



Program on Extremism

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NIDAL HASAN: A CASE STUDY IN LONE-ACTOR TERRORISM

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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

About the Author

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.

Foreword

The terrorist attack at Fort Hood on November 5, 2009, left 13 killed, 32 injured, and countless other lives forever changed. In the aftermath, a range of analyses emerged about the attacker, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, and the events that led to that tragic day. In many ways, the Fort Hood attack was a harbinger for the slow but steady increase in lone-actor terrorist attacks in the United States. It forced the intelligence and law enforcement communities to re-evaluate counterterrorism processes and long-held assumptions about radicalization within the United States.

The attacks also shook policy circles, heralding extensive efforts to identify why relevant authorities failed to prevent the shooting. There were a series of congressional hearings and investigations, internal Administration reviews, and an external commission. There was also no shortage of news reports and academic papers, all attempting to answer the central question of why an Army major would kill his fellow servicemembers.

As a congressional staffer on the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee at the time of the Fort Hood shooting, I spent more than a year investigating the events. As part of this investigation, our team interviewed dozens of officials in both the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The congressional inquiry also included a review of hundreds of pages of documents related to the FBI investigation into Hasan prior to the attack, and the DoD's continued employment of Hasan despite numerous overt warning signs. The [report](#), entitled a *Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure the Fort Hood Attack*, found that "Although neither DoD nor the FBI had specific information concerning the time, place, or nature of the attack, they collectively had sufficient information to have detected Hasan's radicalization to violent Islamist extremism but failed both to understand and to act on it. Our investigation found specific and systemic failures in the government's handling of the Hasan case."

DoD also performed an extensive internal review led by former Army Secretary Togo West and retired Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Vern Clark. The DoD report recommended several officers be subject to disciplinary actions related to their failure to supervise Major Hasan. Finally, an [external commission](#) instigated by the FBI, and led by Judge William Webster, "found shortcomings in FBI policy guidance, technology, information review protocols, and training."

While the reviews by the FBI, DoD, and the U.S. Congress provide some additional details into the radicalization and ultimately, mobilization of Hasan, few appraisals adequately address the ideological underpinnings that influenced his decision. As government reviews understandably are subject to bureaucratic and legal limitations, public

accountings are critical to understanding Hasan’s case and twisted rationale for the attack.

This report, *Nidal Hasan: A Case Study in Lone-Actor Terrorism*, is based on primary source documents, discussions with those close to Hasan, and ultimately, interviews with Hasan himself. In rich detail, the report lays out Hasan’s radicalization pathway leading up to the Fort Hood shooting, and contextualizes the attack within the broader academic discussion on the significance and causes of lone-actor terrorism.

By imploring the now-incarcerated Hasan to reflect on his logic leading up to the attack, the author of the report brings to light new information about the fusion between Hasan’s personal life, and the ideological views he embraced to navigate the world around him. As a critical facet of this analysis, the report re-examines the role of Yemeni-American radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, whose perceived impact on Hasan’s decision to conduct the attack may have been over-valued. After drawing from a range of evidence emerging years after the shooting, this report posits that while Anwar al-Awlaki’s influence on Hasan was important, his loose connections to the cleric should be cast as a “symptom, not the cause, of [his] radicalization.”

While the Fort Hood terrorist attack was nearly nine years ago, the Program on Extremism is conscious that the tragic events are not some distant memory for surviving victims and the loved ones of those lost. The Program issues this report in the hope that new details and analysis on Hasan’s radicalization and ideological beliefs may provide some additional context to the events on the afternoon of November 5, 2009.

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Abstract

As one of the most infamous examples of lone-actor terrorism, an extensive array of studies touch on the case of Nidal Hasan, the perpetrator of the 2009 Fort Hood attack. This study strives to complement these works by conducting a micro-level analysis of Nidal Hasan and his path to mobilization through various stages, including religious intensification, radicalization, mobilization, and post-attack evolutions of his ideology. In order to produce a comprehensive review, this article utilizes a variety of previously unpublished sources, including Hasan's full pre-trial sanity board report and documents penned by Hasan before and after the attack. The discussion also draws from interviews with Hasan himself through written correspondence, as well as conversations with Hasan's cousin, and Hasan's former attorney, Lt. Col. Kris Poppe (Ret). The analysis concludes with three critical takeaways. First, his faith was fundamental to the development of Hasan's worldview and his pathway to mobilization, especially his views of hell and obedience to God. Second, despite receiving credit for inspiring Hasan to commit violence, the Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki did not play a primary role in Hasan's mobilization. Third, evidence suggests that Hasan's radicalization followed a linear trajectory. In light of myriad theoretical frameworks contextualizing the mobilization of lone actors and other violent extremists, these observations are critical to understanding Nidal Hasan's path to the attack on Fort Hood.

Introduction¹

November 5th, 2009 was an average day in the Soldier Readiness Processing Center (SRP) on Ft. Hood, Texas, with soldiers visiting various stations to fill out the paperwork necessary to deploy overseas. At around 1 p.m., Major Nidal Hasan calmly entered building 42003 carrying two weapons, an FN 5-7 pistol fitted with a green laser, and a 0.357 revolver. Hasan had brought with him between 20-30 magazines, each containing around 20 bullets, which he later claimed was “enough.”² Hasan said that at that moment, “I was focused...I had a mission to accomplish.”³ He was wearing earplugs in preparation for the loud gunshots and pretended to talk on his cell phone so that others would not try to talk to him. Hasan went first to the desk of Ms. Latoya Williams, a civilian contractor, and told her that the Officer in Charge (OIC), Major Parish, had an emergency and needed her assistance immediately. In pre-trial interviews, Hasan stated that he did not wish to hurt any civilians that day, only soldiers, so he came up with the false emergency as a way of removing Ms. Williams from the area.⁴ As soon as she left the area, Hasan shouted “*Allahu akbar*” and began shooting.

In a pre-trial interview, Hasan explained that he aimed for the most densely packed areas first, with the intention of killing as many soldiers as possible. After firing from behind the desk for about 5-10 minutes, Hasan moved on to find more soldiers. Hasan said that he knew he would be stopped and wanted to kill as many soldiers as possible before that happened. In the pre-trial sanity board report, Hasan claimed “I didn’t have a set sweep plan, but I wanted to be careful when I went into open spaces...I shot to kill.”⁵ He further stated that as he moved through the building, he did not open any closed doors because he did not want to be cornered or attacked. Hasan exited the SRP building and headed for an auditorium to find more targets, but upon opening the auditorium door, he found a graduation ceremony going on inside. He could not distinguish between soldiers and civilians because of the graduation gowns, so he left and headed back towards the SRP building. The earplugs Hasan was wearing prevented him from hearing the police officers approaching behind him, ordering him to lay down his gun. Police Sergeant Kimberly Munley shot Hasan twice, after which he turned around and shot her. He approached Munley and tried to pick up her weapon, but realized that his arm was paralyzed. At this point, Sergeant Mark Todd arrived and shot Hasan, who fell and lost consciousness. In all, the attack lasted less than 30 minutes. All but one of the 13 killed and 32 wounded were soldiers.

