

## What's Wrong with Radicalization?

**Source:** American Civil Liberties Union

**Available at:** <https://www.aclu.org/other/qa-myth-radicalization?redirect=qa-myth-radicalization>

The word “radicalization” is commonly used in public and policy discourse, but what people mean by it varies and there’s no single agreed-upon definition.

The problem is that government policies and programs are based on a theory of “radicalization” that assumes a process through which people turn to violence because of radical or extreme beliefs. This theory is unscientific and discredited — and government programs based on it result in monitoring or suppression of First Amendment-protected beliefs and ideas.

For example, this dangerous radicalization theory is being applied to American Muslim communities, most recently in the form of “countering violent extremism” programs. [According to this theory](#), the adoption or expression of “extreme” or “radical” religious ideas or practices places individuals on a path toward terrorism or violence, and there are observable “indicators” that can identify those who are “vulnerable” to “radicalization.” This is false. The ACLU has repeatedly provided statements to Congress — in [2009](#), [2010](#), [2011](#), and [2012](#) — to explain the factual and methodological flaws in reports that promote this radicalization theory. Our [allies](#) have also written reports debunking the theory. As we and others have explained, despite years of study and experience in the United States and elsewhere, researchers have not identified criteria or behavioral indicators that can be used to reliably predict who will commit an act of terrorism or political violence.

Simply put, religious beliefs and practices do not correlate with a propensity toward violence. Instead, the freedom to engage in these activities goes to the core of what it means to be an American. Cloaking American Muslims — or any other belief communities — with suspicion puts at risk the freedom of religion, gives the appearance of official endorsement of one set of religious beliefs over another, and threatens to chill free association and free speech.

### What's at stake?

The radicalization myth threatens the fundamental freedoms of American Muslims and all Americans. Government efforts to inquire whether American Muslims — or anyone else — holds “radical” or “extreme” beliefs, however those are defined, stigmatize entire communities and promote a climate of fear and self-censorship. Our values are undermined when people forsake religious exercise, political discussions, and intellectual debate to avoid being branded as extreme or at risk of “radicalization.”

Probing people’s thoughts and beliefs also engenders distrust of the government and undermines the relationship between communities and law enforcement. For example, it can cripple government efforts to demonstrate to Muslims at home and abroad that

the United States seeks to live up to its ideals in its equal treatment of all Americans, including Muslims, and is not engaged in a “war against Islam.”

More broadly, our nation’s founders recognized that radical beliefs that challenge social and political orthodoxies are valuable and necessary for a vibrant society and democracy. That is why First Amendment, which protects the freedoms of belief, religion, speech, and association, occupies a special place in our history and in the Constitution.

Unfortunately, though, government suspicion of beliefs and unsupported theories of “radicalization” are nothing new, and our nation’s history shows they are often used to target minorities or those who dissent. For example, during World War I, Congress banned anti-war speech and the FBI conducted investigations of Americans’ political beliefs to identify purported radicals and opponents. Erroneous theories of eugenics supported racist immigration policies and Jim Crow anti-miscegenation laws for decades. Misguided “red” scares and racism drove abominable policies like blacklists, McCarthyism, and Japanese internment. And the FBI infamously spied on civil rights movement leaders in the name of national security during the J. Edgar Hoover era.

### **What’s the proper role for law enforcement?**

The protections built into the Constitution help ensure that law enforcement officers focus their investigative resources where there is evidence of wrongdoing or criminal activity. The police can conduct an investigation when they have reasonable suspicion to believe that a crime has been, or is being, committed. But the standard for initiating or widening an investigation must be rigorous enough to focus security resources on criminal activity and prevent abuse.

One form of such abuse occurs when officers investigate or monitor people based on their religious beliefs or practices. Former Attorney General Eric Holder rightly stated that “law enforcement has an obligation to ensure that members of every religious community enjoy the ability to worship and to practice their faith in peace, free from intimidation, violence or suspicion. That is the right of all Americans. And it must be a reality for every citizen. In this nation, our many faiths, origins, and appearances must bind us together, not break us apart.”

Too often, though, law enforcement and intelligence have targeted religious, racial, ethnic, or national origin communities for monitoring and suspicion. In the case of American Muslims, “countering violent extremism” initiatives may task communities with reporting to law enforcement about individuals’ radical or extreme beliefs. Although warning law enforcement of threats is indeed a shared civic and social responsibility, it would be illegal, unfair, and impractical for law enforcement officials to require any religious or belief community to prove its loyalty to this country by monitoring or “informing” on its members. To the contrary, American Muslims, like the rest of this country’s citizens, have the right to protest illegal, overzealous or abusive government security measures and to vigorously exercise, and encourage others to exercise, rights guaranteed in the Constitution.

Some in American Muslim communities have also expressed legitimate concerns about whether those who volunteer information to law enforcement will find themselves threatened with legal jeopardy. Individuals should speak to lawyers before talking to law enforcement — and know that refusing to talk to law enforcement without a lawyer is a constitutional right.

**What's the bottom line?**

The government's "radicalization" theory has become a euphemism for religious and ideological profiling. It leads to discrimination and stigmatization, and is fundamentally un-American. Casting suspicion on American faith or belief communities is wrong and does nothing to make us safer.