

From the Boston Marathon to the Islamic State

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM



C O U N T E R T E R R O R I S M L E C T U R E S

MATTHEW LEVITT, EDITOR

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COUNTERTERRORISM LECTURES 6

POLICY FOCUS 139



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
www.washingtoninstitute.org

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The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
1828 L Street NW, Suite 1050
Washington, DC 20036
www.washingtoninstitute.org

Design: 1000colors

Cover photo: Runners continue toward the finish line of the Boston Marathon as an explosion erupts, April 15, 2013. (REUTERS/Dan Lampariello)

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Acknowledgments

The Washington Institute's counterterrorism lecture series, and the series of lecture compilations of which this is the latest offering, is made possible by the dedicated support of many Washington Institute staff members. The Institute's leadership has supported this project from its inception in December 2007. The vision and foresight of our leadership are a key reason this program has been so successful.

The Institute's administrative, communications, and research staff all contributed to this lecture series, including both the events themselves and the publications that come of them (not least of which is this one). Special thanks to the Institute's publications director, Mary Kalbach Horan; communications director, Jeff Rubin; online communications managing editor, R. Scott Rogers; senior editor, George Lopez; editor, Jason Warshof; Arabic managing editor, Maurice Shohet; media relations associate, Brittany Parker; and data services coordinator, Beverly Sprewer. None of these events could have been held without the tireless efforts of operations manager Rebecca Erdman, administrative assistant Gina Vailes, and the team of Washington Institute research assistants (RAs) and interns who make everything run like clockwork at our events.

A special thanks to the fellows, RAs, and interns of the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, especially the Institute's Richard Borow Fellow, Aaron Zelin, who are full partners not only in this lecture series but in all the Stein Program's events and publications. Current and former Stein Program RAs and interns who helped put together this lecture series and volume include: Kelsey Segawa, Sarah Gilkes, Jonathan Prohov, A. J. Beloff, Patrick Hoover, Divah Alshawa, Nicole Fleury, Isaac Fink, Melissa Trebil, Mariah Zarychta, and Nadav Freedman.

As always, I extend sincere thanks and appreciation to the many generous donors to The Washington Institute in general and the Stein Program in par-

ticular. The Institute's development team, led by Dan Heckelman, is second to none.

I am truly blessed to be a part of the intellectual community that is The Washington Institute. The lectures herein, and the insights they provide into this especially critical turning point in the world of terrorism and counterterrorism, are just a small window into the kind of debates and discussions going on within the Institute's walls on any given day.

Dr. Matthew Levitt

April 2015

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Note that positions listed were those held at the time of the respective lecture.

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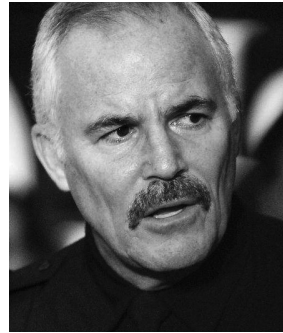
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Introduction

■ MATTHEW LEVITT

In November 2013, The Washington Institute kicked off the sixth iteration of its counterterrorism (CT) lecture series, including remarks by officials representing the National Security Council (NSC), National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Montgomery County (Maryland) Department of Police, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Departments of State and Homeland Security. These speakers could not have spanned a more pivotal period in the evolution of the global jihadist threat, making the lectures all the more critical to understanding these developments and how they were perceived as they were occurring.

From 40,000-foot strategic considerations like the changing nature of the terrorist threat, to more granular and tactical considerations like contesting online radicalization and building resilience within Western communities to counter the draw of extremist narratives, the underlying theme of this series was contending with the secondary effects of what started off as a protest movement, evolved into a civil war, and ultimately became a jihadist battle space featuring barbarism from both the Bashar al-Assad regime and jihadist groups in Syria. Further, for several years policymakers expressed little interest in the critical issue of countering violent extremism (CVE). The White House issued a National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism in 2011, but the product was a watered-down version of the original draft. Lacking high-level backing, the strategy led to little in the way of implementation, especially in light of the short-lived euphoria over what some perceived to be the defeat of al-Qaeda and its ilk following the Arab Spring, the Abbottabad raid, and the death of Usama bin Laden. By this iteration of the lecture series, however, the Syrian jihad and flow of foreign fighters pushed CVE to the top of policymakers' agendas.

