
Do American Muslims Support Terrorism?

by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans. By David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, and Ebrahim Moosa. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2010. 61 pp. Free download.

Schanzer and Moosa of Duke University and Kurzman of the University of North Carolina have garnered a fair amount of media attention for their study despite its complete methodological failure. *Anti-Terror Lessons* asks some good questions in assessing the level of radicalization among American Muslims and identifying mechanisms to counter radical ideology. But the authors' approach to answering these questions evinces a lack of rigor that renders the report's conclusions untrustworthy.

The problems begin with a failure to define terms. A report about radicalization (a word that appears ninety-nine times in its pages) obviously must define that term; what constitutes radicalism is by no means self-evident. The authors' reliance on two contradictory datasets makes this problem even more acute.

One set consists of more than 120 interviews conducted in Buffalo, Houston, Seattle, and Raleigh-Durham to gather information on American Muslims' attitudes toward terrorism and their anti-radicalization efforts. The authors conclude from these interviews that "Muslim-Americans do not support terrorism directed at the United States or innocent civilians." They

concede that "some of our interviewees were less quick to condemn other acts of violence outside the United States," but because the project was intended to focus on domestic terrorism, they "did not attempt to gauge the extent of this support or probe interviewees on these issues."

The other set includes data on American Muslims who since 9/11 have either perpetrated a terrorist act or have been sought, arrested, or convicted of a terrorism-related offense involving violence. However, the study's appendix of "Muslim-American Terrorism Offenders" includes the names of perpetrators whose acts related solely to violence outside the United States, such as the Lackawanna Six and twenty individuals involved in Somalia's Al-Shabaab recruiting network. The failure to probe interviewees on attitudes directly related to the data set on terrorist offenses amounts to sheer incoherence.

At times *Anti-Terror Lessons* reads more like an advocacy brief than academic research, drawing sweeping conclusions from insufficient evidence. The report's discussion of "public and private denunciations of violence" argues that there has been "active denunciation of terrorist violence" by "senior Islamic scholars in the United States and the Middle East." Some denunciations of violence are indeed quoted but without providing a complete picture that might call into doubt either the sincerity or scope of these statements. For example, the very first *fatwa* cited in the report's section on denunciations of violence—a document that condemns the 9/11 attacks and affirms the need to "apprehend the true perpetrators" in order to try them "in an

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross directs the Center for the Study of Terrorist Radicalization at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and is a Ph.D. candidate in world politics at the Catholic University of America.

impartial court of law”—boasts Yusuf al-Qaradawi as its lead author. *Anti-Terror Lessons* does not mention that Qaradawi has also proclaimed that Muslims “killed in a military operation aimed at expelling American occupation forces from the Gulf” are martyrs and sanctioned suicide bombings against Israelis.¹ *Anti-Terror Lessons* favorably cites the Muslim American Society’s (MAS) denunciation of the 7/7 transit attacks in London but fails to mention either MAS’s curriculum (which includes the works of such Islamist ideologues who have advocated violence against the West as Sayyid Qutb, Sayyid Abul ala Mawdudi, and Hassan al-Banna) or its publication of *The American Muslim*, which has published a *fatwa* declaring that suicide bombings directed at Israelis are “not suicide and should not be deemed as unjustifiable means of endangering one’s life.”² Likewise, the authors uncritically quote a condemnation of terrorism issued by the Council on American-Islamic Relations without noting the group’s many ties to terrorism and extremism more broadly.³

The authors’ predilection simply to ignore evidence that might contradict the rosy picture they want to paint is also evidenced in their praise

Five Muslim Americans from the Washington, D.C. area were sentenced to ten years in prison in Pakistan on June 24, 2010. They were convicted of planning to travel to Afghanistan to attack U.S. troops. Despite finding that American Muslims do not support terrorism within the United States, the authors of the study conceded that some interviewees were “less quick to condemn ... acts of violence outside the United States.”

