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Changing minds

By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

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The terrorist plot uncovered last month in which nine Pakistani Muslims living in Britain planned to kidnap, torture and behead a fellow British Muslim — a soldier who had served in Afghanistan — was gruesome and unprecedented. Unlike other recent terrorist activity, it targeted a specific individual; the terrorists hoped to bring the images of captivity and slaughter now associated with Iraq into the West.

The plot recalls a question that U.S. officials have been asking: Why hasn't the American Muslim community reached the same level of radicalism as Europe's Muslims? Al-Husein Madhany, an executive editor of *Islamica Magazine*, had been considering the same question. The beheading plot's announcement lent urgency to his thoughts because the scheme involved an extreme, rigid interpretation of Islam that can impel people to violence.

Mr. Madhany believes that one critical difference between the U.S. and European Muslim community is the level of civic engagement. A number of factors have kept European Muslims disengaged from their societies, ranging from ethnic enclaves to discrimination.

But civic engagement is a process, rather than a given. Since the terror plot's announcement, Mr. Madhany has approached officials in American Muslim organizations with a promising idea. It involves focusing a forthcoming conference of a major American Muslim organization on the theme of civic engagement. The conference's speeches would center on this theme, and at the end the organization would announce a contest for excellence in sermon writing that engages the issue of "how North American Muslims, individually or collectively, can take leadership roles in long-term civic engagement efforts."

Using theological sermons to spread this theme would be an important step because those who hold the pulpit are seen as authority figures in the Muslim community. There will be an immediate on-the-ground impact if the pulpit is used not to condemn those who participate in American democracy, but to encourage such participation.

Civic engagement, according to Mr. Madhany, occurs at many levels. Volunteerism, starting at a young age, is central. "We should promote children entering the Cub Scouts, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America," Mr. Madhany says. "It's also not dismissing your Muslim children's career goals if they include becoming fire chiefs, first responders, public servants within government, or policemen."

Mr. Madhany explains that aspects of this project would include involvement in education boards, parent-teacher associations, county boards and tax boards. What is critical is involvement in issues of importance to the community — not through advocacy

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organizations (of which there are plenty within the American Muslim community), but through groups focused on social services and the social good.

Civic engagement is one means to give American Muslims a greater stake in their local communities and to undercut the tendency to both ghettoization and isolation. "I love the idea of Muslims getting more civically engaged, especially if they are doing it in cooperation with others through activities like interfaith volunteering," says Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Chicago-based nonprofit Interfaith Youth Core. "Interfaith volunteering is powerful not only because it provides a space for Muslims to share how Islam inspires them to serve others, but also because it is an opportunity for Muslims to build relationships with and learn more about other communities."

Another benefit involves the way American Muslims will be seen. When Americans see Muslims engaged publicly in a volunteer capacity, it humanizes them — allowing their neighbors to think not just of terrorists upon hearing of Islam, but to think of their next-door neighbor who is a first responder to local fires or a volunteer representative on a neighborhood association.

Many Americans wonder why more Muslims do not speak out against extremism within their religion. But sometimes lasting changes come not from bold proclamations or manifestoes, but rather small, non-glamorous steps that can over time change minds — and, perhaps eventually, change a community. If those of us who study Islam in America ignore these subtle shifts, we run the risk of misunderstanding the broad picture.

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a counterterrorism consultant and the author of "My Year Inside Radical Islam."

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