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PROPAGANDA AND BRAIN FUNCTION: USING TECHNOLOGY TO MEASURE IMPACT

By Junaid Afeef, Director, Illinois Targeted Violence Prevention Program

University of Chicago researchers are using technology to better understand how the propaganda in martyr videos of the so-called Islamic State impacts viewer brain function. Dr. Robert Pape, Director of the UC Chicago Project on Security and Threats, and his team are using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to review and analyze brain scans of individuals as they view a curated set of martyr videos. They hope to gain a scientific understanding of how these videos may influence individual choices.

Dr. Pape discussed research June 6 at the quarterly Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Roundtable, hosted by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in Chicago. The roundtable brings together a cross-section of civil society and representatives from federal, state, and local government in and around the Chicago area. He described the “social logic of martyrdom” used by the 9/11 hijackers and contrasted it with the “new logic of martyrdom” used by ISIS. He said ISIS videos seem to follow a Hollywood template of the heroic narrative.

Dr. Pape is recruiting 120 individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and a diversity of religions for study participation. But while many have volunteered to take part in the project, the Muslim community is so far underrepresented. An inadequate number of Muslim participants will leave a noticeable hole in the research, he said.

Mr. Kareem Shora, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Section Chief for Community Engagement, opened the discussion with an overview of DHS’ view of ideologically inspired targeted violence. The department focuses on all forms of ideologically inspired targeted violence stemming from groups that range from white supremacy and sovereign citizens to ISIS and Al Qaeda.

“Ideologically inspired violence could be theological, but it could also be social, racial, political, or personal,” said Mr. Shora. “Our view is that the more awareness we are able to raise, the more likely we, as a society, are able to mitigate those factors that may cause someone to act violently. Communities are not part of the problem but they are an essential part of the solution.”