In the years after the attack, Nidal Hasan became one the most discussed terrorists in the United States, often categorized as a ‘lone actor’ by mass media and scholarly articles alike. Unfortunately, these appraisals sometimes tend to lack primary evidence from Hasan’s case, or any direct communications from him. This trend is unsurprising given the challenges researchers face in establishing direct connection with perpetrators of

terrorist violence, a factor undoubtedly affecting the study of violent extremists, and lone actors in particular. In fact, Ramon Spaaij and Mark Hamm, two experts on the topic, state that of the 1,000 new studies on lone actor terrorism every year, only 1% include direct contact with terrorists.⁶ This narrow percentage is likely the result of a complicated and somewhat bureaucratic prison system, institutional ethics boards, and the sheer likelihood that the actor will die either through their own actions or in confrontations with police.

The dearth of in-depth, primary source-based analysis also seems to exacerbate the lack of consensus within terrorism studies discourse regarding lone actor trends, issues of typology, definition, and methodology. This case study aims to contribute to the literature surrounding lone actor terrorism by providing an analysis of Hasan's radicalization based on information gathered through direct contact with him and through his unpublished documents. This type of thematic case study is important because it complements and expands upon existing analysis of lone actor terrorism and radicalization, which has been hindered by the lack of concrete data and evidence. While there have been some studies using this type of evidence, they are few and far between.

In short, the following discussion will provide a brief overview of prominent scholarship regarding Nidal Hasan, then build on existing reviews of Hasan's radicalization and ideology with newly acquired information. The analysis and discussion sections examine Hasan's case through a largely chronological framework with his path towards violence divided into phases. The article will conclude with a discussion of how this type of analysis has shed new light on Hasan's case and allowed for an expanded understanding of Hasan and where he fits within the field of terrorism studies.

Background

As an iconic case, especially within lone actor terrorism, there have been hundreds of news articles and a growing number of scholarly reports that discuss Hasan's case. Dozens of academic investigations incorporate Hasan, both within quantitative data sets and qualitative studies. Anecdotally, it would be difficult to study lone actor terrorism today without encountering analysis about Nidal Hasan and the Ft. Hood shooting. Although research products that reference Hasan vary in depth, most understandably lack significant amounts of primary evidence due to the aforementioned difficulty of acquisition. Currently, there are no academic works that have utilized primary source information directly from Hasan regarding his radicalization or motivations. Several studies have mentioned Hasan's infamous "Koranic Worldview" presentation from his medical residency, but they do not spend significant time unpacking the ideas contained in that presentation. This article will explore the previously unexamined paper that Hasan wrote to accompany the presentation, which provides significantly more detail about

Hasan's views at the time. Furthermore, this discussion will delve into several other previously unpublished sources of information, including the full pre-trial sanity board report, a manifesto hand-written by Hasan in prison, interviews with his cousin and his former attorney, and interviews with Hasan himself.

Many articles discuss only a few aspects of Hasan's radicalization and the circumstances surrounding his attack at Ft. Hood, such as his communications with Anwar al-Awlaki, a notorious Yemeni-American cleric and al-Qaeda propagandist.⁷ Consisting of less than 20 emails, these communications receive notable attention in several works that essentially use them as evidence of Awlaki's influence over Hasan.⁸ While scholars often cast Awlaki as Hasan's spiritual mentor and inspiration⁹ some analyses go one step further, suggesting that without Awlaki, the shooting may not have occurred.¹⁰ Ultimately, emerging evidence presented in the following analysis and discussion shows that the perceived relationship of Hasan to Awlaki is nuanced and arguably less influential than previously thought.

In addition to exploring Hasan's supposed link to Awlaki, other studies delve into what they claim are Hasan's alleged motivations for committing violence. Examples of these include a personal grievance against the military for his deployment to fight a war he was morally opposed to¹¹ and depression and anger as a result of religious discrimination and harassment from his fellow soldiers.¹² Upon examination of new data, however, it is apparent that Hasan's motivation for committing violence was not what these studies have previously asserted, but, instead, was rooted in his religious beliefs. These studies' perceptions of Hasan's motivations informed how they perceived Hasan's case as a whole and influenced their conclusions about him. The development of a more accurate understanding of Hasan's motivations is one example of how the new data utilized in this article will challenge and expand upon preconceived notions about Hasan's case.

For the most part, studies including Hasan do not focus entirely on him, but rather, use his case as a data point to support a larger theory about lone actor terrorism or radicalization.¹³ For example, in "Understanding the lone wolf terror phenomena: assessing current profiles," the authors offer a typological theory arguing that "lone wolves are often the result of multiple key personality and environmental drivers often omitted from existing trait typologies."¹⁴ The authors put forth Hasan as an example, arguing that after experiencing harassment from his fellow soldiers, Hasan underwent an 'internal pack conflict' which pushed him into "a period of deep radicalization."¹⁵ This conclusion is not unreasonable through a macro-level analysis of Hasan and the potential drivers of his radicalization, but upon closer examination, that according to the known facts of the case, Hasan was not significantly disturbed by the minor harassment he experienced, and that this did not have a defining impact on his radicalization. While this type of theoretical analysis is equally a worthwhile endeavor, micro-level analysis of lone

actor terrorists has too often been overlooked inadvertently in favor of macro-level analysis of lone actor terrorism as a whole. In Hasan's case, this orientation towards macro-level analysis has confined the utility of Hasan as an example of lone actor terrorism, unintentionally limiting the insights the field can gain from his particular circumstances.

This case study shows that researchers can glean valuable information from in-depth analysis, with the hope that future research can use a more expansive understanding of Hasan to further the field of lone actor terrorism and radicalization studies writ large. The next section shows how Hasan's radicalization follows a linear trajectory and begins sooner than has been assumed. There is disagreement in the field of terrorism studies about the efficacy of using models to study and classify radicalization, noting that there are many individualized pathways for radicalization.¹⁶ Often in model-based analyses, models are developed to support a particular theory and are deployed in a mass application. This may contribute to the development of generalizations about cases so that they can fit within the model as opposed to having a model developed that will suit the particular cases. There is a common desire among scholars to use models to explain phenomena, but it is rare for all cases to fit neatly within the defined boundaries. In Hasan's case, however, evidence indicates that his particular radicalization pathway could fit within a linear progression and it is possible that a linear radicalization model could be used as a useful tool in the analysis of his case.

Hasan's path to the attack on Ft. Hood divides into three chronological phases that are outlined in the following discussion and analysis: religious intensification, radicalization, and mobilization. Upon further investigation, it will also become apparent that although Anwar al-Awlaki played an important role in the development of Hasan's religious ideology, he did not have a highly influential role in Hasan's decision to commit violence. In fact, evidence suggests that Hasan decided he was going to commit violence well before he attempted to communicate with Awlaki. Lastly, this case study will show that a detailed analysis of Hasan's religious views is also critical to understanding his behavior and motivation for committing the attack at Ft. Hood.

