

FBI Teaches Agents: ‘Mainstream’ Muslims Are ‘Violent, Radical’

By [Spencer Ackerman](#) September 14, 2011 | 8:45 pm | Categories: [Crime and Homeland Security](#)



The FBI is teaching its counterterrorism agents that “main stream” [sic] American Muslims are likely to be terrorist sympathizers; that the Prophet Mohammed was a “cult leader”; and that the Islamic practice of giving charity is no more than a “funding mechanism for combat.”

At the Bureau’s training ground in Quantico, Virginia, agents are shown a chart contending that the more “devout” a Muslim, the more likely he is to be “violent.” Those destructive tendencies cannot be reversed, an FBI instructional presentation adds: “Any war against non-believers is justified” under Muslim law; a “moderating process cannot happen if the Koran continues to be regarded as the unalterable word of Allah.”

The FBI’s Islam Training Documents



[Militancy Considerations](#)



[Strategic Themes and Drivers in Islamic Law](#)



[Doctrinal Basis for Jihad](#)



[Chart: Violence and Adherence to the Torah, Bible and Koran](#)

These are excerpts from dozens of pages of recent FBI training material on Islam that Danger Room has acquired. In them, the Constitutionally protected religious faith of millions of Americans is portrayed as an indicator of terrorist activity.

“There may not be a ‘radical’ threat as much as it is simply a normal assertion of the orthodox ideology,” one FBI presentation notes. “The strategic themes animating these Islamic values are not fringe; they are main stream.”

The FBI isn’t just treading on thin legal ice by portraying ordinary, observant Americans as terrorists-in-waiting, former counterterrorism agents say. It’s also playing into al-Qaida’s hands.

Focusing on the religious behavior of American citizens instead of proven indicators of criminal activity like stockpiling guns or using shady financing makes it more likely that the FBI will miss the *real* warning signs of terrorism. And depicting Islam as inseparable from political violence is exactly the narrative al-Qaida spins — as is the related idea that America and Islam are necessarily in conflict. That’s why FBI whistleblowers provided Danger Room with these materials.

Over the past few years, American Muslim civil rights groups have raised alarm about [increased FBI and police presence in Islamic community centers and mosques](#), fearing that their lawful behavior is being targeted under the broad brush of counterterrorism. The documents may help explain the heavy scrutiny.

They certainly aren’t the first time the FBI has portrayed Muslims in a negative light during Bureau training sessions. As Danger Room reported in July, the FBI’s Training Division has included anti-Islam books, and materials that claim Islam “[transforms \[a\] country’s culture into 7th-century Arabian ways](#).” When Danger Room confronted the FBI with that material, an official statement issued to us claimed, “The presentation in question was a rudimentary version used for a limited time that has since been replaced.”

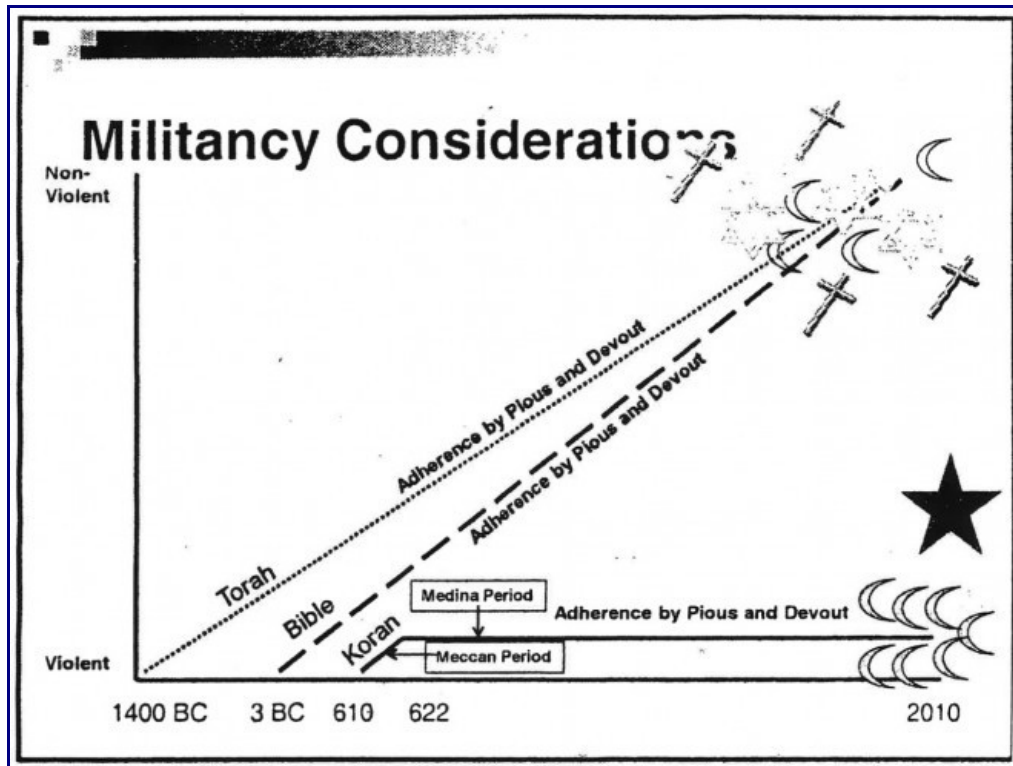
But these documents aren’t relics from an earlier era. One of these briefings, titled “[Strategic Themes and Drivers in Islamic Law](#),” took place on March 21.