A Turning Point in the Syrian Jihad

At the time this series started, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)—also known as the Islamic State—was just beginning to seriously assert itself, while Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, was still drawing in most of the foreign fighters making their way to Syria, including six publicly disclosed cases of individuals from the United States joining or attempting to join JN since the beginning of the year.¹ All parties to the Syrian civil war were positioning themselves for the coming Geneva II peace talks scheduled for January 2014, and the joint Syrian regime–Hezbollah offensive in the al-Qalamoun region—which would prove to be a turning point in the war—was not yet complete.

The battle for prominence within the Sunni jihadist community between ISIS and al-Qaeda had not yet started in earnest; ISIS had only entered the Syrian battle space in April, seven months before the lecture series began. The fissure between ISIS and JN would come to a head over the course of the series, but al-Qaeda would not disassociate itself from ISIS until February 2014, toward the tail end of this round of speakers.

ISIS had not yet conquered significant swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq, let alone announced the establishment of a caliphate, its “Islamic state”—that would only come in June 2014; and while the Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013 underscored the need to enhance and develop domestic and international efforts to counter violent extremism, the number of foreign fighters flocking to Syria and Iraq—a phenomenon then already under way—would skyrocket in the weeks that followed. In November 2013, estimates put the number of foreign fighters between 1,100 and 1,700.² A month later, those numbers rose significantly, to between 3,300 and as many as 11,000.³

Fast-forward to May 2014, when this round of speakers concluded, and the world was a different place. Sunni foreign fighters were flowing into Syria and Iraq in record numbers. On the other side of the equation, an equal number of Shiite foreign fighters were marking the one-year anniversary of their full-fledged entry into the Syrian war. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi unilaterally announced the merger of his group and Jabhat al-Nusra in April 2013, leading to overt fighting between ISIS and JN and a massive rift within the Salafi-jihadist community. By February 2014, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri formally disavowed ISIS: “ISIS is not a branch of the [al-Qaeda] group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and [al-Qaeda] is not responsible for its actions.”⁴ The ISIS response was swift and definitive: the

assassination of Abu Khalid al-Suri, Zawahiri's personal emissary in Syria, who had led al-Qaeda efforts to mediate the dispute between ISIS and JN. ISIS was already consolidating its control over eastern Syria, making Raqqa its capital city. Then, in June 2014, just weeks after the final lecture in this round of the series, ISIS stormed into Mosul. The rest is history.

The Beginning of the Foreign-Fighter Effect

As events in the Middle East spiraled out of control, with moderate rebel formations collapsing like dominos for lack of international support and the creeping radicalization of the rebellion, security services around the world became increasingly worried about the possibility of domestic blowback as foreign fighters flocked to the region with the chance of returning home still more radicalized.

The Syrian civil war “poses a growing, long-term security threat,” FBI assistant director Mark Giuliano explained. Since about March 2011, he continued, Syria had attracted thousands of foreign fighters across the country's porous borders to fight on both sides of the conflict. The threat was such that the bureau expanded a team within the Counterterrorism Division “to track, analyze, and ultimately neutralize the threats emanating from Syria to the United States.” Even before ISIS exploded onto the scene and expanded the jihadist battle space into Iraq, the FBI anticipated that “given the prolonged nature of the Syrian conflict,” Americans and U.S. residents would “continue to be attracted to the region and may attempt to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict.”

The FBI's primary concern focused on the likely contact travelers from the U.S. would have with extremist elements in Syria; the battlefield experience some would obtain; and the possibility that they “could become radicalized, or further radicalized, and then conduct organized or lone-wolf style attacks” once they returned home. Foreign fighter cases had already popped up around the country, from Arizona to North Carolina.