Analysis and Discussion

Religious Intensification

Nidal Malik Hasan was born September 8th, 1970 in Arlington County, Virginia. His parents emigrated from the West Bank in Palestine before he was born, and according to Hasan's cousin, Nader Hasan, they strove to blend into their adopted homeland. The Hasan family was not particularly devout in their faith and were more "culturally" Muslim than actively engaged in the religion.¹⁷ Throughout his youth, Hasan did not face any outstanding incidents of racial or religious discrimination, and was not particularly

interested in religion at all.¹⁸ Hasan's family described young Nidal Hasan as a quiet introvert with few hobbies; someone who did not stand out in any particular way. In 1987, after almost a year living abroad in the West Bank, the Hasan family moved to Roanoke, VA, where Hasan attended William Fleming High School. According to his peers and Roanoke locals, Hasan was an unremarkable student who left few impressions on those around him. Hasan enlisted in the Army for a three-year tour directly after high school, viewing the military as a way of advancing himself and of obtaining financial assistance for college.¹⁹

He spent the entire three years of his initial service in Ft. Irwin, California, playing the opposition for units in training.²⁰ Hasan was described as "an average soldier, not distinguished service but honorable."²¹ His first experience of the military was enjoyable and relatively easy, and for some time, Hasan was grateful for the opportunities that being in the military provided for him. According to those close to him, Hasan did not experience any blatant discrimination or bullying because of his ethnicity or religion during his time in the infantry. In the one instance he did recall being bullied, it was because of his physicality (or lack thereof).²² After completing his service and being discharged, Hasan studied at a community college before attending Virginia Tech on his Montgomery GI bill. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in biochemistry in 1997. Post-graduation, Hasan applied to attend medical school at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USHUHS), a military medical school that would require further service in the Army as an officer. In his application to the school, Hasan said that one of the reasons he chose to apply to a military medical school was because "he loved the army."²³

In 2001, Hasan's mother passed away following a long battle with cancer. He moved in with her to take care of her during her illness, and watching her deteriorate from disease profoundly impacted his psyche. Although Hasan was raised as primarily culturally Muslim rather than religiously devout, after her death, he began to worry about the state of her soul in the afterlife. According to one of Hasan's letters, his mother had only started to become religious in the last years of her life, and he was worried that it would not be enough to earn her a place in heaven.²⁴ Hasan's parents owned a convenience store that sold alcohol, which Hasan came to believe as forbidden by Islam. The sin of selling alcohol would, in Hasan's mind, damn his mother to an eternity of burning in hell. This religious interpretation was one he believed to be entirely literal—his mother would spend an eternity burning in a pit of fire. Hasan felt that there was a way for him to help his mother and prevent her from suffering this terrible fate. Her sins, as he saw them, could be outweighed by good actions he did on her behalf. Thus, good deeds and actions as a devout, pious Muslim could gain him a sort of "religious karma" that could be spent on erasing his mother's earthly sins. The fear of his mother suffering this terrible fate is what sparked Hasan's period of 'religious intensification.'²⁵ During this period, Hasan was not

yet radicalized but was exploring his religion and beginning to place it in a more prominent position in his life.

According to his letters, Hasan began actively thinking about and searching for the most correct interpretation of Islam so that he could best serve God. During this period of religious exploration, he met Anwar al-Awlaki. Today, Awlaki is known as having been one of the most influential al-Qaeda recruiters and ideologues, inspiring multiple actors such as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Faisal Shahzad, and Roshanara Choudary.²⁶ In 2001, however, Awlaki was considered a moderate and well-known Muslim leader in the Washington, D.C. area and was the imam of the Dar al-Hijra mosque in Falls Church, Virginia. Hasan's mother's funeral was held at this mosque, with Awlaki presiding. Awlaki impressed Hasan because of his perfect English and his engaging way of speaking.²⁷ According to Hasan, Awlaki was a captivating speaker with impressively detailed knowledge of the Qur'an.²⁸ Awlaki directly influenced the development of Hasan's religious ideology from the very beginning, although Hasan did not know it at the time. Awlaki had produced a series of recorded sermons that were available on CDs in which he discussed a variety of religious topics. Hasan began listening to these lectures in his car, without realizing Awlaki was the orator, as he only briefly met Awlaki at his mother's funeral. Hasan liked the sermons because they integrated stories and quotes directly from the Qur'an. As a non-Arabic speaker, he liked that Awlaki would occasionally introduce Arabic words in the sermon and explain their meaning.²⁹ Furthermore, as Hasan was only beginning to explore Islam, he enjoyed the fact that the majority of Awlaki's teachings concerned the basics of the religion and the fundamental concepts of the Qur'an.

Hasan stated that Awlaki's sermons directly influenced a document he wrote while imprisoned at Ft. Leavenworth, "Man's Duty to his Creator and the Purpose of Life," in which Hasan tried to emulate Awlaki by exploring fundamental Islamic concepts as he interpreted them.³⁰ Hasan said that one of the ideas in Awlaki's sermons that resonated deeply with him was the idea of complete obedience to God and submission to his will, and how mankind has continually failed to do this by "compromising" Islam in one way or another.³¹ As will be shown in the following sections, the idea of absolute submission to God would continue to influence Hasan and his actions as he developed his own religious beliefs. In addition to this, Hasan has said that Awlaki's sermons gave him "more insight into what it means to be at war with Islam, and how the US/West wanted a castrated form of Islam."³² These recorded sermons became very important in Hasan's life. He carried multiple copies of them in his trunk to pass on to others. Both family members and co-workers have recounted instances in which Hasan tried to give CDs to them.³³ At the time of his religious intensification, Hasan was also influenced to a lesser degree by Anjem Choudary, the British Islamist who founded the anti-Western organization al-Muhajiroun. According to Hasan's former lawyer Lt. Col. (Ret.) Kris

Poppe, Hasan was also very active online, browsing through chat rooms and searching YouTube and blogs for information to support his increasingly radical beliefs.³⁴

Radicalization

In 2003, Hasan graduated from medical school and entered his internship and residency period at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. This timeframe, from about 2003 to early 2009, can be seen as Hasan's "radicalization period." During this time, patterns and indicators of radicalization develop in Hasan's beliefs and behavior. These include increasing isolation from family and colleagues, growing religious conservatism, and the adoption of views typically associated with jihadi-Salafism. These indicators are present in four different areas: his relationships with family members, his interactions with colleagues at Walter Reed, and two separate academic works focusing on Muslim soldiers and their potential religious conflicts with US military involvement in the Middle East,

In the wake of his mother's death, Hasan's family began to notice Hasan's burgeoning religious interest. Initially, in spite of the relatively secularity of the extended family, Hasan's religiosity did not cause any issues. This changed, however, as Hasan's religious beliefs became not only stronger but more conservative and intolerant. Nader Hasan, Nidal's cousin and close childhood friend, said that at family gatherings Hasan would only want to discuss religious topics, and would continuously try to convince Nader of the validity of his religious beliefs, urging him to become more pious.³⁵ The subject of religion became so pervasive that Nader eventually told Hasan that his constant discussions about religion were making Nader *less* religious, which put an abrupt end to them. According to Nader, Hasan became so fiercely conservative that during a family get-together for Thanksgiving in 2007, Hasan harshly scolded him for bringing a female date because he believed that it was religiously impermissible for women to leave the house without a male guardian.³⁶ After that event, Nader says the relationship between them cooled and interactions between the two cousins declined significantly.³⁷ This progression demonstrates how Hasan's growing conservatism drove a wedge between him and his secularly-inclined family. Apart from his brother Anas, who Nader says became supportive as the two brothers transitioned into a more pious lifestyle, Hasan did not have any family members to turn to with his newly developed beliefs and was increasingly frustrated at their unwillingness to engage with him about religious topics.³⁸ Hasan began to withdraw from his family as he became more and more focused on maintaining what he believed to be a pious lifestyle; in fact, his family was unaware that he was scheduled to deploy to Afghanistan in 2009.

