

Chairman Lieberman's "War on Terror"

By Chip Berlet

Sen. [Joseph Lieberman](#), the Independent Democrat from Connecticut who is closely affiliated with neoconservative-led advocacy efforts to push an expansive "war on terror" in the Middle East, is using his position as chair of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security to push hardline U.S. foreign and domestic counterterrorism policies that undermine First Amendment rights for dissidents across the political spectrum—and could have potentially far ranging implications for how the United States prosecutes the "war on terror" abroad.

Lieberman, whose advocacy of hawkish Mideast policies also includes support for aggressive Israeli unilateral action in struggles with Palestinians inside and outside current borders, has been stage-managing a one-sided theatrical presentation of witnesses at committee hearings for the past year, with the cast primarily consisting of purported experts in counterterrorism warning of new threats of Islamic terrorism targeting the United States. In this effort Lieberman has allied himself with neoconservatives and appears to be not only supporting the Bush administration's current policies, but engineering a policy debate aimed at influencing the next administration in the White House, whether it is occupied by a Republican or Democrat.

On May 8, 2008, Lieberman and his co-chair of the Committee on Homeland Security, Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), publicly released a report, "Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorism Threat."ⁱ As the title indicates, the report is concerned with "how violent Islamist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda are using the Internet to enlist followers into the global violent Islamist terrorist movement and to increase support for the movement, ranging from ideological support, to fundraising, and ultimately to planning and executing terrorist attacks."

The duo is not alone in worrying about what their report calls a "dangerous trend" in threats from both within and outside the United States. The report cites February testimony by Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, who said at a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence: "Over the next year, attacks by 'homegrown' extremists inspired by militant Islamic ideology but without operational direction from al-Qa'ida will remain a threat to the United States or against U.S. interests overseas. The spread of radical Salafi Internet sites that provide religious justification for attacks, increasingly aggressive and violent anti-Western rhetoric and actions by local groups, and the growing number of radical, self-generating cells in Western countries that identify with violent Salafi objectives, all suggest growth of a radical and violent segment among the West's Muslim populations.... The al-Qaida-propagated narrative of an 'us versus them' struggle serves both as a platform and a potential catalyst for radicalization of Muslims alienated from the mainstream U.S. population."ⁱⁱ

Dubiously, the report claimed to have discovered how “to fully identify the best way to combat this threat” by outlining the “the process by which individuals or groups of individuals are radicalized to become violent Islamist extremists.” As evidence, the report cited New York City Police Department (NYPD) “research into homegrown terrorism cases in the United States and around the world” and testimony by Marc Sageman, [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#) fellow and NYPD “scholar in residence” on the subject of terrorism. The theories of the NYPD and Sageman, however, have been widely criticized as flawed and even sloppy.ⁱⁱⁱ Concluding that, “there is no cohesive and comprehensive outreach and communications strategy in place to confront this threat,”^{iv} the report’s apparent subtext is to impose a narrow and faulty analytical model across the entire set of federal agencies concerned with foreign policy and terrorism and encourage them to export this misguided model in future outreach and propaganda efforts.

A broad array of critics immediately condemned the report, complaining that its analysis was dangerously thin, that it stereotyped Muslims, and that it threatened freedom of expression, civil liberties, and civil rights. Said the ACLU, “Though the need to prevent criminal acts of violence is unquestionable, targeting communities based on religious beliefs is unacceptable and unproductive. We will only end up stigmatizing the Islamic community and creating a nation of Islamophobes. We should not be legislating against thought and we should certainly not be regulating religious or unpopular thought.”^v

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and Muslim Advocates sent the committee a letter critical of the report, asking for a dialogue.^{vi} “Given that only one of nineteen witnesses before the Committee represented the American Muslim community,” the letter writers noted, “we also urge you to include representative American Muslims at future hearings on Islam or the American Muslim community.” The letter argued that the report sabotaged its own goals: “Unfortunately, the Committee's report undermines fundamental American values (as well as its own stated recommendations) by encouraging alienating suspicion of several million Americans on the basis of their faith. Contrary to Secretary [\[Michael\] Chertoff](#)'s recommendations, it thus exacerbates the current climate of fear, suspicion and hate mongering of Islam and American Muslims.”^{vii}

American Muslims have also launched a campaign to encourage more precise language when linking Islam and terrorism, which the committee’s report fails to do. According to Religion News Service, “In March, the National Counterterrorism Center drafted a memo for the State Department urging diplomats to drop words like ‘jihadists’ or ‘mujahedeen’ (those engaged in jihad) when describing terrorists because it ‘unintentionally legitimizes their actions.’”^{viii}

In fact, in January the Department of Homeland Security suggested, “We should

not concede the terrorists' claim that they are legitimate adherents of Islam," according to a memo obtained by the Associated Press.^{ix}

A Partisan Report?