Several weeks earlier, Shaarik Zafar, from the NCTC, had highlighted the challenges the foreign-fighter phenomenon presented for CVE efforts. Already then, Zafar noted, more than seven thousand foreign fighters from forty countries were battling in Syria, including at least a thousand from Europe and “dozens of Americans” who radicalized on their own or through “peer-to-peer relationships.” Some went to support secular oppositionists in the early days, but others joined JN or ISIS and a few had already perished

in suicide operations. Back home, the Syrian foreign-fighter challenge had a direct impact on domestic CVE efforts. “In a nutshell,” Zafar explained, “the attraction of participating in the sectarian war in Syria has created a new and significant opportunity for terrorists to recruit and radicalize.”

In the Wake of the Boston Marathon Bombings

Meanwhile, here in the United States law enforcement and intelligence services were also grappling with the aftermath of the biggest terrorist attack in the homeland since 9/11, the Boston Marathon bombings (and subsequent shootings), which left three people dead and more than 260 wounded. In March 2014, Zafar warned: “While the United States is fortunate that we have not had a high number of fighters travel to Syria...we are not immune to this phenomenon. And as the Boston attacks demonstrated, it doesn’t take large numbers to kill and injure scores of innocents.” Speaking later that month, just shy of the first anniversary of the Boston bombings, senior Department of Homeland Security intelligence and counterterrorism official John Cohen pointed to a shift in terrorism tactics from the post-9/11 period, when security services were focused on preventing attacks from centralized terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, to today, when homegrown violent extremism presents a no-less-pressing threat, even as organized groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continue plotting attacks against the West: “It is fitting to be talking about this subject one year after the Boston Marathon bombing, an event that replicates today’s threat environment in many respects while illustrating how the methods for countering violent extremism must continuously evolve.”

In May 2014, the FBI’s Giuliano revealed that over the previous year FBI-led Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) across the country “successfully disrupted more than a hundred counterterrorism threats.” But, he added, even as the threat from core al-Qaeda elements was “degraded,” new threats were emerging, specifically “a combination of decentralization of the violent extremist movement, shifting alliances of like-minded violent extremist organizations, and the general instability in the Middle East and North Africa.” The threat, he summarized, had become more “flat,” meaning increasingly “complex and decentralized.” As the Boston Marathon bombing evidenced, there is now a “continuing threat” from homegrown violent extremists, who present unique challenges to law enforcement because they “do not share a typical profile and may be self-radicalized, self-trained, and self-executing.”

And the relative scarcity of successful terrorist attacks in the homeland can only be so reassuring. As the NSC's George Selim pointed out, "Homegrown violent extremists motivated by al-Qaeda's distorted interpretation of Islam have not been able to carry out large-scale attacks on the homeland since 9/11, but their repeated attempts can nonetheless terrorize a nation."

While many CVE programs were initiated and updated following the Boston Marathon bombings, some were already in place, established in recognition that events in Syria had significantly intensified radicalization both in person and online. In one lecture, Montgomery County police chief J. Thomas Manger highlighted the community-led, public-private partnership program he, together with Hedieh Mirahmadi of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), helped put in place in his Maryland county. That program, developed over a long period, was initiated a month before the Boston Marathon bombings. Just weeks later, after the Boston bombings, the county's nascent Faith Community Working Group (FCWG) held a town hall meeting to express community and interfaith commitment to preventing extremism and violence while also showing solidarity with the local Muslim community, which feared anti-Muslim reprisals despite its explicit condemnation of the attacks. The Montgomery County CVE program has since become a national model being replicated across the country.

Syria and the "New Normal" in Global Jihadist Radicalization

As Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, chief of the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), explained in February 2014: "In Syria, ground zero for al-Qaeda's narrative for some time now, the messaging of Jabhat al-Nusra has been eclipsed...by the much more robust work of the 'Zarqawist' ISIS, which was recently expelled from the movement by Ayman al-Zawahiri. The messaging from al-Qaeda's senior leadership continues but seems to lack relevance and immediacy." His comments were prescient: within months ISIS's graphic videos and glossy online magazines would dominate the jihadist social media space, paralleling the group's dominance on the ground in Syria in Iraq.

