

Hearing on

Islamist Foreign Fighters Returning Home and the Threat to Europe

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to share my perspective and experience. My name is Farah Pandith. As of February 2014 I have been at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. The opinions I am expressing in both my written and verbal testimony are my own.

Almost five years ago today, I was sworn in as the first-ever Special Representative to Muslim Communities at the US Department of State. I served in this role for five years and traveled to more than 80 countries, where I met with thousands of Muslims. I engaged with communities, heard stories, and developed a new perspective on what is happening globally to Muslim youth.

The first thing to understand is that Muslim youth are experiencing a profound identity crisis unlike any in modern Islamic history. Nearly every day since September 12, 2001, Muslim Millennials have seen the word "Islam" or "Muslim" appear on the front pages of papers on and offline. They have grown up scrutinized because of their religion—and much of this attention is not positive. As a result, they are asking questions like: What does it mean to be modern and Muslim? What is the difference between culture and religion? Who speaks for my generation? While members of earlier generations might have turned to close-knit families and communities for help answering such questions, Millennials are unfortunately tuning in to unsavory figures encountered on the Internet and in other venues. Extremists prey on young Muslims and offer ready-made answers designed specifically to appeal to this generation. They market their ideas with savvy and alarming expertise—from magazines to apps, YouTube sermons to Hip Hop.

That is by no means all that's going on. Muslim women are becoming far more conservative across the planet, rejecting established, local traditions of dress and society. They are "veiling"

when their mothers and grandmothers did not. They are listening to radical sermons on satellite TV beamed from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. They are downloading music, poetry, and blogs that celebrate isolation and hatred of the “other.” They are keeping their children away from people not “like them.” And most recently, they are joining the armies of Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Because a mother is a child’s first teacher, and because Muslim women are now showing a desire to be in the fight, young women are in a position to make or break their succeeding generation.

This summer, with its gruesome images of beheadings and other atrocities, has represented another turning point for our nation and other countries around the world. For the first time since 9/11, we are re-awakening emphatically to the growing threat posed by extremists. At the moment, we are rightfully concerned about the potential of radicalized youth returning from battlefields to conduct terrorist actions. But in addition to the short-term impacts on public safety, we should be concerned about the long-term ability of battle-hardened extremists to build new terrorist networks at home and extend existing ones by preying on youth. There is a critical ideological battle to be waged here. Extremists remain radicalized once they return. They are technologically savvy and understand how to use emotions to attract recruits. They also might command heightened and growing legitimacy in Muslim communities. Hard power responses such as retrieving passports are a start, but we need to do much more to prevent recruitment of new terrorists.

It’s simple: If we clamp down on recruitment, then before too long, ISIL and others will not have armies. The radicalization of an individual is a gradual process: Why haven’t we done more to intercede proactively during the initial stages of ideological persuasion? Why are we only interceding much later by attempting to stop extremists as they seek to cross national borders? Recruitment is a relatively new phenomenon, but we certainly possess enough information thirteen years after 9/11 to address the issue and scale up counter-measures at the local level, both in our country and around the world. We must decide if our goal is merely to stop an immediate threat, or to stop recruitment from happening in the first place.

The US government has struggled since 9/11 to wage a “war of ideas.” This is understandable, since such a war throws us headlong into fundamental theological and social debates that we are not equipped to fight. The good news is that we *can* win a war of ideas with extremists. To do so, however, we must invest boldly and massively scale up its use of soft power. During the two years that I served as Senior Advisor in the EUR Bureau, we seeded many soft power initiatives and networks, demonstrating a proof of concept. Initiatives like Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) were designed in the image of Mothers Against Drunk Driving to be grassroots, local, and responsive. Recognizing that European Muslim youth were in need of positive role models, we created the first pan-European professional network that activated a new narrative and inspired others.

