

U.S. Military White Paper Describes Wearing Hijab as “Passive Terrorism”

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A policy paper issued by the Air Force Research Laboratory, titled Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods & Strategies, includes a chapter setting forth controversial and unsubstantiated theories of radicalization, including the idea that support for militant groups is driven by “sexual deprivation” and that headscarves worn by Muslim women represent a form of “passive terrorism.”

The paper, first published in 2011, was reissued by the Air Force lab this past summer following President Obama’s announcement of a national counter-extremism strategy. This January, the revised copy was [published](#) online by the open source research website Public Intelligence. A preface for the revised report cites a summit convened by Obama on extremism as a reason for revisiting the subject, adding that “the wisdom contained in this paper collection is more relevant than ever.”

Many of the articles contained in the document have scholarly merit and are written by academics and researchers in the field of counterterrorism. But a chapter titled “A Strategic Plan to Defeat Radical Islam,” written by Dr. Tawfik Hamid, a self-described former Islamic extremist and fellow at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, contains a number of bizarre prescriptions for how to defeat terrorism, few of which appear to be supported by empirical evidence

Among Hamid’s claims are that support for militancy is primarily a product of sexual deprivation and that terrorism bears relation to religious dress. His ideas for combating terrorism thus include “addressing the factors underlying [sexual] deprivation” among young men, as well as “weakening the hijab phenomenon.” Hamid further claims that, along with fundamentalist ideology, the “hijab contribute[s] to the idea of passive terrorism” and represents an implicit refusal to “speak against or actively resist terrorism.”

Hamid does not make clear how he reaches these conclusions. On his personal [website](#), he describes himself as “an Islamic thinker and reformer” and says he has a medical degree in internal medicine from Cairo University and a master’s degree in cognitive psychology and educational techniques from the University of Auckland. He also claims credit “for developing one of the most innovative Cognitive Psychology models, the [Multi-Dimensional Learning Model](#).”

Two terrorism experts and a professor of Islamic Studies questioned the assertions in Hamid’s chapter of the Air Force white paper, calling them unsubstantiated.

“This characterization of the hijab demonizes millions of women whose reasons for covering

have nothing to do with the advocacy of political violence,” says Arun Kundnani, a lecturer on terrorism studies at New York University. “The document as a whole includes some scholars who are serious researchers. However it appears the purpose of this chapter by Hamid is not a genuine investigation of the roots of violence, but rather an attempt to supply national security agencies with bogus surveillance rubrics.”

Hamid’s theory of radicalization states that terrorism stems from a lack of sexual activity among young men and that addressing this issue is key to reducing support for militant groups. “I believe young Muslims are motivated to join radical groups because of sexual deprivation,” he writes, claiming further that “addressing the factors causing deprivation in this life can interrupt the radicalization process and reduce the number of suicide attacks by jihadists.”

An expert on the subject of foreign fighters disagrees. “There is virtually no evidence that sexual deprivation is somehow a cause of radicalization, or suicide attacks,” says Amarnath Amarasingam, a fellow at George Washington University’s Program on Extremism. “From my interviews with jihadists in various organizations, it is clear that they are there for a complex variety of reasons. To simply attribute their motivations to sexual depravity is to miss the point entirely.”



An accompanying chart that describes Hamid’s purported theory of radicalization is similarly unfounded. “One thing that is absolutely clear from studies of radicalization is that this conveyor belt model from ‘conservative beliefs’ to ‘violence’ is incorrect,” Amarasingam says.

Ingrid Mattson, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Western Ontario, said Hamid’s comments about the hijab are baffling. She pointed out that the garment is worn by an incredibly diverse array of women, including Nobel Peace Prize recipient Malala Yousafzai, who was the subject of a Taliban assassination attempt after she campaigned for women’s rights in northwest Pakistan.

“Is hijab any Muslim woman’s headcover? Any style, any country? Because covering the head is very widely observed among Muslim women,” Mattson says. “There is no logic here. Is Malala, who wears a hijab and was shot by the Taliban, a terrorist? There is nothing, sadly, more banal than for powerful people to tell women to take their clothes off.”

Hamid’s article also expresses a striking faith in the power of government public relations efforts to overcome deeply unpopular policies toward the Middle East.

It claims that improvements in the U.S.’ reputation in the Mideast “will not come from drastic changes in policy,” but instead from government PR campaigns. “For example,” Hamid writes, “during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. Agency for International Development sent food aid to Egypt. Images of chickens wrapped in bags adorned with the U.S. flag significantly improved Egypt’s perceptions of the U.S., even though it had not altered its pro-Israel policies.”

Hamid repeated his theory about the power of food aid in 2011 [testimony](#) to the House Armed Services Committee in which he claimed that such efforts had, among Egyptians, “created a link in the human brain between the word ‘U.S.A’ and the good taste [of chicken].”

Hamid's theories seem to contradict a Rumsfeld-era [study](#) commissioned by the Pentagon's Defense Science Board Task Force. That study traced the poor reputation of the U.S. in the Middle East to government policies, not to insufficient PR. Arguing that "Muslims do not 'hate our freedom,' but rather, they hate our policies," the report cited the U.S.' support for dictatorial regimes, its military occupations of countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, and its "one-sided support in favor of Israel" as the primary factors behind its poor reputation in Muslim countries.

Still, Hamid's thoughts are apparently influential in government; he says on his website that his opinion has been solicited by a wide range of government agencies, including the Department of Defense, the National Security Agency, the Special Operations Command, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It is not clear if he has been paid for his appearances at such agencies.

Hamid is currently a writer at the right-wing website *Newsmax*, where he publishes a running column titled "[Inside Islam](#)." In recent weeks, he has written several articles lavishly praising Republican presidential candidates Donald Trump and Ben Carson for their vituperative public statements about Muslim Americans.

Hamid did not respond to requests for comment.

The updated version of *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods & Strategies* includes a preface that credits Hamid with providing a "soup to nuts strategic plan" for combating radicalism that "addresses the components of the Islamist terrorism cycle at ideological, psychological, social, and economic levels." The original version of the report was [cited](#) by the FBI in the development of its own anti-extremism strategy in 2014. Both the original and revised versions contain Hamid's chapter on radicalization.

Hamid's section ends with an unsettling argument for using harsh military force to fight terrorism, comparing it to the use of chemotherapy to fight cancer. "Nobody supports the intentional killing of innocent civilians," he says, "but in war, as in medicine, good cells die when we treat bad ones. ... It is unfair to blame the doctor for killing good cells."

Hamid's chapter "is no more than Islamophobic propaganda and should not have been included in any kind of government training material or published research," Kundnani said.

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