The Islam briefings are elective, not mandatory. “A disclaimer accompanied the presentation stating that the views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government,” FBI spokesman Christopher Allen tells Danger Room.

“The training materials in question were delivered as Stage Two training to counterterrorism-designated agents,” Allen adds. “This training was largely derived from a variety of open source publications and includes the opinion of the analyst that developed the lesson block.”

Not all counterterrorism veterans consider the briefings so benign. “Teaching counterterrorism operatives about obscure aspects of Islam,” says Robert McFadden, who recently retired as one of the Navy Criminal Investigative Service’s al-Qaida-hunters, “without context, without objectivity, and without covering other non-religious drivers of dangerous behavior is no way to stop actual terrorists.”

Still, at Quantico, the alleged connection between Islam and violence isn’t just stipulated. It’s literally *graphed*.



An FBI presentation titled "[Militancy Considerations](#)" measures the relationship between piety and violence among the texts of the three Abrahamic faiths. As time goes on, the followers of the Torah and the Bible move from "violent" to "non-violent." Not so for devotees of the Koran, whose "moderating process has not happened." The line representing violent behavior from devout Muslims flatlines and continues outward, from 610 A.D. to 2010. In other words, religious Muslims have been and always will be agents of aggression.

Training at Quantico isn't designed for intellectual bull sessions or abstract theory, according to FBI veterans. The FBI conducts its training so that both seasoned agents and new recruits can sharpen their investigative skills.

In this case, the FBI's Allen says, the counterterrorism agents who received these briefings have "spent two to three years on the job." The briefings are written accordingly. The stated purpose of one, about allegedly religious-sanctioned lying, is to "identify the elements of verbal deception in Islam and their impacts on Law Enforcement." Not "terrorism." Not even "Islamist extremism." *Islam*.

According to this FBI training, religious Muslims have been and always will be agents of aggression.

What's more, the Islamic "insurgency" is all-encompassing and insidious. In addition to outright combat, its "techniques" include "immigration" and "law suits." So if a Muslim wishes to become an American or sues the FBI for harassment, it's all just part of the jihad.

On Tuesday, the leaders of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Joe Lieberman (I-Connecticut) and Susan Collins (R-Maine), warned that law enforcement lacks "[meaningful standards](#)" to prevent anti-Islam material from seeping into counterterrorism training. Some FBI veterans suspect the increased pressure on American Muslims has a lot to do with the kind of training that Quantico offers.

"Seeing the materials FBI agents are being trained with certainly helps explain why we've seen

so many inappropriate FBI surveillance operations broadly targeting the Muslim-American community, from infiltrating mosques with agents provocateur to racial- and ethnic-mapping programs,” Mike German, a former FBI agent now with the American Civil Liberties Union, tells Danger Room after being shown the documents. “Biased police training can only result in biased policing.” (Full disclosure: This reporter’s wife works for the ACLU.)

The chief of the Training Division, Assistant FBI Director Thomas Browne, came into his current job in January. His [official biography](#) lists no terrorism expertise beyond serving as a coordinator for a bureau “Domestic Terrorism Program” in Tennessee sometime in the last decade.

