NYPD's Homegrown Hysteria

By Nat Parry
Global Research, August 22, 2007
consortiumnews.com 22 August 2007

Region: USA
Theme: Police State & Civil Rights

An influential report by two New York Police Department counterterrorism analysts crosses a dangerous threshold in recasting the "war on terror" as primarily a struggle that requires increased domestic surveillance and pre-emptive action against American Muslims who might become "homegrown terrorists" by visiting Internet sites.

Written by Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt, the Aug. 15 report recommends increased police attention "to identify, pre-empt and thus prevent homegrown terrorist attacks." The report was promptly hailed in the U.S. news media. (Newsweek called it "insightful.")

What makes the report troubling to civil libertarians, however, is that it lowers the bar for fighting terrorism to simply the possibility that some domestic Muslims might be influenced by jihadist Web sites, and it applies lax standards to target Americans of a specific religious faith as prospective terrorists.

Yet – except for the fact that Muslims have become all-purpose political whipping boys – there is little indication that disaffected American Muslims represent any more significant threat than, say, alienated white males, right-wing Cuban-Americans or inner-city gangs, and quite possibly less.

Arguably, there has been more reason to fear right-wing militia types like Timothy McVeigh (who killed 168 people in the Oklahoma City bombing) or Cuban terrorists such as Luis Posada Carriles (now protected from deportation by the Bush administration despite his role in repeated terror attacks).

Yet, after angry white male McVeigh car-bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, there was no talk of suspending the Constitution or rounding up right-wing militia members for pre-emptive detention. Law enforcement simply tracked down the conspirators and punished them through the normal criminal justice system. (McVeigh was executed and his co-conspirators were sentenced to prison terms.)

Many right-wing extremists also have their hatreds fueled not just by like-minded Web sites but by talk radio and TV personalities, such as Michael Savage and Ann Coulter, who flippantly use hostile, even threatening, language against political enemies.

Indeed, if Silber and Bhatt based their report on actual killings by domestic terrorists – rather than concentrating on a handful of thwarted Muslim plans and even theoretical threats – they would have written a report that not only took aim at violent jihadist Web sites but at hate talk on right-wing radio and TV shows.

Destructive Weapons

The NYPD report also misses the vital point that the justification for the Bush administration's over-the-top actions in the "war on terror" – including use of torture, detention without trial, and suspension of constitutional liberties – is that a foreign terrorist group like al-Qaeda might get its hands on a nuclear bomb or other WMD and inflict mass casualties inside the United States.

Without connections to such an external group, the potential destructiveness from a homegrown terrorist – whether an angry white male, a right-wing Cuban or a disaffected Muslim – is far less dangerous, meaning that normal police strategies within traditional legal standards should be enough to do the job.

Yet, even as the NYPD report downplays the danger from overseas terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, it refocuses special police attention on young American Muslims who – despite no direct communications with foreign terrorists – are deemed a threat because they might gain access to pro-jihadist Web sites.

"During the Indoctrination phase, when individuals adopt this virulent ideology," the report said, "the Internet allows the aspiring jihadist to view the world and global conflicts through this extremist lens."

The NYPD report also suggests that since it is so difficult to determine which Muslims may become "radicalized," police agencies need much greater surveillance capabilities, a recommendation that fits in well with what is known about recent Pentagon strategies.

A Defense Department document, entitled the "[Strategy for Homeland Defense and Civil Support](#)," has set out a military strategy against terrorism that envisions an "active, layered defense" both inside and outside U.S. territory. In the document, the Pentagon pledges to "transform U.S. military forces to execute homeland defense missions in the … U.S. homeland."

The Pentagon strategy paper calls for increased military reconnaissance and surveillance to "defeat potential challengers before they threaten the United States." The plan "maximizes threat awareness and seizes the initiative from those who would harm us."

Spy Satellites

With the latest news that limits have been lifted on the ability of domestic law-enforcement agencies to use imagery from military spy satellites, it looks like the Pentagon's strategy for homeland defense is being put into practice.

In May, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell approved in a memorandum to Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff a plan that would put some of the nation's most powerful intelligence-gathering tools at the disposal of domestic security officials as early as this fall.

But the plan has drawn sharp criticism from privacy advocates who say the government is improperly using military technology for domestic surveillance.

"It potentially marks a transformation of American political culture toward a surveillance state in which the entire public domain is subject to official monitoring," said Steven Aftergood, director of the Project on Government Secrecy for the Federation of American Scientists.