Meanwhile, a common thread woven through this round of CT lectures was the need to work closely and cooperatively with U.S. communities to counter violent extremism, challenge radical narratives, build trust between at-risk communities and law enforcement agencies, and foster resilient com-

munities able to address these national concerns in ways that best fit their local circumstances. “Security of the homeland is not the charge of a single department or agency,” the White House’s George Selim explained, “but the responsibility of all of us, from our largest city police force to smallest law enforcement jurisdiction, our biggest company to smallest independent business, from parents and teachers to county councils, and from the whole community to each individual within those communities.” At the end of the day, the guiding principle for such programs, Selim concluded, “is that federal efforts just support local capabilities and programs...to address problems of national concern.”

About This Volume

Since December 2007, The Washington Institute’s counterterrorism lecture series has featured more than fifty officials—from local police to senior White House officials, and from heads of federal intelligence agencies to officials from the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, Treasury, and more—for exceptionally timely and cutting-edge lectures on every aspect of counterterrorism policy imaginable. Five previous volumes presented and analyzed earlier iterations of this lecture series: *Terrorist Threat and U.S. Response: A Changing Landscape* (September 2008), *Countering Transnational Threats: Terrorism, Narco-Trafficking, and WMD Proliferation* (February 2009), *Continuity and Change: Reshaping the Fight against Terrorism* (April 2010), *Obama’s National Security Vision: Confronting Transnational Threats with Global Cooperation* (October 2010), and *Finding a Balance: U.S. Security Interests and the Arab Awakening* (May 2012).

The lectures in this volume began with a November 2013 panel discussion entitled “New Strategies for Countering Homegrown Violent Extremism,” featuring Montgomery County police chief J. Thomas Manger, WORDE president Hedieh Mirahmadi, and George Selim, the director for community partnerships on the White House National Security Staff. The public-private partnership program they discuss has since become a model for similar initiatives across the country. In February 2014, Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, coordinator of the State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, described how the “new normal” in global jihadist radicalization requires that Washington and its allies use public diplomacy as a major soft-power tool in countering violent extremism, both online and on the ground. The lecture series continued in March with an address by Shaarik

Zafar, the then-acting deputy chief of the Homeland, Cyber, and Countering Violent Extremism Group in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Counterterrorism Center. Zafar addressed the implications of the sharp increase in the flow of Western foreign fighters to Syria for U.S. CVE strategies and tactics. John Cohen, the then-acting undersecretary for intelligence and analysis and counterterrorism coordinator for the Department of Homeland Security, spoke that same month, using the upcoming first anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombings as an opportunity to step back and assess U.S. efforts to counter violent extremism given events in Syria and the rise in homegrown violent extremism. This sixth running of the lecture series concluded with an address by a returning CT lecture series speaker, FBI deputy director Mark Giuliano, who discussed how the FBI is evolving to meet threats in a changing environment. (Giuliano last participated in the Institute's CT lecture series in April 2011, when he served as assistant director of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division.)

Spanning a period that saw drastic changes and developments in the nature of the terrorist threat, both in the Middle East and around the world, this volume offers a snapshot of how U.S. officials perceived the momentous happenings transpiring at the time. Understanding this transformative period, and how officials responded to it, is critical to fully appreciating how today's situation has come to be. The foreign-fighter phenomenon is exponentially worse now than it was then. ISIS controls a massive swath of territory. Secularism is driving a new, more virulent and bloody form of extremism. And homegrown violent extremists who cannot make it to Syria or Iraq now turn their anger on their home countries. And yet, if ISIS were defeated tomorrow, the Assad regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah backers would still be there and the radicalization and CVE issues would be no less pressing and immediate. A close reading of these lectures, from a time just before ISIS's rise, when Syria was still the primary jihadist battle space, offers lessons aplenty for policymakers today.

Notes

1. "North Carolina Arrest Marks 6th American in 2013 Associated with Al Qaeda in Syria," Anti-Defamation League, November 13, 2013, <http://blog.adl.org/international/north-carolina-arrest-marks-6th-american-in-2013-associated-with-al-qaeda-in-syria>.

