.

Out of many, one.

It is this concept which will see us through the challenge we face today.

Out of many, one.