Hasan's family members describe him as someone who had difficulty making friends, both growing up and as an adult. This description as a loner followed him into Walter Reed, where Hasan failed to develop any close relationships with his colleagues.

According to interviews with his former colleagues, Hasan would never socialize outside of the classroom, even though groups would regularly get together after classes or work. Hasan was viewed as intentionally distant by his colleagues, choosing to go home or to services at his mosque instead of socializing.³⁹ According to pre-trial interviews by Hasan, this was a conscious choice. By the time Hasan had entered his residency, his focus on religion had grown to such a point that he decided to stop socializing or putting effort into his classes so that he could focus all of his energy on religious study.⁴⁰ Clashes with Hasan's colleagues, caused by his mounting religious fervor, contributed to his isolation. According to one co-worker, Hasan refused to have his photo taken with female coworkers, causing a rift regarding the holiday group photo.⁴¹ Although this was not a significant issue, it added to the division between Hasan and his peers.

In an interview given to TIME magazine, one classmate claimed Hasan "wore his rigid Islamic ideology on his sleeve and wove it through his course work... He would be standing there in uniform pledging allegiance to the Koran."⁴² Hasan would constantly bring religion up in conversation in what was perceived as attempts to instigate arguments with classmates. One classmate recalled feeling that Hasan was deliberately provocative in these discussions, often making controversial claims about the legitimacy of suicide bombers or the superiority of Shari'a to the Constitution. In an interview with TIME, this classmate stated: "we asked him pointedly: 'Nidal, do you consider Shari'a law to transcend the Constitution of the United States?' And he said, 'Yes.' We asked him if homicidal bombers were rewarded for their acts with 72 virgins in heaven and he responded, 'I've done the research- yes.'"⁴³ Hasan told interviewers for the sanity board report that "near the end of his third year of residency and the beginning of his fourth year of residency, he began to accept that he needed to do something to help the resistance efforts of his Muslim brothers."⁴⁴ At this time in Hasan's life, he had radicalized to the point that he had decided he was going to take action against the United States. Uncertain of what his plan would be, he turned his school work into a platform from which he could share his developing ideology while internally debating how he would take action.

Hasan's insistence in using his coursework as an opportunity to espouse his beliefs also inflamed tensions among his classmates. According to one, Hasan gave at least three presentations over the course of a year that focused almost exclusively on his beliefs about Islam and the persecution of Muslims by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁵ These presentations were supposed to be about different issues relating to mental health, and were instead used by Hasan as a method to present to his classmates his increasingly extreme religious ideas. In an assignment regarding environmental health, for example, Hasan argued that the U.S. was waging war on Islam and claimed that there could be legitimate reasons for suicide bombings in a presentation entitled "Why the War on Terror is a War on Islam."⁴⁶ During Hasan's time at Walter Reed, he developed two other academic projects that showcased his developing ideology. These are his 2007 Grand

Rounds presentation, entitled “The Koranic Worldview as it Relates to Muslims in the US Military,” and a 2008 research project, “Religious Conflicts among U.S. Muslim Soldiers.”⁴⁷

In the final year of Hasan’s residency, he participated in “Grand Rounds,” a teaching tool in which a presenter would introduce a particular case or medical issue to an audience of colleagues and answer questions. Hasan’s presentation instead emphasized the conflicts he believed existed for Muslim soldiers between their faith and their military duty. On the surface, this topic seems applicable as a psychiatric issue, but within the lecture, Hasan incorporated almost zero medical evidence and instead based his arguments on quotes from the Qur’an and his own religious interpretations. Hasan told pre-trial interviewers the presentation was autobiographical, and that he was discussing his own beliefs and the conflict he was experiencing.⁴⁸ In the introduction of the paper accompanying his presentation, Hasan explained his purpose was to “identify what the Koran inculcates in the minds of Muslims and the potential implications this may have for the U.S. military, describe the nature of the religious conflicts that Muslims may have with the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and take an intuitive look at identifying Muslim soldiers that may be having religious conflicts with the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Hasan writes that this topic is necessary to explore because “a War against Islam is resonating in the minds of at least a small percentage of U.S. Muslim soldiers,” which he says has been responsible for what he labels “adverse events.”⁴⁹ The example he gives for these ‘adverse events’ is the case of Sergeant Hasan Akbar, a Muslim convert who in 2003 attacked his fellow soldiers with both grenades and gunfire while stationed in Kuwait. Hasan writes Akbar “was later found crying in a corner of a tent where he stated, ‘You guys are coming into our countries and you’re going to rape our women and kill our children.’”⁵⁰ Hasan does not, however, provide any empirical evidence to support his claim that a percentage of Muslim soldiers believe that the war on terror is a war on Islam. This lack of evidence in combination with Hasan’s statements that he was referring to his own specific worldview when writing the paper leads to the conclusion that he believed the U.S. was directly attacking Islam.

Furthermore, Hasan writes that “not all of the current actions,” meaning these ‘adverse events,’ “taken by Muslims and seen around the world are condoned by the Koran...this disconnect can be explained, at least partly, by the interplay of culture, politics, and the idiosyncratic psychologies of particular groups that are sometimes driven by frustration, anger, fear, and the need for fast and tangible results. These Muslims look for a religious justification.”⁵¹ Here Hasan’s writing mirrors his own life. After the death of his mother, Hasan was emotionally devastated and terrified of the eternal suffering he believed she would suffer for her perceived sins. In his “Koranic Worldview,” Hasan describes in detail what he believed were the very real tortures of hell. He writes: “If you do not submit [to

God] and God condemns you to hell, there is much to fear.”⁵² He then lists several verses of the Qur’an describing sinners being boiled alive, burning in hellfire, and being unable to escape the torment. The fear of his mother’s perceived condemnation drove Hasan to seek out religious solutions, further priming him for the path to radicalization. As demonstrated, he had already decided that he was going to take action, so he was himself one of these individuals driven by fear into undertaking an ‘adverse event,’ even if he did not recognize himself as such.

In the paper, Hasan writes that the purpose of life is to submit oneself to God and his will completely.⁵³ Hasan argues that there should be no hesitation on the part of a Muslim in fulfilling God’s command, because God defines morality. Thus, there should be no ethical quandary about pursuing actions required by God. Hasan claims “the only thing that should keep a Muslim from doing what is commanded is the doubt that the command actually came from God.”⁵⁴ He then goes on to write that in the Qur’an, Islam is not solely a peaceful religion but that “in reality it can be quite an aggressive religion. This aggressiveness is not only condoned by God, but in some cases commanded by God.”⁵⁵ After unpacking these ideas, it is reasonable to conclude that Hasan believed that violence and fighting were not only permitted but in some cases commanded, and that because they are commands from God, they are not only morally just but are obligatory in the effort to fully submit to God.