2. Thomas Hegghammer, “Number of Foreign Fighters from Europe in Syria Is Historically Unprecedented: Who Should Be Worried?” *Washington Post*, November 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/11/27/number-of-foreign-fighters-from-europe-in-syria-is-historically-unprecedented-who-should-be-worried/>.
3. Aaron Zelin, “ICSR Insight: Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise among Western Europeans,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, December 17, 2013, <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>.
4. Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda Disavows Any Ties with Radical Islamist ISIS Group in Syria, Iraq,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html.

MAY 28, 2014

How the FBI Is Evolving to Meet Threats in a Changing Environment

■ MARK GIULIANO

PREPARED REMARKS

Good afternoon. Thank you to everyone with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy for hosting me today. I am pleased to be able to join you to provide you with an overview of how we are adapting and evolving, the current counterterrorism threat, and the challenges the United States and its partners are facing as a result of the conflict in Syria.

I previously spoke here three years ago in April 2011 when I was Assistant Director for our Counterterrorism Division, and I am honored to be invited back in my new role as Deputy Director.

First, in order to address the threats we are facing it is critical to have the resources we need. Coming in, Director Comey knew the budget would be one of his top priorities, and he was vocal with Congress and with the public about the nature of the FBI's work, as well as the importance of having the resources to get the job done.

Fortunately, the FBI was allocated \$8.3 billion in FY 2014, our largest allocation to date, so that we can carry out our mission. The last few fiscal years prior we were cutting programs, so this is a welcome change. As the Director has said, we are grateful to have the budget that we do, and we need to be faithful stewards of that money. It will be spent with the goal of ensuring that the FBI is prepared to face the multitude of ever-evolving threats our nation faces.

The FBI's mission to protect the American people has never been broader—and the demands upon the Bureau have never been greater—but Director Comey has a strong vision of where the Bureau needs to go down the road. When he first became Director, he was surprised to learn how far the FBI had come in its transition to a full partner in the Intelligence Community. And that's a fair assessment. Most people aren't aware of all the changes we've

made in the past 12 years, nor do they understand the breadth and scope of our capabilities. Our job is to prevent attacks, and those stories rarely make the headlines.

Adapting and Evolving to Stay Ahead of the Threat

Before I comment on the current counterterrorism threat and the crisis in Syria, I wanted to address how the FBI is adapting and evolving to stay ahead of the threat.

As the U.S. Government's lead domestic intelligence agency, the FBI is a threat-focused, intelligence-driven organization *now*, but there is still work to be done. We are committed to always looking ahead into the future to see how we need to adapt to stay *ahead* of the threat.

The Bureau is pushing for full integration of intelligence in operations across the board, not just in counterterrorism.

As such, the Bureau is pushing for the full integration of intelligence in operations across the board – not just in counterterrorism – while respecting the rule of law and the safeguards guaranteed by the Constitution.

We've made great strides in prioritizing our threats through our Threat Review and Prioritization Process, but we are perpetually seeking to become even more threat-driven.

Our Threat Review and Prioritization Process, or TRP, helps the Bureau develop a standard national picture of our threats, and to streamline the prioritization process for both the Field and FBI Headquarters. Additionally, it provides the

Field with clear guidance and a consistent process to evaluate threats, while ensuring Headquarters has an effective way to program manage and evaluate the significant threats facing the country.

Another way we are integrating intelligence into operations is through our Fusion Cell Model which integrates our intelligence and operational elements through teams of analysts embedded with Special Agents in operational divisions. These analysts evaluate both national and international information and provide intelligence on current and emerging threats across programs—making connections that are not always visible at the Field level.

The TRP and the Fusion Cell Model, among other resources we are employing, help us to be more aware of emerging threats and to stop them before they can occur.

The full integration of intelligence into operations will remain a strong priority for the Director. It is only by fully maturing this process that we will be able to effectively address the terrorist threat.