for the Muslim Alliance in North America’s (MANA) prisoner outreach program as an important counter-radicalization effort. Less than three months before *Anti-Terror Lessons* was released, one of MANA’s leaders, Luqman Abdullah, was killed in a firefight with federal authorities while resisting arrest for illegal possession and sale of firearms. The criminal complaint subsequently filed against his coconspirators (some of whom, it notes, “converted to Islam while they were serving sentences in various prisons across the United States”) accused Abdullah of “call[ing] his followers to an offensive jihad” and telling them that “they need to be with the Taliban, Hizballah, and with Sheikh bin Laden.”⁴ Abdullah’s teachings may or may not be typical of MANA’s prisoner outreach efforts, but they are one of the few inside glimpses that have been afforded. The

1 Yusuf al-Qaradawi, “Those Who Die Fighting U.S. Occupation Forces Are Martyrs,” *Islam for Today*, accessed Aug. 2, 2010; Haim Malka, “Must Innocents Die? The Islamic Debate over Suicide Attacks,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2003, pp. 19-28.

2 Faysal Mawlawi, “*Fatawa* [Scholarly Opinions]: Questions about Palestine,” *The American Muslim*, Mar. 2002.

3 Daniel Pipes and Sharon Chadha, “CAIR: Islamists Fooling the Establishment,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2006, pp. 3-20.

4 *United States of America v. Luqman Ameen Abdullah*, criminal complaint, no. 2:09-MJ-30436 Eastern District of Michigan, Oct. 27, 2009.

report's decision to ignore them underscores its selective reading of Islam in America.

To laud the various American Muslim organizations cited above as bulwarks against extremism, *Anti-Terror Lessons* clearly needed to deal with the controversies that have surrounded them along with the evidence that suggests their stances on terrorism and extremism may be more problematic than their published denunciations suggest. The report's failure to do so is particularly damning because *Anti-Terror Lessons* professes to analyze not only public messaging but what occurs in private, so as to refute those observers who "fear that these denunciations are intended solely for public consumption by non-Muslims." *Anti-Terror Lessons* assures the reader that this is not the case since the researchers conducted numerous interviews and "cross-checked information with additional respondents and with digital searches of local newspapers." After undertaking this research, "[n]o significant discrepancies were discovered." The evidence about those groups that *Anti-Terror Lessons* claims do not deviate in private from their public denunciations of violence is easily accessible; thus, one has either to question the rigor with which they cross-checked their information or else doubt the authors' honesty.

This same propensity to draw sweepingly positive conclusions without considering evidence that would disturb their thesis leads the authors to laud Salafism, stating that "the self-described Salafis that our project interviewed were among the most hostile to radical Islamic

movements." Salafism, they explain, is misunderstood by the American media as "the term is more commonly used to refer to an intense form of personal religiosity, with no political implications." This discussion ignores the high percentage of "homegrown" Muslim terrorists who have embraced Salafism as their brand of Islam. Moreover, the report fails even to mention the most well-funded strain of Salafism within the United States, that fostered by Saudi Arabia. Even a casual reading of the Saudi-funded translation of the Qur'an leaves no doubt that this branch of Salafism is anything but apolitical.⁵

So what should the reader make of the ultimate conclusion in *Anti-Terror Lessons* that although "some observers are concerned" about increased religiosity among American Muslims, "our research suggests otherwise"? Quite simply, the authors have not done sufficient research to validate that finding, other than locating a few disparate data points and ignoring contradictory information. It seems the authors of this report are neither interested in providing a comprehensive picture nor in genuine academic inquiry. This review by no means covers all of the methodological and outright factual errors contained in this report, which will do far more to confuse than to illuminate future discussions of Islam in America.



5 Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan trans., *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, 15th ed. (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers and Distributors, 1996).

Iranian Influence Spreading Like a Disease

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak compared Iran's growing influence in the Middle East to a "cancer," according to a cable released by the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks.

"President Mubarak has made it clear that he sees Iran as Egypt's—and the region's—primary strategic threat," says the secret cable, sent April 28, 2009, from the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. "His already dangerous neighborhood ... has only become more so since the fall of Saddam, who, as nasty as he was, nevertheless stood as a wall against Iran, according to Mubarak. He now sees Tehran's hand moving with ease throughout the region, 'from the Gulf to Morocco.'"

The Washington Times, Dec. 15, 2010