It is unclear what vetting process the FBI used to approve these briefings; if any Muslim scholars contributed to them; and what criteria Quantico uses to determine Islamic expertise. “The development of effective training is a constantly evolving process,” says FBI spokesman Allen. “Sometimes the training is adapted for long-term use. This particular training segment was delivered a single time and not used since.”

Several of these briefings were the work of a single author: an FBI intelligence analyst named William Gawthrop. In 2006, before he joined the Bureau, he gave an interview to the website WorldNetDaily, and discussed some of the themes that made it into his briefings, years later. The Prophet “[Muhammad’s mindset is a source for terrorism](#),” Gawthrop told the website, which would later distinguish itself as a leader of the “birther” movement, a conspiracy theory that denies President Obama’s American citizenship.

At the time, Gawthrop’s major suggestion for waging the war on terrorism was to attack what he called “soft spots” in Islamic faith that might “induce a deteriorating cascade effect upon the target.” That is, to discredit Islam itself and cause Muslims to abandon their religion. “Critical vulnerabilities of the Koran, for example, are that it was uttered by a mortal,” he said. Alas, he lamented, he faced the bureaucratic obstacle of official Washington’s “political taboo of linking Islamic violence to the religion of Islam,” according to the website.



Back then, however, Gawthrop didn’t work for the FBI. He had recently stepped down from a position with the Defense Department’s Counterintelligence Field Activity. That agency came

under withering criticism during the Bush administration for keeping a database about threats to military bases that included [reports on peaceful antiwar protesters and dovish Church groups](#). It is unclear how Gawthrop came to work for the FBI.

Through an intermediary, Gawthrop told Danger Room that he was unavailable for comment before our deadline.

‘Instead of looking for indicators of nefarious behavior, you have a sweeping generalization.’

The FBI didn’t always conflate terrorism with Islam. “I never saw that,” says Ali Soufan, one of the FBI’s [most distinguished counterterrorism agents](#) and author of the new memoir [The Black Banners](#), who retired from the bureau in 2005. “Sometimes, toward the end of my time, I started noticing it with different entities outside the FBI. You started feeling like they had a problem with Islam-as-Islam, because of the media. But that was a few people, and was usually hidden behind closed doors.”

Soufan, a Muslim, has interrogated members of al-Qaida and contributed to [rolling up one of its cells in Yemen](#) after 9/11. But by the logic of the FBI’s training materials, Soufan’s religious practices make him a potential terrorist.

McFadden, the former NCIS counterterrorist, has a lot of respect for his FBI colleagues, who he believes are ill-served by these Islam briefings. “These are earnest special agents and police officers who want to know how do their job better,” McFadden says.

Too often, McFadden says, counterterrorism training becomes simultaneously over-broad and ignorant. “Instead of looking for indicators of nefarious behavior, you have a sweeping generalization of things like, for instance, the Hawala system,” McFadden explains. “It’s a system that most of the developing world and expatriates from it use to move money around, including terrorists. But you can’t say the whole hawala system is about terrorism, just like you can’t say that Islam as a whole has anything to do with bad behavior.”

McFadden, a Catholic, believes that obsessing over obscure Koranic verses is as useful a guide to terrorist behavior as “diving into the rite of exorcism” is to understanding Catholicism.

On April 6, barely two weeks after the “Islamic Motivations for ‘Suicide’ Bombers” briefing at Quantico, FBI Director Robert Mueller defended the bureau’s budget before a congressional committee. Among his major points: the FBI needs cooperation from American Muslims to stop the next terrorist attack.

“Since September 11th, every one of our 56 field offices and the leadership of those offices have had outreach to the Muslim community,” Mueller said. “We need the support of that community ... our business is basically relationships.” That is exactly the opposite message sent in the training rooms of Quantico, where the next generation of FBI counterterrorism is shaped.

Photos: [Flickr/Cliff1066](#), ISAF

See Also:

- [FBI ‘Islam 101’ Guide Depicted Muslims as 7th-Century Simpletons](#)
- [Document: FBI Surveillance Geeks Fear, Love New Gadgets](#)
- [After Oslo, Group Accuses Thousands of Being Homegrown Terrorists](#)
- [Web Vents Open on U.S. Muslims](#)
- [Report: Homegrown Terrorists Are Scrubs](#)
- [How to Beat Terrorism: Refuse to Be Terrorized](#)

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Spencer Ackerman is Danger Room's senior reporter, based out of Washington, D.C., covering weapons of doom and the strategies they're used to implement.

