

Q&A: THE MYTH OF "RADICALIZATION"

Adaptation of article by the ACLU

The word "radicalization" is commonly used when we discuss policies, but there is no single agreed-upon definition. The problem is that government policies and programs are based on the idea that there is a process through which people turn to violence because of radical or extreme beliefs.

According to programs like "countering violent extremism" (CVE), there are "indicators" that can identify people that have "extreme" or "radical" religious ideas and are "vulnerable" to "radicalization." This is false. This theory is unscientific and discredited — and government programs that are based on it, result in monitoring or suppression of First Amendment rights.

Perceiving American Muslims — or any other belief communities — with suspicion puts their freedom of religion at risk, and threatens to limit free speech.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

The radicalization myth threatens the freedom of American Muslims and all Americans. Government efforts to determine if American Muslims hold "radical" or "extreme" beliefs, **stigmatize** entire communities and promote a climate of fear and **self-censorship**. Our values as Americans are at stake when people are afraid to practice their religion, engage in political discussions or intellectual debate for fear of being seen as extreme or at risk of "radicalization."

But the government's unsupported theories of "radicalization" are nothing new. In fact, historically, these theories are often used to target minorities. For example, during World War I, Congress banned anti-war speech and the FBI conducted investigations of Americans' political beliefs to identify supposed radicals and opponents. Racist theories of genetics laid the foundation for racist immigration policies and Jim Crow inter-racial marriage laws for decades¹. Misguided "red" scares² and racism led to horrible policies like blacklists, McCarthyism³, and

¹ Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of these laws stated people of different races (black and white, for example) could not marry.

² Here, the "red" scare refers to the fear of the spread of communism (particularly during the Cold War)

³ McCarthyism refers to making accusations of treason without evidence; named after Senator McCarthy during the Cold War, where Americans feared communist influence or sympathy and Soviet spies.

Japanese internment⁴. And the FBI even spied on civil rights movement leaders⁵ in the name of national security during the J. Edgar Hoover era.

WHAT'S THE PROPER ROLE FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT?

The police can conduct investigations when they have a reasonable reason to be suspicious that a crime has been, or is being, committed. But the standard for starting or expanding an investigation must be strong enough to focus security resources on criminal activity and prevent abuse.

Abuse of this power can occur when law enforcement officers target religious, racial or ethnic communities for monitoring and suspicion. For example, “countering violent extremism” or CVE programs ask American Muslim communities to report to law enforcement about individuals that may have radical or extreme beliefs. Although warning law enforcement of threats is a shared social responsibility, it would be illegal for police to require any religious community to prove its loyalty to this country by monitoring or “informing” on its members. To the contrary, American Muslims have the right to protest illegal or abusive government security measures and to exercise the rights guaranteed in the Constitution.

Stigmatize: to treat someone or something unfairly by disapproving of him, her, or it

Self- censorship: controlling what you say or do in order to avoid offending others

⁴ During the 1940s, after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, over 100,000 people of Japanese ancestry (many of whom were citizens) were forcefully relocated into internment camps.

⁵ COINTELPRO was a series of secret, sometimes illegal projects conducted by the FBI aimed at surveilling, discrediting, and disrupting domestic political organizations like anti-Vietnam War organizers, activists of the civil rights movement or Black Power movement (like Martin Luther King Jr., the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panther Party).