Finally, we are also addressing and staying ahead of the threat by working with our state, local, federal, and international partners. Whether it is through our Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs), Field Intelligence Groups, the Fusion Centers, or any other FBI task force, we know that to succeed we cannot address the threats we face alone.

Cyber

I would be remiss if I did not also make a few comments on cyber. It has become one of the greatest threats to our national security, and some aspect of cyber—whether it be cyber crime, the targeting of U.S. national security assets, critical infrastructure, the economy, or foreign hostile intelligence operations conducted over the Internet—is involved in many of the cases and threats we are working.

We are confronting cyber threats in a number of ways, and we are retooling to address the threat, just as we did in the counterterrorism arena after September 11, 2001.

To address this threat, there have been sweeping changes across the FBI's Cyber program through the Next Generation Cyber initiative. These changes have not been limited to one division, but rather have had an impact across the FBI.

The FBI's strategy to address increasing cyber threats has proven quite successful in gaining unprecedented visibility into the problem, and in coordi-

nating operational responses. This strategy includes leveraging the FBI-led National Cyber Investigative Joint Task Forces (NCIJTF)—the focal point for the coordination and integration of counterintelligence, counterterrorism, intelligence, and law enforcement activities of more than 18 member agencies in order to identify and disrupt cyber threats.

We are also working closely with our federal, state, and local partners on cyber task forces in all 56 field offices and with our 64 legal attaches' offices around the world. We are focused on targeting high-level intrusions, the biggest and most dangerous botnets, state-sponsored attacks, and global cyber rings.

Additionally, we are coordinating and working closely with our private sector partners utilizing iGuardian to instill confidence that we can protect their proprietary and customer data. We have to think *strategically*—be better, smarter, and to do so quickly. iGuardian is a secure information portal allowing industry-based, individual partners to report cyber intrusion incidents in real-time. The iGuardian portal is an evolution of eGuardian, the platform through which the FBI's law enforcement partners provide potential terrorism-related threats and suspicious activity reports. While eGuardian enlists law enforcement users, iGuardian was developed specifically for partners within critical telecommunications, defense, banking and finance, and energy infrastructure sectors and is available over the sensitive but unclassified InfraGard network.

While challenges remain, we are making great strides. On May 19, 2014, FBI New York announced a number of law enforcement actions related to the investigation and takedown of the company Blackshades. Blackshades had been selling and distributing malicious software to thousands of individuals throughout the world. Blackshades' flagship product—Remote Access Tool—was a sophisticated piece of malware that enabled its users to remotely and surreptitiously gain complete and total control over a victim's computer.

Once installed, the user of the tool could access and view documents, photographs, record keystrokes, and even activate the web camera on the victim's computer – all without the victim's knowledge. We believe that the tool was purchased by thousands of people around the world and used to infect more than 700,000 computers in more than 100 countries. The FBI New York Cyber Division's outreach efforts and strong relationships with private sector and international partners were critical to the success in this case.

Another recent success was against five members of the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA). These officers, members of the 3PLA, used a variety of techniques, including malicious emails that appeared to be from individuals familiar to the targets, to install backdoors to penetrate the network security

of six companies. Once gaining access they ultimately stole proprietary information related to trade secrets, financial information, production capabilities, and business strategies, among other company assets. Economic espionage is a genuine threat that U.S. companies are facing, and this first indictment of Chinese cyber actors clears the way for additional charges to be made in the future. The FBI, in coordination with the Department of Justice, will continue to use every tool at our disposal to fight cyber espionage to protect U.S. innovation, ideas, and our competitive advantage in the world marketplace.

The cyber threat cannot be stopped by just those individuals working in one division of one organization—it is a U.S. Government problem that we have to work on together—with the interagency, with our friends in the private sector, and especially with our partners overseas. This is a threat which is likely to continue to evolve and will remain a top FBI priority for years to come.

Counterterrorism Threat

With regard to counterterrorism, the threats we face, in terms of both understanding and getting in front of them, have never been more complex.