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FBI 'Islam 101' Guide Depicted Muslims as 7th-Century Simpletons

By [Spencer Ackerman](#) July 27, 2011 | 1:27 pm | Categories: [Crime and Homeland Security](#)



As recently as January 2009, the FBI thought its agents ought to know the following crucial information about Muslims:

- They engage in a “circumcision ritual”
- More than 9,000 of them are in the U.S. military
- Their religion “transforms [a] country’s culture into 7th-century Arabian ways.”

And this was what the FBI considered “recommended reading” about Islam:

- A much-criticized tome, *The Arab Mind*, that one reviewer called “[a collection of outrageously broad — and often suspect — generalizations](#)”
- A book by one of Norwegian terrorist suspect Anders Behring Breivik’s favorite anti-Muslim authors.

All this is revealed in a [PowerPoint presentation by the FBI’s Law Enforcement Communications Unit](#) (.pdf), which trains new Bureau recruits. Among the 62 slides in the presentation, designed to teach techniques for “successful interviews/interrogations with individuals from the M.E. [Middle East],” is an instruction that the “Arabic mind” is “swayed more by words than ideas and more by ideas than facts.”

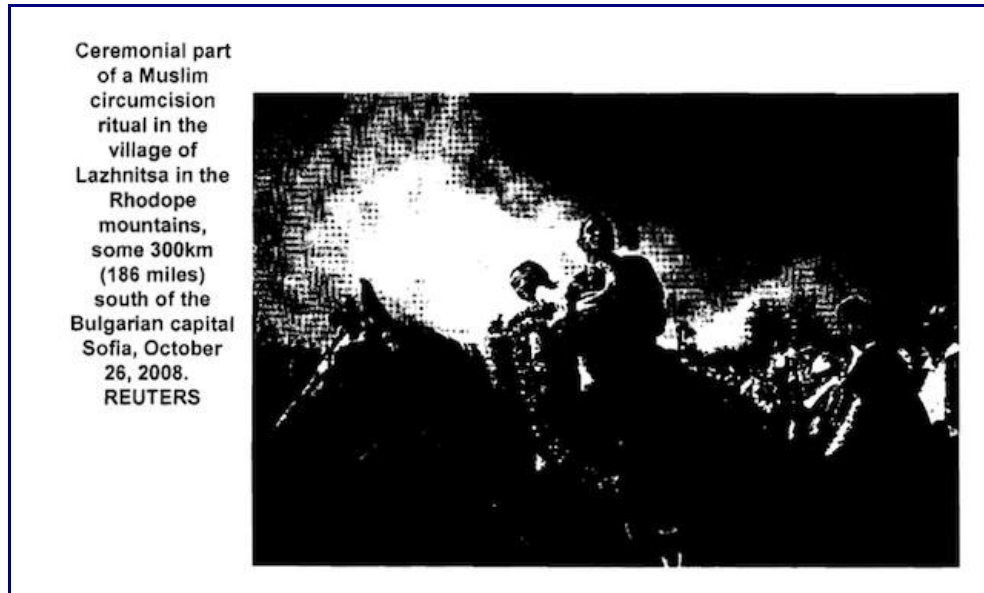
The briefing presents much information that has nothing to do with crime and everything to do with constitutionally-protected religious practice and social behavior, such as estimating the number of mosques in America and listing the states with the largest Muslim populations.

Other slides paint Islam in a less malicious light, and one urges “respectful liaison” as a “proactive approach” to engaging Muslims. But even those exhibit what one American Muslim civil rights leader calls “the understanding of a third grader, and even then, a badly misinformed

third grader.”

One slide asks, “Is Iran an Arab country?” (It’s not.) Another is just a picture of worry beads.

“Based on this presentation, it is easy to see why so many in law enforcement and the FBI view American Muslims with ignorance and suspicion,” says Farhana Khera, the executive director of Muslim Advocates, a legal aid group. “The presentation appears to treat all Muslims with one broad brush and makes no distinction between lawful religious practice and beliefs and unlawful activities.”



A grainy copy of the PowerPoint was obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union’s Northern California chapter and the Asian Law Caucus, a San Francisco-based civil rights group, and provided to Danger Room. The two groups filed a Freedom of Information Act request last year inquiring about government surveillance of American Muslim communities.