Concerns also have been raised over whether the plan would violate the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which prohibits active-duty military forces from conducting law-enforcement missions on American soil.

Despite these concerns, the NYPD report lends credibility to the notion that this sort of surveillance capability is precisely what is needed to counter an allegedly growing threat of homegrown terrorism.

The report also purports to analyze why young Muslims might be drawn to radical ideologies. In doing so, however, it ignores the impact of U.S. policies such as the Iraq War, arbitrary detention of Muslims at Guantanamo Bay and the Bush administration's use of torture.

Instead, the report depicts American Muslims as "looking for an identity and a cause," not reacting to genuine cases of oppression and injustice.

"Much different from the Israeli-Palestinian equation," the report said, "the transformation of a Western-based individual is not triggered by oppression, suffering, revenge, or desperation."

However, what's missing from this psychoanalysis are first-hand accounts from those being psychoanalyzed. Nowhere in the report is there an indication that its authors actually asked young Muslims why some are attracted to jihadist Web sites.

Indeed, in the report's "methodology" section, there is no mention of interviews with any suspected terrorists, even though many of the Muslims being analyzed are in custody often on charges of conspiracy to commit crimes that were never actually committed.

Instead of speaking with these alleged jihadists, "the NYPD dispatched detectives and analysts" to cities, which were the supposed targets of thwarted terrorist attacks, "to meet with law enforcement, intelligence officials and academics," the report said.

Even the choice of those academics and intelligence officials must have been highly selective, however, because no reference is made to the growing consensus that the Bush administration's policies are a key factor in development of radical jihadist ideology.

Contrary Intelligence

By insisting that American Muslims are being radicalized by their internal identity crises (rather than anger over the Iraq War, for instance), Silber and Bhatt seem to contradict some of the latest analysis of the U.S. intelligence community.

In 2006, the New York Times [disclosed](#) an official National Intelligence Estimate, which stated that the Iraq invasion has worsened the global terrorist threat.

The NIE, representing the consensus view of 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, for the first time recognized the obvious: that the invasion of Iraq has spawned a new generation of Islamic extremists who are determined to strike at the West, that Iraq has served as both a recruitment poster and a training ground for jihadists.

"The Iraq war has made the overall terrorism problem worse" since Sept. 11, 2001, summarized one U.S. intelligence official in referring to the NIE, which was completed in

April 2006. [NYT, Sept. 24, 2006]

The NYPD report also made no mention of a 2006 survey of over 100 of America's top terrorism experts, which found an overwhelming agreement that the world is more dangerous for the American people than it was on Sept. 11, 2001, and that Islamic animosity over the Iraq War is a primary factor in the deteriorating security situation.

Former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer, who ran the now-disbanded al-Qaeda task force, has said Osama bin Laden knows that his ragtag band of terrorists can't do much in taking on the awesome power of the U.S. military, but bin Laden hopes that his call to arms can inspire people even inside the United States to take up his cause.

So, if the goal is to reduce the appeal of this extremist message, a logical strategy would seem to be removal of the reasons for anger, such as the Iraq War, the Guantanamo Bay detentions and the appearance of anti-Muslim prejudice in the U.S. legal system.

Instead, Silber and Bhatt essentially absolve the Bush administration of any responsibility for the rise in Islamic anger, at least among American Muslims, putting the onus almost entirely on their supposed psychological shortcomings and irrationality.

Rather than taking seriously the anger that Muslims feel about the Iraq War – which by some estimates has killed over 600,000 Iraqis and created millions of refugees – the NYPD report suggests that the war issue is raised mostly as a propaganda device.

"A political crisis is sometimes brought about by some of the 'moral shock' tactics used by extremists in spewing out political messages, arguments, and associated atrocities that highlight some particular grievance that Islam has with the West," the report said.

"Chronic exposure to these extremist political campaigns (e.g. ... Iraq) may initiate feelings of moral outrage" which in turn leads some Muslims to be "born again" as jihadists, the report said.

Police Repression

The NYPD report also insists that anti-Muslim bias in American society plays little role in the radicalizing process. Again, this contradicts many accepted realities of so-called homegrown terrorism in Western societies.

A 1999 government report called "Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why," for instance, notes that "the person who becomes a terrorist in Western countries is generally both intellectual and idealistic. ... Often, violent encounters with police or other security forces motivate an already socially alienated individual to join a terrorist group."