After making these religious claims, Hasan asks, “How does this affect Muslims in the U.S. military?”⁵⁶ He argues that the issue is not that the Qur’an forbids Muslims from killing other Muslims, but rather that the reason behind the killing must be just. He writes: “If the U.S. is fighting for truth and justice, then Muslims serving in the U.S. military have nothing to fear; however, if American hegemony seeks to attenuate or destroy Islam, that poses a problem for Muslim soldiers. If the issue becomes God versus country, the Koran makes it quite clear what comes first.”⁵⁷ For Hasan, the U.S. military was very much engaged in an unjust war against Islam. He lays out his reasoning for this by saying:

Is this an attack on Islam? If one were to try to recall the events after 9/11 it would probably resemble the following: 1.) The World Trade Center Towers were struck. 2.) President Bush demands the Taliban hand over Osama Bin Laden. 3.) Taliban publicly acknowledges the atrocity as wrong, but demanded some kind of evidence. 4.) President Bush refused stating that the request was unacceptable. 5.) Under severe pressure and acknowledging the military might of [sic] the U.S., the Taliban agreed to hand over Osama bin Laden to a neutral third party. 6.) President Bush refused and waged a war which he extended into Iraq, which if we give him the benefit of the doubt,

was based on poor intelligence data. Given this, one could convincingly argue that this is a war on Islam.⁵⁸

Apart from the overt flaws in the flow of this logic, Hasan is quite clear in stating here that he believes the United States is at war with Islam. Following his logic and religious reasoning further, this would have compelled Hasan—according to his beliefs—to act in defense of Islam through violent action. In addition to his critique of the permissibility of the war and Muslim soldiers’ involvement in it, Hasan then delves into a brief discussion of Osama bin Laden. This portion of his paper and presentation were particularly disturbing to his classmates, at least one of whom complained to their superiors after.⁵⁹ Hasan writes that “it is arguable that the U.S. government is quite capable of doing ungodly things,” and that this is what Bin Laden claimed in many of his released statements and videos.⁶⁰ Hasan writes that “Osama bin Laden convincingly argues that Koranic injunctions allow him to fight his enemy as they fight him, for example destroying anything and everything that gets in the way of his goal to establish God’s hegemony. The obvious difference is that Bin Laden does it openly, whereas the U.S. is accused of doing so covertly.”⁶¹

Hasan concludes his presentation with a recommendation that the military allow Muslim soldiers who are facing internal religious conflicts the opportunity to either administratively separate from the military or to move into a non-combat role that is deemed religiously acceptable. He argues that this could prevent the occurrence of further ‘adverse events.’ Here again, Hasan’s writing mirrors his own lived experience, as he tried to obtain conscientious objector status, and failing at that, hired a lawyer to find a way to allow him to separate from the military, ultimately to no avail.⁶² Hasan ends his paper with “The U.S. military bases its mottos on God and Country. But what happens when it becomes God versus Country? The harsh reality is that God comes first for American Muslim soldiers.”⁶³ Based on Hasan’s admission that this work was autobiographical, we can conclude that by 2007 at the time of his Grand Rounds presentation, Hasan had already decided that his devotion to God and submitting to what he perceived to be His will was more important than any other aspect of his life.

In June 2008, Hasan submitted a project proposal as a part of the requirement for his Master’s in Public Health degree. The research project, entitled “Religious Conflicts among U.S. Muslim Soldiers,” indicates that Hasan had not moved on from the issue of religious conflict in the wake of his controversial Grand Rounds presentation. The purpose of this study was to develop a survey to be given to Muslim soldiers with the hopes of quantifying potential religious conflicts the soldiers could be having with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This project proposal and accompanying survey are particularly interesting not because of the contents—Hasan was careful to keep this work within the bounds of academia, as opposed to his Qur’an-laced Grand Rounds

presentation— but because of the fact that Hasan’s survey would have classified him as a soldier with serious religious conflicts at risk for a so-called ‘adverse event.’

Of the questions that Hasan included in his survey, there are a few that stand out as ones that, based upon Hasan’s established thinking, would have singled him out as a person of interest. One of these is “Thinking now about U.S. actions around the world, please tell me if you think the following are or are not U.S. goals. Please say if you think it is: To weaken and divide the Islamic world.”⁶⁴ Based upon Hasan’s arguments in his “Koranic Worldview,” it is not a stretch to assume that he would have said that this was ‘definitely’ a goal of the U.S. government. Hasan thought that the U.S. was not only trying to weaken the Islamic world, but was attacking it directly. In another question, Hasan asks, “Do you agree or disagree: Groups in the Muslim world that attack American civilians are defending Islam against America’s efforts to divide and dominate the Islamic world.”⁶⁵ In the sanity board report, Hasan stated that by the time he developed this project proposal, he had already decided that he needed to act in order to help the ‘resistance’ of his ‘Muslim brothers,’ meaning the Taliban. Hasan believed that they were defending Islam against its enemy—the U.S.

Other questions include asking if the soldier feels that their “role as a loyal U.S. conflicts with [their] role as a good Muslim,” and if their “religion (Islam) expects [them] to help those Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan that are fighting against coalition forces.”⁶⁶ When these questions are placed within the larger framework of Hasan’s previously written statements and the information he gave after the attack, it becomes almost certain that he would have answered in the affirmative to both of these questions. The purpose of this survey was to develop a way in which Muslim soldiers experiencing the conflicts could be identified, and had Hasan been given this survey, assuming he answered truthfully, he likely would have been identified as a potential threat.

Between December 2008 and June 2009, Hasan sent over a dozen emails to Anwar al-Awlaki through a messaging function on Awlaki’s website. These emails are the first and only instance of Hasan attempting to make contact with Awlaki, which demonstrated his increasing desire to engage more actively with the extremist movement. At that time, Awlaki was a known al-Qaeda associate; although Hasan’s communications “tripped a wire” to open an investigation, authorities ultimately categorized Hasan as “not a person of interest.”⁶⁷ In these emails, Hasan explores a variety of topics, including questions about the religious permissibility of suicide bombings, Western views of Hamas, and finding an appropriately pious wife. He even wrote that he was going to establish a scholarship in Awlaki’s honor, given to the winner of an essay contest on the topic “Why Anwar al-Awlaki is a Great Activist and Leader.”⁶⁸ Awlaki responded only twice to Hasan’s inquiries, both of which were regarding the essay contest. Awlaki never answered any of Hasan’s religious questions or gave him any explicit directives.

These emails, along with Awlaki's perceived relationship to Hasan as a mentor and spiritual advisor, are often discussed in studies about Hasan's case, with Awlaki frequently being credited with having significant influence over Hasan. When placed in context within Hasan's radicalization pathway, however, these emails appear to be less influential than previously thought. Although it is interesting that Hasan attempted to establish contact with Awlaki, he was largely unsuccessful, receiving only two inconsequential replies. At this critical moment in Hasan's radicalization, Awlaki did not provide, based on the new evidence, him with any overt guidance or motivation. Even still, it is difficult to resolve the precise influence of Awlaki in Hasan's life, especially as Hasan did listen extensively to Awlaki's recorded sermons during the initial stages of his religious intensification. Ultimately, the evidence does not support the notion that the brief correspondence between Awlaki and Hasan was a driving factor in Hasan's push towards mobilization, but it is likely that Awlaki's sermons were highly influential in the development of Hasan's religious ideology.