“In order for FBI training to be effective it has to present useful, factual and unbiased information. This material fails on all three criteria,” said Mike German, a former FBI agent who now works for the ACLU. “Factually flawed and biased law enforcement training programs only expand the risk that innocent Muslim and Arab Americans will be unfairly targeted for investigation and prosecution, and stigmatized in their communities.” [Full disclosure: My fiancée works for the ACLU.]

In response to queries from Danger Room, the FBI issued the following statement about the PowerPoint: “The FBI new agent population at Quantico is exposed to a diverse curriculum in many specific areas, including Islam and Muslim culture. The presentation in question was a rudimentary version used for a limited time that has since been replaced. It was a small part of a larger segment of training that also included material produced by the [Combating Terrorism Center \(CTC\)](#) at West Point.”

It is unclear when the FBI stopped using the PowerPoint.

Among the most provocative aspects of the presentation is its recommended reading list. One book offered is *The Truth About Mohammed: Founder of the World’s Most Intolerant Religion*, by Robert Spencer. Spencer is one of the ringleaders of the protest against the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” and the co-founder of Stop the Islamicization of America, which “[promotes a conspiratorial anti-Muslim agenda](#),” in the view of the Anti-Defamation League. A manifesto written by the Norwegian terror suspect Anders Behring Breivik [cited Spencer 64](#)

[times](#).

Another book cited is *The Arab Mind*, by Raphael Patai. The volume was briefly infamous in 2004, after Seymour Hersh reported its influence among [certain Iraq war hawks in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal](#). According to Hersh, the takeaway of Patai's book is that "Arabs only understand force" and are susceptible to "shame and humiliation."

"It's like asking law enforcement to learn 'the facts' about the African American experience by reading a book by the grand wizard of the KKK," says Khera. "It is deplorable and offensive that the nation's top law enforcement agency would promote such hateful so-called 'experts' on Islam."

An FBI spokesman said Spencer's book is no longer on the reading list but was not sure about the others. "We encourage our agents to seek out a variety of viewpoints. That does not mean we endorse or adopt the view of any particular author," the bureau's statement continues. "Broad knowledge is essential for us to better understand and respond to the threats we face. Knowledge also helps us defeat ignorance and strengthen relationships with the diverse communities that we serve."

When dealing with Muslims and counterterrorism, the FBI's record is mixed. It's [sent informants into mosques](#) and used operatives to [coax suspected extremists into active terror plots](#), arresting them before anyone was hurt. But its agents also [stood up against torture at Guantanamo Bay](#) and [in the CIA's undisclosed prisons](#). FBI Director Robert Mueller testified in 2008 that many of its terrorism cases "[are a result of the cooperation from the Muslim community in the United States](#)."

In recent years, law enforcement agencies around the country have proven receptive to anti-Muslim crusaders. The *Washington Monthly* recently reported on the "[growing profession](#)" of terrorism consultants who get paid to make "sweeping generalizations about Muslims" to rapt audiences of cops. Adam Serwer at the *American Prospect* reports that another Breivik favorite, Walid Shoebat, also gets government cash to tell police things like "[Islam is the devil](#)."

At a Capitol Hill event on Monday, a Florida-based researcher named Peter Leitner claimed that up to 6,000 Muslims in America are a "[fifth column](#)." According to Leitner's official biography, he founded a group called the Higgins Counterterrorism Research Center; Higgins [claims to have provided counterterrorism instruction](#) to "FBI Counterterrorism Special Agents," various police departments countrywide and even Blackwater.

"These characterizations of Islam and of Arab and Muslim people are not just disheartening — they are frightening," says Veena Dubal, an attorney with the Asian Law Caucus. "Degrading and inaccurate characterizations of Islam and of the 'Arab mind' don't help individual agents fight terrorism. Rather, they imbue law enforcement with an extremely biased view of a diverse community."

Photo: [newmanchu/Flickr](#)

See Also:

- [After Oslo, Group Accuses Thousands of Being Homegrown Terrorists](#)
- [Harman Blows Another \\$22 Million on Terror Panel](#)
- [Chertoff's 'Web of Terror'](#)
- [Someone Tell Obama's Counterterrorism Crew About the Internet](#)
- [U.S. Jihadists to American Muslims: You Suck](#)



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Source: <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/07/fbi-islam-101-guide/>