By overlooking this factor in its report, Silber and Bhatt omit a useful policy prescription for averting homegrown terrorism, that politicians and police should make every effort to create a climate of fairness that reduces the sense among minority groups that they are facing persecution or bigotry.

Over the past several years, however, the NYPD has earned a reputation of doing the opposite, ranking among the most repressive police agencies in the country. This is the case both when it comes to general policing of the community and the policing of political demonstrations against the Iraq War and other U.S. policies.

The police department came under criticism last year for the killing of Sean Bell, a 23-year-old African-American, outside of a strip club in Jamaica, Queens. In a hail of 50 bullets, five plain-clothes NYPD officers shot and killed the unarmed man on Nov. 25, 2006, hours before he was to be married.

The incident drew comparisons to the 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed 23-year-old immigrant from Guinea. Four officers shot 41 rounds at Diallo as he attempted to enter his apartment.

The NYPD also has been faulted for its heavy-handed tactics in dealing with political demonstrations. Over two decades, the NYPD has refined use of "protest pens" to herd protesters like cattle, long before the term "free-speech zone" was coined.

On Feb. 15, 2003, a day of worldwide protest against the looming invasion of Iraq, the NYPD declared that due to "security threats," no marching would be permitted in the city. Nevertheless, about 60 unauthorized "feeder marches" took place, prompting police on horseback to charge protesters and detain some without charges for hours.

During the 2004 Republican National Convention, the NYPD arrested over 1,800 peaceful protesters and sent them to an old bus depot that had been converted to a makeshift detention center.

The depot, known as Pier 57, was contaminated with asbestos and lead, which was apparently known several months before the convention, according to [documents](#) obtained by journalist Drew Poe.

Bike Protests

Besides these high-profile cases of police repression, the NYPD has also waged a concerted campaign against Critical Mass bike rides, in which bicycle enthusiasts ride through the streets of New York to highlight cycling as an environmentally friendly alternative to driving.

In responding to these monthly bike rides, the NYPD has consistently engaged in mass arrests and has recklessly endangered public safety.

"Police vehicles have driven the wrong way down busy Midtown streets and have cut at sharp, brake-screeching angles across Greenwich Village avenues," the New York Times reported in February 2006. "They have climbed onto sidewalks to skirt traffic jams near Grand Central Terminal, according to witnesses. Officers have been filmed driving a large sport utility vehicle along the Hudson River bicycle and jogging path" – all in an attempt to prevent the monthly bike rides.

With videotape evidence of these aggressive tactics, activists have won battles in court against the NYPD. On Feb. 15, 2006, a state judge [rejected](#) the city's attempt to shut the bike rides down, calling the city's legal strategy against the ride "highly irregular" and "as unnecessary as it is inappropriate."

Now, the NYPD "homegrown terrorism" report suggests a plan to infringe on freedom of speech by targeting information on the Internet.

The report's highlighting of Web sites as a principal concern also fits with earlier Defense Department recommendations about "fighting the net" as part of the "war on terror."

A secret Pentagon ["Information Operations Roadmap,"](#) approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in October 2003, included a strategy for taking over the Internet and controlling the flow of information.

In a speech on Feb. 17, 2006, to the Council on Foreign Relations, Rumsfeld elaborated on the administration's perception that the battle over information would be a crucial front in the "global war on terror."

"Let there be no doubt, the longer it takes to put a strategic communication framework into place, the more we can be certain that the vacuum will be filled by the enemy and by news informers that most assuredly will not paint an accurate picture of what is actually taking place," Rumsfeld said.

It could be said that in singling out the Internet in its report on domestic terrorism, the NYPD report has leant its support and credibility to Rumsfeld's thoughts about countering both "the enemy" and "news informers." Silber and Bhatt mentioned the Internet 42 times in their 90-page report.

But the larger threat from the NYPD report may be that — by whipping up a public hysteria about "homegrown terrorism" — it demonstrates the very anti-Islamic bias that drives young Muslims toward extremism. In that sense, the report may become more a part of the problem than part of any solution.

Nat Parry is co-author of Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush, which can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](#). His e-mail address is ndtparry@gmail.com.

The original source of this article is [consortiumnews.com](#)
Copyright © [Nat Parry](#), [consortiumnews.com](#), 2007

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Nat Parry](#)