Radicalization

In the spring of 2009, towards the end of his fellowship, Hasan was promoted to the rank of major. He received orders to report to the Darnall Army Medical Center at Ft. Hood no later than July 15th.⁶⁹ As discussed in the previous section, Hasan had already decided at least two years earlier that he needed to commit an act of violence against the US military. However, according to his statements in the sanity board report, at the time of his transfer to Ft. Hood Hasan had not developed a plan for what exactly he intended to do. In the months following his arrival in Killeen, Texas, Hasan continued to try to live his life in accordance to his interpretation of the Shari'a. According to his statements in the sanity board, he was "procrastinating" in his plan to commit some act of violence towards the military.⁷⁰ Hasan settled into an inexpensive apartment that he kept mostly bare, preferring to have few possessions or furniture. In addition, he intentionally kept his bank account so low that it would not accrue interest, believing this to be un-Islamic. Instead, according to the sanity board report, during his time at Ft. Hood Hasan gave roughly 75% of his income to various Islamic charities or persons in need.⁷¹ Along with his belief that interest was against the tenets of Islam, Hasan believed that insurance was un-Islamic and so declined his Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance.⁷²

Hasan began attending a local mosque, the Islamic Center of Killeen, arranging his schedule so that he could attend the five daily prayers.⁷³ Although Hasan met people at the center, he did not spend much time socializing, although he would occasionally share meals with other mosque members.⁷⁴ Continuing his pattern of antisocial behavior from Walter Reed, Hasan made the conscious choice not to socialize or make friends in an effort to focus all of his extra time in prayer or religious study. Hasan also continued to

intentionally perform only adequately at work, meeting the expectations required of him but avoiding any extra effort so that his energy could be directed towards religion.

On August 1st, 2009, Hasan purchased an FN 5-7 pistol, magazines, and ammunition from Guns Galore in Killeen. In the sanity board report, Hasan told interviewers that he purchased the weapon because he “knew something was going to happen.”⁷⁵ After purchasing the gun, Hasan said “he was dedicated to carrying out a violent act in his role as a mujahadeen.”⁷⁶ According to an interview with the employee that sold him the weapon, Hasan wanted to buy the most high-tech gun the store had available. He filmed store employees demonstrating how to disassemble, clean, and load the gun. According to statements given by the employee, Hasan would purchase “three to four boxes of ammunition approximately ‘every or every other’ weekend as well as additional magazines.”⁷⁷ In the weeks leading up to the attack, Hasan began purchasing eight to ten boxes of ammunition at a time.⁷⁸ Hasan told interviewers that after buying the gun, he spent two weeks “getting used to it” before going to a gun range. In his free time, Hasan would frequently go to Stan’s Shooting Range, usually buying three or four targets at a time to practice. On November 3rd, two days before the attack, Hasan reportedly purchased ten targets.⁷⁹ The owner of the gun range stated that Hasan was “an above average shot,” and would focus primarily on headshots.⁸⁰ An instructor at the range told investigators that Hasan hit between 80-90% of his headshots.⁸¹

Near the end of October, Hasan was informed that he was going to deploy to Afghanistan, with orders to report to Ft. Benning, Georgia, for pre-deployment training no later than November 28th. This event served as the triggering point that propelled him out of his self-described ‘procrastination’ into action. Hasan told interviewers: “I was shocked...I wasn’t expecting [to deploy] this soon.”⁸² That night, after considering the pros and cons of deploying, he decided that “getting deployment orders was a ‘task from God to speed up his actions.’”⁸³ At the time, Hasan had been wrestling with the fact that committing violence against the military would mean breaking his oath of office. According to Hasan’s religious beliefs, oaths of any kind are a sacred covenant between the pledge taker and God. For Hasan, breaking his vow meant breaking a promise with God. However, according to the sanity board and several pre-trial documents written by Hasan, he ultimately decided that his believed duty as a Muslim to commit violence in the name of God in defense of Islam overrode any secular oath he swore to the United States.⁸⁴

After receiving his deployment orders, Hasan spent several days mulling over his precise plan. During this time, he attended several appointments in the SRP concerning administrative and medical matters. Hasan told interviewers after the attack that he “initially considered driving to the deployment center at Ft. Benning [GA] during his pre-deployment leave to Virginia and shooting soldiers there,” but “he decided against that idea because he did not want to get caught in an unknown territory with weapons and

ammunition in his car.” Hasan also stated that he considered waiting to carry out his attack until he was in Afghanistan, but ultimately, he decided on the SRP because he was familiar with the building after his pre-deployment appointments and had studied the layout of the building. In interviews for his sanity board, Hasan told investigators that in the days leading up to the attack he began to have doubts about his plans. He knew that carrying out the attack would mean giving up his medical career, and that it would effectively end his life as he knew he would either go to prison or die. In the end, however, Hasan recommitted himself to his plan, convincing himself that “fighting for God was a noble deed.”⁸⁵

Post-Attack Evolutions

After the attack, Hasan was paralyzed from the chest down with limited mobility in his left arm. He was charged with 13 counts of premeditated murder and 32 counts of attempted murder. After an extensive investigation, the Department of Defense classified the attack as ‘workplace violence,’ instead of designating it as an act of terrorism. This decision was highly controversial at the time due to the ideological nature of the attack as shown by Hasan’s statements. In the years leading up to the trial, which would not take place until 2013 due to the complex nature of the case, Hasan was confined to the Bell County jail in Belton, Texas—only 30 minutes from where the attack took place. During his pre-trial confinement, Hasan’s legal team attempted to help Hasan understand the errors in his ideology and to show remorse for his actions. They brought in two religious experts, a Muslim U.S. Army chaplain and a respected imam, to meet with Hasan and discuss his religious beliefs with him. They met with Hasan every day for a week, trying to convince him that his interpretations of the Qur’an and the Shari’a were incorrect and he was mistaken in his belief that he needed to commit violence in the name of God. According to Hasan’s attorney, there was a point when they believed they were going to be successful in their attempts to de-radicalize him.⁸⁶ This aspiration was unsuccessful, and it soon became clear that Hasan would remain firm in his convictions about the validity of his beliefs and his reasons for committing violence. It is interesting to note that although Hasan has always maintained his belief that what he did was right, there are two aspects of his pre-trial period that can be interpreted as showing some semblance of remorse.

While in jail, Hasan began a period of fasting. Although he believed that he was religiously correct for killing and wounding soldiers in his attack, Hasan decided he could not be entirely sure of this fact. Thus, he began fasting as a way of atoning for his part in killing or injuring each victim in the event that he was wrong and punished in the afterlife. He decided on a set period for each victim in which he would fast from sunup to sundown. Hasan’s self-imposed contradictions are particularly interesting here. In his own words, he believed that what he had done was correct and that the people he had killed were religiously permissible because, in his mind, they posed a direct threat to Islam and his

fellow Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, by fasting “just in case” Hasan had developed for himself a spiritual safety measure, a way out of being sentenced to hell should he have been wrong about his interpretations. As discussed in the previous section, Hasan believed hell to be a real place with physical torture for all of eternity, so it is in line with his established thinking to do everything in his power to avoid that fate. His period of fasting, while not overtly an act of remorse, shows that for at least that time Hasan was uncertain enough in his religious convictions that he was unwilling to risk an eternity in hell for them. This example also emphasizes the power that the concept of hell had over Hasan.