The report was drafted solely under the direction of Lieberman and ranking Republican Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME). Democratic senators who sit on the committee—Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), Thomas R. Carper (D-DE), Carl Levin, (D-MI), and Barack Obama (D-IL)—had no role in writing the report, according to their Senate office spokespeople.

Senator Collins's Washington, D.C. office, however, argued that, "It was never a full committee report" and that its cover (which mentions only Lieberman and Collins) and text made that clear. Despite the apparently partisan nature of the report, Collins' spokesperson told the author, "There is a lot of cooperation on this committee; it is very bipartisan."^x

A committee spokesperson said that there was "zero truth" to assertions that the report was motivated by partisan political objectives. "We held six hearings going back for over a year, there were multiple drafts, it was a long process, the staff worked hard on it, there was never any consideration of the political impact."^{xi} In an election season when "even the weather is being interpreted through a political lens," such speculation is common, but regrettable, she said. The report resulted from Lieberman's interest in the topic and was issued when it was finished, the spokesperson said.

Lieberman has long been a security hardliner and associates with many hawks. He was active with the [Committee for the Liberation of Iraq](#) (CLI), founded in late 2002 by [Bruce Jackson](#), a director of the neoconservative [Project for the New American Century](#) (PNAC) and a former vice president of defense contractor Lockheed Martin. At CLI, Lieberman was allied closely with members Sen. [John McCain](#) (R-AZ) and conservative policy analyst [Randy Scheunemann](#). Other CLI members included [Eliot Cohen](#), [Robert Kagan](#), [Bill Kristol](#), former Secretary of State George Shultz, as well as former Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-NE), who called CLI "a group of people who will talk to Americans about why the liberation of Iraq is something the United States ought to do."^{xii} Scheunemann is now a major foreign policy advisor on the McCain election team.

The Democratic Party is reluctant to criticize Lieberman because the Senate is home to 49 Republicans and 49 Democrats, with two Independents (Lieberman and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont) who line up with the Democrats in caucus, thus giving the Democrats a voting majority and senior status on Senate Committees. If Lieberman moves to caucus with the Republicans, it would mean the Senate was evenly divided, sending more tie votes to Vice President [Dick Cheney](#), who serves as the president of the Senate. In addition, if Lieberman defected to the Republicans, the Democrats would no longer unilaterally control

the chairs of all Senate committees and would have to negotiate a power-sharing arrangement with Republicans.

Lieberman's staff also insists that there is no connection between the committee's report and a flawed legislative bill stalled in Congress, titled the "Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007," even though the legislation and the hearings reinforce each other.^{xiii} One section of this proposed Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act drew special attention to online communications: "The Internet has aided in facilitating violent radicalization, ideologically based violence, and the homegrown terrorism process in the United States by providing access to broad and constant streams of terrorist-related propaganda to United States citizens."

The Lieberman-Collins report was largely ignored by the mass media, but Lieberman stayed on-message in highlighting the terrorist threat supposedly posed by the internet, demanding that video website YouTube remove scores of videos that he claimed promoted Islamic terrorism. YouTube yanked some videos that violated its policies but refused the senator's blanket request. Lieberman had created another needless civil liberties confrontation based on flawed analysis.

Flawed Analysis, Flawed Advisors

All of this political maneuvering is driven by policy advice from four self-described experts on Islam and counterterrorism. Two of these experts, [Daniel Pipes](#) and [Stephen Emerson](#), have become polemicists who repeatedly drift into stereotyping of Islam, yet are regularly featured on network talk shows and are champions for the political right. The other two, Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, are in the midst of a [very public dispute](#) over whether future acts of domestic terrorism by Islamic militants, such as those carried out on 9/11, will be generated by the international Qaeda network (which Hoffman contends) or by homegrown terrorism, planned by Muslims living in the United States (which Sageman argues).

Hoffman negatively reviewed Sageman's recent book, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*, in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, calling it a "brusque dismissal of much of the existing academic literature on terrorism in general and terrorist networks in particular" and assessing his arguments on jihadists as "devoid of evidence," among other complaints.^{xiv} Sageman responded in the following issue, claiming that Hoffman was "ignoring all of [*Leaderless Jihad's*] main points while making up others."^{xv} The debate has since spilled over into the *New York Times* and other publications.