By partnering with individuals and community groups across Europe, we managed to lift up voices of Muslims who had influence within local neighborhoods and communities, establishing the basis for an empowering a grassroots *countermovement* in opposition of extremist

manifestations. We joined former extremists, victims of terrorism, entrepreneurs, and women into layered networks dedicated to combatting the allure of the extremist narrative and ideology. This is the kind of work that we must now dramatically “scale up” if we are to prevail.

We can't create an ideological countermovement on the backs of a few isolated government-funded programs. It requires much broader commitment and focus starting now. Principles for future action should include:

- Investing significantly in soft power the way we did during the Cold War. We must give soft power as much credibility as we do hard power.
- Creating a comprehensive, coordinated strategy that does not skirt the ideological threat and that mobilizes all levers of power available to us (again, as we did during the Cold War). Such a strategy should incorporate lessons we've learned from the ground up, and it should invest in local answers.
- Adopting helpful and appropriate goals. The point here is not to win a popularity contest—to “win hearts and minds.” Rather, it's to get voices online and offline to push back against what the extremists are selling. It's to flood the marketplace of ideas with online and offline counter-narratives articulated by Muslims themselves. Rather than simply disseminating our message ourselves, we need to act as convener, facilitator, and intellectual partner to Muslim youth, bringing together their great ideas and seeding them. This approach will hold far more credibility in Muslim communities.
- Publicly condemning countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others that are giving life to an eco system that ignites extremist ideology—through textbooks, radical preachers, and mosques that promote hate and reject the diversity of Muslims around the world (not to speak of other faiths).
- Emphasizing proactive attacks on extremist recruiting, not reactive and exponentially costlier “hard power” interventions once military threats have already materialized. Remember, without recruits, there are no troops.
- Ramping up initiatives and knowledge about the radicalization of women, and developing new approaches to mobilize them *against* radicalism.
- Creating awareness campaigns about radicalization the way we do for diseases like AIDS or breast cancer.
- Normalizing the conversation about extremism so that more private-sector money flows into soft power initiatives. Government can do this by sharing information about what we are seeing and convening helpful players outside of government.

- Anticipating extremist ideological attacks, and keeping an arsenal of strong counteractions at the ready. In this field, there are few real surprises. With imagination we can predict the kind of tools extremists will use against us. We ought to be ready with swift responses, not wait days and weeks to react.

What I was asked to do at State during the Bush Administration was unique. At the time, forward-thinking policy-makers understood that America had to be proactive in engaging with Muslim communities in Europe. You might remember the intense days after the Danish Cartoon Crisis when everyone—our nation, as well as our European allies—was caught off-guard by the realization that something happening in Copenhagen could affect lives in Kabul. Sadly, these many years later, we have seen this phenomenon play out all too often. A false rumor, a video, a preacher threatening to burn the Quran can all unleash unrest as well as violence in faraway places such as Australia, Brazil, Zanzibar. We must accept that extremism *is* a global threat—that something happening in Copenhagen does have an effect on a life in Kabul.

The strategy of the extremists is evilly smart. By that I mean they are doing everything from all angles to re-make the world according to their apocalyptic vision. We understand this, but we are not doing enough to connect the dots and neutralize all their methods. Let me give just one example of how we might disempower extremists. In addition to the principles above, and as part of a larger strategy to counteract extremists intellectually, we should also take urgent steps to protect sacred and historical sites. ISIL and its ideological allies are not simply attempting to alter the political landscape and erase national borders; they are attempting to destroy entire peoples, histories, and cultures that threaten their worldview. They are getting rid of evidence that diversity exists, and with nothing to prove otherwise, generations going forward will only have *their* narrative.

As you are aware, extremists have been exiling and slaughtering ancient Christian communities in eastern Syria and northern Iraq; Shia, Kurdish, Sufis, and other minority families and towns; and Sunnis willing to oppose their nightmarish rule. The language of Jesus—Aramaic—is under direct and imminent threat as communities in Syria and Iraq who still speak its dialects are being killed or dispersed. And this problem is not isolated to Iraq or Syria; it's part of a greater tragedy unfolding from Central and South Asia to West Africa.