Prior to being sentenced and sent to Ft. Leavenworth prison, Hasan wrote several preliminary and pre-sentencing statements that he intended to read in court addressing his motivations for why he committed his attack. These comments vary slightly, but in general they remain consistent in message. In the statements, Hasan writes that he had come to understand that in his “zeal and great desire to help the mujahadeen against the enemies of Islam,”⁸⁷ he broke his oath of office, something he had come to believe was not religiously permissible. This is an issue Hasan wrestled with before committing his attack, and this interpretation differs from his previous understanding of his oath of office. Before conducting his assault, Hasan decided that although it was un-Islamic to break an oath, it was acceptable in that circumstance because of his perceived duty to commit violence in the name of God to protect Islam. According to his preliminary trial statements, however, Hasan’s thinking had evolved and he now believed that he acted in error by breaking his oath. One draft pre-sentencing statement, although a bit long, warrants reproduction in full to completely understand Hasan’s evolving viewpoint:

To the court and members of this panel, Thank you for providing this opportunity so that I may address you as well as family and friends of those who died and were injured on Nov 5th, 2009. I understand that many of you may turn away from me in anger because of my actions. I recognize that nothing I can do or say will ever fully restore your losses, erase your agony, or ease your despair, all of which I have brought upon you. But I ask you to listen attentively because its important for you to understand my actions and specifically why I am making an apology. On Nov 5th, 2009, I committed an act in an attempt to defend my religion. The U.S is engaged in a war against Islam and as multiple surveys affirm, this belief is not particular to me, but shared by a majority of Muslims worldwide. I am an American, but God commands me to be Muslim first and foremost. But even as an American my actions seem more palatable knowing that a majority of International legal scholars as well as many American legal scholars, and even graduates of West Point thought that the attack in Iraq was illegal. Similar reasoning can also be applied to the attack in Afghanistan. And as a

Muslim I can never engage myself in fight against God. It's one thing for the U.S. to say they don't want God's law to reign supreme as the law of the land, but to try to enforce that philosophy in Muslim lands is not acceptable. But in my zeal to help the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan and post Saddam Iraq I made an error. I broke an explicit covenant—my oath of office—that I took voluntarily, not under duress. Muslims in the U.S. have been my harshest critics in this regard. I am not an Islamic scholar and regret both making a covenant that had the potential to force me to fight against my religion and I now regret breaking such an inviolable oath that led to the deaths and injuries that I will now be held accountable to All-Mighty God. For that I apologize.⁸⁸

In this statement, Hasan makes it clear that while he does feel some remorse about his assault, it is because of the way in which he carried it out, not because of the attack itself. He remains firm in his belief that attacking and killing soldiers was the right thing to do, but he regrets that he had to break his oath in order to do it. Hasan later resolved this moral quandary by writing a statement renouncing his U.S. citizenship and absolving himself of his oath as a soldier.⁸⁹ Hasan never read these comments during his trial. In fact, he said very little apart from an opening statement where he told the jury that they would find him guilty.

Before the trial began, Hasan fired his legal team (although the judge ordered them to remain in court as advisors) with the intention of representing himself. He refused to put on a defense, however, after the judge blocked his motion to present a “defense of others” strategy. This is an approach where the defendant's crimes are argued to be justified as they were committed in the defense of others. Hasan claimed that this procedure was applicable because he killed the soldiers out of a desire to defend Islam and the Taliban, which he believed was under threat by the United States. After the judge denied his request to present this strategy, Hasan refused to put on any sort of defense, not calling any witnesses and rarely speaking. In response to interview questions regarding his lack of action, he said that he wished to get the death penalty because he believed it would make him a martyr.⁹⁰ He was convicted on all counts, and was sentenced to await the death penalty pending appeal at Ft. Leavenworth military prison.

While in Ft. Leavenworth, Hasan wrote a manuscript entitled “The Purpose of Life: Why Were We Created?”, detailing his religious ideology. It should be noted that this document was written several years after the Ft. Hood attack, and after an extended period in which Hasan had ample opportunity to reflect and develop his opinions. It would not be a stretch to assume that some of the opinions he describes in the document differ slightly from what he believed at the time of the attack, or that Hasan changed his views to fit into the larger narrative of jihadi-Salafism that he strove to emulate. However, this document is

the most in-depth description Hasan has given of his belief system and is worth unpacking.

Hasan begins this document with a description of the ‘ranking system’ he believes exists in heaven and hell. He writes that a person can achieve a higher rank by being a pious, obedient Muslim and committing good deeds. On the other side of the spectrum, a person can be sentenced to lower ranks of hell depending on the severity of their sins. According to Hasan, the religious ‘points’ one can get from good deeds and acting in accordance to God’s will can be lost. For example, in a section entitled “Obeying Only All-Mighty God,” Hasan writes: “Once an order is decreed by All-Mighty God mankind has no option except to obey or face the prospect of losing all of your good deeds.”⁹¹ This unwavering obedience to God shows a continuity in Hasan’s ideology. He wrote about this idea several years earlier in his “Koranic Worldview,” arguing that the most critical aspect of being a good Muslim was to place full authority in the will of God and be completely obedient to His will. Hasan’s section on obedience demonstrates that although he has elaborated more fully on his ideology, the core tenets remain the same. When asked if he was concerned with trying to improve his rank in heaven when he planned to commit his attack, Hasan responded:

Yes, but it was first and foremost to avoid Hell. Hell has ranks also and the lowest or one of the lowest ranks in Hell belong to the hypocrites (munafaqeen). The hypocrites are those who say they’re Muslims, but their actions indicate otherwise, like fighting against the establishment of God’s (shari’ah) law despite God’s requirement to do so. I believe that Muslims who directly or indirectly help support those who wish to establish a Western-like type democracy over shari’ah law are hypocrites.⁹²

In this response, Hasan’s focus on hell is once again apparent. The threat of being sentenced to hell continues to be a recurring theme in Hasan’s writings and is a dominant feature of his ideology. For Hasan, the desire to avoid being a ‘hypocrite,’ along with his belief that the US military was a threat to Islam and the establishment of the Shari’a by the Taliban, was a large part of his decision to commit an act of violence.

Hasan also wrote that he believed a person could intercede on behalf of others regarding their rank. In particular, he thought that his good deeds could be used to help improve the position of his mother, who he feared would be condemned to hell because of the sins he believed she committed during her lifetime. He wrote: “God allows people to intercede for other people on the Day of Judgment if their wretchedness wasn’t overwhelming. So my sole concern for my mother is to avoid Hell. After that, any rank in heaven would be great.”⁹³ As described previously, the death of Hasan’s mother was the catalyst for his religious intensification. He initially began exploring religion to find ways to prevent his

mother from going to hell. It fits within Hasan's established thinking to assume that if he believed that good deeds could be used in order to avoid his mother's suffering, he would have done whatever could be counted as the best of these prescribed good deeds. For Hasan, this was violent jihad.

