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ARTICLE

Are Americans Being Radicalized Online And Converting To Islam?





BY DAN HART/WASHINGTON STAND JANUARY 22, 2026

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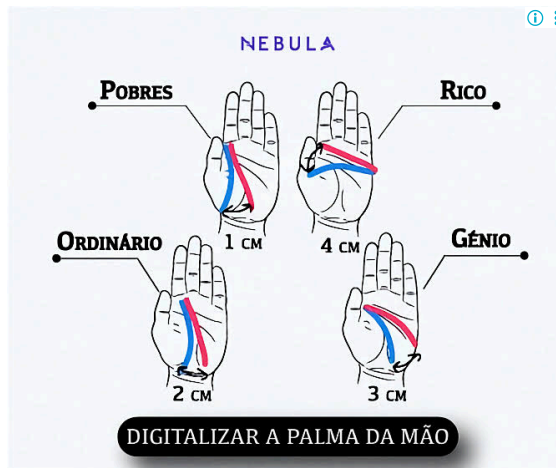
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Simon Hankinson, a former U.S. diplomat, made a case Monday for what he deemed a rise in "lone wolf amateur terrorism." Hankinson referred to the high-profile, Bondi Beach, Australia massacre. Within 10 minutes, on December 14, 2025, a father and a son opened fire on hundreds during a festival, ultimately killing 15 people and injuring 40.

Hankinson used this tragedy to make a simple point: "In most cases of Islamist terrorism, the perpetrator is of Muslim heritage and has ancestral roots in a Muslim country." Both the father and son involved in this attack appeared to have been born Muslim.

Now, consider the other two stories Hankinson addressed concerning young men like John Michael Garza, described as Mexican-American, and Christian Sturdivant, grandson of a Christian minister. Garza, late last year, "was charged in Texas with terrorism offenses, accused of providing bomb components to individuals he is alleged to have believed were acting on behalf of the Islamic State (IS).



Garza was arrested after allegedly giving an undercover FBI agent instructions on how to make a bomb." Sturdivant, Hankinson wrote, "was charged in North Carolina with a similar offense -- allegedly attempting to provide material support to IS."

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The chilling cases highlighted by Hankinson serve as a stark reminder of how rapidly and deeply online influences can reshape a person's worldview -- sometimes toward darkness we scarcely imagine. From a Christian perspective, this invites sobering reflection.

Scripture reminds us that the heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9), and we are shaped by what we see and interact with. "Do not be conformed to this world," Paul urges us in Romans 12:2, "but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." And yet, look around. What do you see happening when the "world" streaming into our lives, far from being a mere cultural drift, results in a life of algorithmic echo chambers, propaganda videos, and increasingly lifelike AI companions that affirm (or only further confuse) our angers, curiosities, or searches for meaning?



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Hankinson noted how we've moved from desktop blogs to always-on social media, where young people can radicalize on religion, politics, or even gender ideology without ever meeting another soul in the flesh. This alone should serve as a wake-up call. But he pushed even further, stressing how "kids are interacting with AI avatars so convincing they might as well be real. And who controls them? People with financial motives at best, political or even terrorist goals at worst."

We must ask ourselves: If evil associations corrupt good manners (1 Corinthians 15:33), what does constant digital "association" with unseen voices do to the soul? When the screen becomes confessor, teacher, and companion, whose lordship are we truly submitting to?

These incidents prompt more questions rather than quick answers. How much of our children's formation have we unwittingly outsourced to devices that know their habits better than we do? In seeking belonging or purpose online, are we equipping future generations to discern truth from manipulation, or leaving them vulnerable to whoever -- or whatever -- speaks loudest in the feed?

Maybe online echo chambers aren't creating terrorists in our midst. But it's possible. It's not even a matter of Islamist terrorist ideology. Just look at the anti-ICE protests unfolding across the country. The anger, the violence... Almost assuredly, it ties back to what they see

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world, not merely messaged it.

As followers of Christ called to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23), it's important to consider: how do we model and teach a life where real, embodied relationships -- family, church, neighbors -- hold greater weight than virtual ones? Perhaps the deeper unease is this: if heavy screen time can lead some to pledge loyalty to violent ideologies -- even outright terrorism -- far from their upbringing, what subtler shifts might it work in all of us?

The cases are extreme, yet they illuminate a broader vulnerability. What worlds are our minds truly inhabiting, hour by hour, scroll by scroll -- and who, ultimately, is forming them?

Originally published at The Washington Stand (<https://washingtonstand.com/article/are-americans-being-radicalized-online-and-converting-to-islam>)

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