Testifying before the Committee on Homeland Security in June 2007, Sageman claimed, "Over the past two or three years, face-to-face radicalization is being replaced by online radicalization. It is the interactivity of the group that changes people's beliefs, and such

interaction is found in Islamist extremist forums on the Internet. The same support and validation that young people used to derive from their offline peer groups are now found in these forums, which promote the image of terrorist heroes, link them to the virtual social movement, give them guidance, and instruct them in tactics. These forums, virtual market places for extremist ideas, have become the virtual 'invisible hand' organizing terrorist activities worldwide."^{xvi}

Yet there is no evidence that this is true outside of Sageman's analysis and the claims of the NYPD. In addition, Sageman in his book claims that these types of "leaderless social movements," in order to survive, require: "a constant stream of new violent actions to hold the interest of potential newcomers to the movement, create the impression of visible progress toward a goal, and give potential recruits a vicarious experience before they take the initiative to engage in their own terrorist activities."^{xvii}

Not only was this idea lifted by Sageman from the work of policy analyst Simson L. Garfinkel, but it mistakenly attributed violence to a broad range of dissident social movements rather than the narrowly defined terrorist underground cell structure being analyzed by Garfinkel. In Sageman's erroneous analysis, anyone joining a street-level affinity group or collective would be considered prone to violence and a potential terrorist.

Accurate descriptions of targeted terrorist formations and potential terrorists, especially their ideology and methodology, are crucial for the government to effectively understand, predict, and prevent acts of domestic terrorism while abiding by constitutional safeguards. Police and intelligence agencies justify as appropriate different investigative techniques, with different levels of government intrusiveness, depending on the specific ways different potential terrorist cells set up their organizational command structure.

Not only do civil liberties hang in the balance, but so too does national security policy. Based on faulty analysis, Lieberman is taking what should be a serious policy debate and ratcheting up a campaign of cynical fear-mongering. The notion that future counterterrorism policy could emerge from ill-supported theories is a dangerous one indeed.

Chip Berlet is on the board of the Defending Dissent Foundation, which helped coordinate criticism of the Lieberman-Collins Report. He is senior analyst at Political Research Associates (PRA) and a contributor to PRA's Right Web (<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/>).

Additional Resources

[Open Letter to the Senate Committee from Civil Liberties Groups](#)

[ACLU Press Release](#)

Chip Berlet, "[Leaderless Counterterrorism Strategy: The 'War on Terror,' Civil](#)

Liberties, and Flawed Scholarship,” *Public Eye*, Fall 2008.

ⁱ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (Chairman Joseph Lieberman, Ranking Minority Member Susan Collins), Majority and Minority Staff Report, “Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat,” May 8, 2008, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf.

ⁱⁱ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (Chairman Joseph Lieberman, Ranking Minority Member Susan Collins), Majority and Minority Staff Report, “Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat,” May 8, 2008, p. 3, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Chip Berlet, “[Leaderless Counterterrorism Strategy: The ‘War on Terror,’ Civil Liberties, and Flawed Scholarship,](#)” *Public Eye*, Fall 2008, vol . 23, no. 3.

^{iv} Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (Chairman Joseph Lieberman, Ranking Minority Member Susan Collins), Majority and Minority Staff Report, “Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat,” May 8, 2008, p. 2, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf.

^v ACLU, “ACLU Skeptical of Senate Report on Homegrown Terrorism,” May 8, 2008, <http://www.aclu.org/safefree/general/35221prs20080508.html>.

^{vi} Joint letter, May 14, 2008, posted on Muslim Advocates website, HYPERLINK "http://www.muslimadvocates.org/docs/temporary_HSGAC_report-Allied_response_FINAL.pdf.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Omar Sacirbey, “Muslims campaign to reclaim ‘jihad’ from extremists,” Religious News Service, no date, http://www.religionnews.com/index.php?/rnstext/muslims_campaign_to_reclaim_jihad_from_extremists/.

^{ix} Matthew Lee, “Government targets language in war on terror,” Associated Press, carried in Army Times, April 24, 2008, http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/04/ap_jihadlingo_042408/.

^x Telephone interview with spokesperson for the Committee on Homeland Security, May 15, 2008.

^{xi} Telephone interview with spokesperson for the Committee on Homeland Security, May 15, 2008.

^{xii} Peter Slevin, “Randy Scheunemann: McCain Adviser Campaigned for War,” *Washington Post* blog, “The Trail, Cast of Characters,” June 17, 2008, http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/06/17/randy_scheunemann_mccain_advis.html. *Washington Post* blog,

"The Trail, Cast of Characters," June 17, 2008,

http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/06/17/andy_scheunemann_mccain_advis.html.

^{xiii} "H.R. 1955: Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007," Govtrack.us, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h110-1955>

^{xiv} Bruce Hoffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080501fareviewessay87310/bruce-hoffman/the-myth-of-grass-roots-terrorism.html>.

^{xv} Marc Sageman, "Does Osama Still Call the Shots?" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008,

<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080701faresponse87415/marc-sageman-bruce-hoffman/does-osama-still-call-the-shots.html>.

^{xvi} Marc Sageman, June 2007 testimony to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, cited in "Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat," May 8, 2008, pp. 12-13, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf.

^{xvii} See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).