In the section titled "Jihad," Hasan writes that "angering and inflicting harm on the enemies of God will count as a good deed."⁹⁴ He claims that "believing fighters have a greater rank in the eyes of Allah than believers who don't fight," and that the mujahadeen may make mistakes, but they are "imperfect Muslims trying to establish God's religion as supreme on the land," and are therefore worthy of God's forgiveness.⁹⁵ Hasan goes on to explain that fighting, a good deed that will grant the fighter a high rank in heaven, is "obligatory upon Muslims although they may dislike it."⁹⁶ When asked why he believed that those who fight or commit violence in the name of God receive a higher rank, Hasan said that "he was only reporting what the Holy Qur'an teaches."⁹⁷ In response to the question of whether he thought he was committing a good deed in his attack on Ft. Hood, Hasan wrote:

Of course! I considered those who were trying to help the U.S undermine the Taliban's attempt to establish Shariah (God's) Law as the supreme law of the land and replace it with something else like a democracy that doesn't rule by God's law the enemies of God, and thus worthy of fighting/killing. I would prefer convincing them to accept Islam and be part of God's people (i.e., Muslim), but my threshold was their deployment, and the fact that the Taliban were asking for help worldwide.⁹⁸

It is worth noting that although Hasan writes in his "Purpose of Life" document that fighting is obligatory and can lead to a higher rank, he states here that he would have preferred not to fight, and would have instead chosen to try to convert the soldiers had they not been deploying. This also is another example of Hasan showing a clear triggering point for his violence, as he was deploying at the same time as these soldiers. When asked if he felt that killing soldiers was something he wanted to do, he responded:

No, but war causes death. Sometimes killing is necessary. The only way to stop the U.S is going to involve killing soldiers. They kill our soldiers, we kill theirs. They fight for "democracy", I fight for Sharia (God's) law. I felt it was something I had to do. I take no pleasure in killing for the sake of unwarranted killing. But, sometimes it's necessary. In war, you have to kill once you have decided to take the path of a front line soldier.⁹⁹

In Hasan's motivations for committing violence and discussions of jihad, he makes it clear that he believed that violence against the U.S, who he considered an enemy, would be

regarded as a good deed by God and would grant him a higher rank in heaven. This achievement was important to Hasan not just for his own sake, but for his mothers, as he thought his good deeds could be used to intercede and prevent her from going to hell. Furthermore, Hasan believed fighting to be commanded by God and obligatory, even if he did not want to do it. As discussed previously, Hasan thought that the most important action for a Muslim to take was to obey God and His commands. Therefore, based on his ideology, he felt there was no option except committing violent jihad.

Conclusion

Although the discourse surrounding Nidal Hasan often illustrates the broader threat posed by lone actors, a deeper evaluation of the case has utility in the field of terrorism studies. While macro-level analyses have utility in mapping trends, engaging in micro-level analysis allows us to see beyond that framework and unpack the push and pull factors of Hasan's radicalization. Upon further investigation, Hasan's life and written works punctuate takeaways that are crucial to consider in the subsequent analysis of both Hasan and his case within the broader scope of violent extremism.

First, evidence suggests that Hasan's radicalization followed a linear progression. He had a singular experience, his mother's death, that resulted in his religious intensification and set him on a path towards radicalization. As a product of his increasing piety, he began researching traditional radical Islamic scholars, like Sayyid Qutb, and listening obsessively to taped sermons of Anwar al-Awlaki.¹⁰⁰ He became gradually, but noticeably, more religiously conservative, to the point of conflict with his family. He made the conscious choice to withdraw from social interaction to spend more time focused on religion. When he reached medical school, he began entertaining ideas of violence and focusing his academic works on his religious beliefs. Next, his deployment orders served as a triggering point for mobilization. It is important to note the linear structure of Hasan's radicalization because of the continuing debate within the literature about the validity of linear progression models of radicalization.¹⁰¹ Whether or not Hasan's case will be weighed on the side of linear models overall, in analysis specifically focusing on him it provides the most accurate analytic tool for mapping his radicalization.

Another element that requires recognition is the primacy of religion and ideology in shaping Hasan's worldview and pushing him towards violent action. Two factors of Hasan's ideology that are critical to understanding his worldview are his conventions of hell and obedience to God. An overarching fear of hell plays an enormous role in determining how Hasan thinks and acts, and he has repeatedly written and said that he believed hell to be a real, physical place and his primary motivation in committing violence was to avoid hell. A fundamental way he thought he could do this was through complete submission to God and His will. Hasan felt that a pious Muslim must obey God's

commands without question, and to fail to do so would cause him to lose his ‘rank’ in heaven. As he came to believe that God was commanding him to fight in His name against the enemies of Islam, Hasan, according to his worldview, was left with no other option but to comply or risk condemnation to hell. In both the sanity board report and his writings, Hasan said that he did not want to kill soldiers, but felt compelled to do so because God commanded it. Without understanding Hasan’s interpretations of hell and obedience to God, it is impossible to understand why he committed the attack.

Third, micro-level analysis of Hasan’s case has unveiled the nuances of his perceived relationship to Anwar al-Awlaki, in whom many studies imbue a significant influence over Hasan. Hasan’s emails to Awlaki, written between December 2008 and June 2009, are commonly mentioned by scholars in discussions regarding Hasan’s case. Based on the emerging evidence, however, these emails are a symptom, not the cause, of Hasan’s radicalization. In the process of unpacking Hasan’s written works and interview responses, it becomes clear that his radicalization began several years before his first communication with Awlaki. Awlaki’s role in Hasan’s radicalization cannot be dismissed entirely, as his religious interpretations were instrumental in the formation of Hasan’s ideology through the repeated listening of his sermons, even though Hasan was unaware of his identity at the time. The complexity of Awlaki’s role in Hasan’s radicalization as demonstrated by in-depth analysis showcases the utility of analyzing Hasan’s case beyond how it fits within the existing framework of lone actor terrorism, or in relation to Awlaki.

Comprehensive, thematic analysis of Hasan’s case provides an opportunity to extend beyond existing frameworks by allowing the integration of new theories and perspectives regarding his path to violence. Through this type of analysis, it has become evident that Hasan’s radicalization process started earlier than previously suggested, beginning several years before his attack, during his residency. Furthermore, the continued dominance of his religious beliefs as drivers of radicalization and their role in his push to mobilization gain a new position in the hierarchy of factors integral to understanding Hasan. At the macro-level, religion serves as a motivating factor for Hasan; the depth of this determinant becomes overwhelmingly apparent in a more expansive examination of his life and writing. Moreover, new evidence challenges existing appraisals of Hasan’s relationship to Awlaki, painting a more nuanced portrait, and encourages subsequent evaluation of the role of the ideologue in Hasan’s life. Ultimately, these observations shed light on the utility of Hasan’s case beyond the scope of lone-actor terrorism and change perceptions of where Hasan fits within the broader study of violent extremism.¹⁰²

References

- ¹ The author is related to Lt. Col. (Ret.) Kris Poppe, Nidal Hasan’s former military defense attorney. Hasan gave the author explicit consent to access court records and as well as publish information derived from a series of written interviews with Hasan.
- ² Sanity Board Report, US v. MAJ Nidal M. Hasan, pg. 27
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pg.27. It should be noted that Hasan did in fact kill a civilian during his attack, Michael Cahill, who was a physician assistant working in the SRP.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
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