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OPINION

The Homegrown Jihadist Threat Grows

ISIS's online recruitment is reaching into North America, yet the Obama administration still has no strategy to fight it.

By **JOSEPH LIEBERMAN** And **CHRISTIAN BECKNER**

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Three teenage girls from Colorado were on their way to join Islamic State, also known as ISIS, last week when they were caught by police in Frankfurt. Reports now suggest that the young women may have been victims of an “online predator” who lured them to travel to Turkey to link up with the jihadist forces in Syria and Iraq. ISIS has certainly proved skillful at using the Internet to spread its message of hatred and violence around the world, particularly through social-media sites like Twitter and the group’s online English-language magazine, Dabiq.

More Americans may be motivated to travel to the Middle East to join ISIS or other terrorist groups. The online radicalization efforts could also encourage “lone wolves” to undertake acts of terrorism within the U.S., similar to the two deadly terrorist attacks in Canada this week, both apparently motivated by ISIS’s online communications.

Islamic State “operates the most sophisticated propaganda machine” of any terrorist group today, as former National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen noted in a speech at the Brookings Institution in September. Mr. Olsen warned of the possibility of an ISIS sympathizer “perhaps motivated by online propaganda,” who could “conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home, with no warning.”

Al Qaeda’s online efforts have evoked similar fears over the past decade, and played a role in inspiring a number of terrorist attacks, including the Islamist terrorist attack at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009, where 13 people were killed; the unsuccessful car bombing in Times Square in 2010; and the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, which killed four people.



A screen grab taken Sept. 20 from an ISIS-affiliated Twitter account purporting to show senior commander Abu Wahib in southern Iraq sharing a flower with a child. ASSOCIATED PRESS

Despite all this, the U.S. government still has no strategy to counter ISIS’s and al Qaeda’s violent online propaganda when it is directed at Americans. Several government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Justice Department, have outreach programs to discuss this threat in meetings with community leaders in major cities. The FBI sometimes intervenes to dissuade individuals from engaging in extremist activity online by warning about the risks of illegal activity such as material support to a foreign terrorist organization. But such efforts have been sporadic and are

carried out ad hoc, without a comprehensive strategy for countering the online radicalization of U.S. citizens.

In December 2011, the Obama administration said it would develop such a strategy. The White House rolled out the Strategic Implementation Plan for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which promised that the administration “will develop a separate strategy focused on CVE online” that would analyze the role of the Internet, examine “the absence of clear national boundaries in online space and the relationship between international and domestic radicalization to violence,” and then assess legal issues and agencies’ authorities and capabilities.

In 2012, administration officials told Congress on several occasions that they were on the case. In April 2012, then-White House Homeland Security Advisor John Brennan sent a letter to Sen. Joseph Lieberman (one of the authors here), noting that “this issue is of such importance that it warrants a ‘separate, more comprehensive strategy,’ which we are developing.”

In September 2012, Janet Napolitano, DHS secretary at the time, said that “interagency partners are currently developing a strategy around countering violent extremism online” and that the “strategy focuses on leveraging Internet safety principles to protect communities from violent extremist propaganda.”

Two years later, there is still no strategy. In February 2013, the White House released a blog post titled “Working to Counter Online Radicalization to Violence in the United States” and an accompanying fact sheet that briefly discussed the issue. The fact sheet also listed existing related programs and noted the establishment of a new “Interagency Working Group to Counter Online Radicalization to Violence” that would address the issue.

The blog post addressed none of the specific issues mentioned in the Strategic Implementation Plan of December 2011. For example, it did not look at the relationship between domestic and international radicalization, and included no discussion of relevant legal issues and agency roles. There is no evidence that this new Interagency Working Group has done anything since the release of the blog post.

Without such a strategy in place, federal agencies have limited ability to develop programs that can counter the influence ISIS’s propaganda within the U.S. A strategy would allow government agencies—the DHS and Justice, for example—to develop a new U.S.-focused program, similar to an existing State Department program that is focused overseas. The strategy should also integrate counter-messaging with related Internet safety, community engagement and law-enforcement efforts.

Given the continuing threat that ISIS and al Qaeda pose to the homeland, and in light of the murderous ISIS-inspired attacks in Canada, the Obama administration should make this strategy a priority. That would help the U.S. combat the spread of a violent Islamist ideology, and reduce the threat of homegrown terrorist attacks in the U.S.

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