ISIL is hardly the first to use cultural destruction to demoralize their enemies, finalize their victories, and reshape history. The glorious cartouches on the walls in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt show scratched-out dynastic rulers whose names were replaced by those of new Pharaohs. Invading Mongols destroyed libraries and infrastructure across the Middle East, including the great libraries of Baghdad in 1258. The Nazis burned books and great works of art. Yet with the rise of extremism, cultural destruction appears to have found new importance as a tactic. In 2001, the world watched as the Taliban destroyed The Great Buddhas and hundreds of shrines in Bamiyan Province in Afghanistan. In 2006, in Iraq's destruction of the Shia mosque in Samarra, AQ helped spark sectarian fighting and destruction in Iraq. Sufi graves and shrines have been destroyed from Tunisia and Libya to the Balkans and Bahrain. The Pakistan Taliban has attacked Ahmadi minorities and their mosques. In 2013, hard-line Islamists in Mali

destroyed numerous mausoleums and burned ancient Islamic manuscripts in the fabled libraries of Timbuktu. Radical Salafis in Egypt have even suggested destroying the Sphinx and the Pyramids because they are “un-Islamic.”

As part of the ideological battle underway, allied extremists are trying to reshape the very identity of people based on a distorted view of Islam. The United States and its partners need to act to save persecuted minorities, sacred sites and priceless historical artifacts. Preservation of history *materially contradicts the extremist narrative* and testifies to our own record of tolerance and inclusiveness. In the course of protecting sacred and historical sites, we also are able to protect the peoples and heritage attached to such sites. Finally, amid sectarian tension, protection of sites helps avoid flashpoints of confessional conflict and could create opportunities for cooperation and goodwill.

We are fortunate to possess a set of actors and networks already committed to and working on the preservation of peoples, texts, and culture, including leading archaeologists, anthropologists, universities, heritage trusts, museums and libraries, and even activist celebrities. We could make great headway by mobilizing these assets in innovative ways. For instance,

- Our government could fund the Smithsonian and leading museums to preserve ancient texts and assist libraries and networks of collectors to move precious texts at risk.
- Western churches and congregations could adopt sister parishes or communities under assault in the Middle East, providing funding for refugees and protection of ancient churches and monasteries. Social media could be used to raise awareness and funding in real time.
- We could launch real-time mapping and monitoring of at-risk sites, much as George Clooney’s Satellite Sentinel project and the Google Earth/Holocaust Museum website focused on the Sudan are already doing.
- The UN could consider positioning peace-keeping forces to protect villages and sites where feasible. Such forces capably defend diplomatic posts, personnel, and oil installations in conflict zones. Forces already invested in counter-terrorism—like the French in North Africa or the Kurds in northern Iraq—could take the lead in the defense management of such sites.

Countering extremist attempts to re-write history is just one of the many things we must do comprehensively across all channels in order to destroy their ability to recruit young Muslims. Extremism poses an obvious terrorist threat, but as I’ve argued, the way to engage this threat most effectively over the long-term is by emphasizing *ideological* means as a complement to hard power. We *can* beat extremists at their own game. We can end their exploitation of the Muslim identity crisis and beat back groups like Al Qaeda and ISIL at their source. Doing so won’t cost a fraction of traditional hard power solutions, but it will require that we take a more

entrepreneurial and innovative approach to policymaking. We must stop playing catch-up and get ahead of trends. We must connect the dots and not look at specific conflicts or extremist groups as if they are “one-offs.” As a nation, we move swiftly, like nimbler start-ups. We defeated communist ideology during the Cold War by mustering creativity and full-on dedication. We can and must do this again.

One thing is certain: If we do not engage in the war of ideas for a generation, America, Europe, the world will continue to face extremist threats that will morph in shape and scope and grow ever more organized and dangerous. The time to act is now. So what are we waiting for?

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N.B. I am also submitting “Foreign Fighters; The Challenge of Counter-Narratives” by Rachel Briggs and Ross Frenett of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in London, UK.