In 2013, the JTTFs successfully disrupted more than 100 counterterrorism threats. While core al Qa'ida has been degraded, our counterterrorism efforts are challenged by a combination of the decentralization of the violent extremist movement, shifting alliances of like-minded violent extremist organizations, and the general instability in the Middle East and North Africa.

The threat has become more flat, and by that I mean increasingly more complex and decentralized. Terrorists aren't just operating in the shadows—they target English-speaking audiences, and actively use the Internet, social media, and propaganda like al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's, or AQAP's, *Inspire Magazine* to recruit and provide guidance on how to attack our critical infrastructure and economy.

Our enemies are sophisticated in their use of the Internet and all forms of electronic communications, which has provided them with a much easier means of acquiring information and exercising command and control over their operations—from recruiting to planning to propaganda to execution.

While al Qa'ida central is not the dominant force it was 12 years ago, it remains intent on causing as much death and destruction as possible. A more serious threat, I believe, stems from al Qa'ida affiliates such as AQAP and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which was formerly known as al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI).

AQAP in particular attempted several attacks on the United States, including the failed Christmas Day airline bombing in 2009, and the attempted bombing of U.S.-bound cargo planes in October 2010.

As the Boston Marathon bombings illustrate, we also face a continuing threat from homegrown violent extremists. These individuals present unique challenges because they do not share a typical profile and may be self-radicalized, self-trained, and self-executing. Their experiences and motives are often distinct, but they are increasingly savvy and willing to act alone, which makes them difficult to identify and to stop.

In the past three years, we have seen homegrown extremists attempt to detonate bombs at high profile targets, such as the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, commercial establishments in downtown Chicago, the Pentagon, and the U.S. Capitol. Fortunately, these attempts—and many others—were prevented, but the threat remains real.

As the lead agency responsible for countering terrorist threats to the United States and its interests overseas, the FBI integrates intelligence and operations to detect and disrupt terrorists.

We have the capacity to collect information, review it, and push out intelligence products to the rest of the IC to aid in our collective national security efforts, and we are a leader in many areas of expertise, technical collection, cyber, and national security. In order to succeed in this environment—an environment which is constantly changing, ever-evolving, and increasingly more complex—we must be nimble, adept, and able to change quickly. Most importantly, we must work with our partners closely to identify future threats so that we are able to get *ahead* of them.

Foreign Fighters in Syria

We are also closely monitoring the unrest in Syria. This crisis is a concern not only for the U.S. Government, but for our overseas partners as well.

As Director Comey recently discussed with the *Wall Street Journal*, the Syrian civil war poses a growing, long-term security threat and is a similar situation to when fighters were traveling to Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. These individuals formed al Qa'ida and declared war on the United States.

With its porous borders, Syria (since about March 2011) has attracted thousands of individuals from across the world interested in participating in the conflict, either in support of Sunni extremist opposition groups or pro-Asad regime elements. Given the global impact of the Syrian conflict, the

FBI regularly engages with fellow U.S. Government agencies, the Intelligence Community, and our foreign counterparts in an effort to pursue increased information sharing with our partners on identified foreign fighters, combating radicalization, and exchanges regarding community outreach programs and policing strategies. Through this collaboration, the FBI is working hard to

These individuals may be self-radicalized, self-trained, and self-executing.

ensure foreign fighters from other nations do not enter the United States undetected. The FBI has also expanded its team within our Counterterrorism Division to fully track, analyze, and ultimately neutralize the threats emanating from Syria to the United States.

Given the prolonged nature of the Syrian conflict the FBI remains concerned that U.S. persons will continue to be attracted to the region and may attempt to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict. This concern is predominantly centered on:

- the potential contact travelers could have with extremist elements;
- battlefield experiences they could obtain;
- the possibility they could become radicalized, or further radicalized, and then conduct organized or lone-wolf style attacks (particularly if they return to their countries of origin).

The recent flood of militants into the country poses a serious challenge as these individuals could be trained to plan and carry out attacks around the world. It is also possible that foreign terrorist orga-

nizations could seek to leverage U.S. or Western persons to facilitate terrorist activity, as al-Qa'ida and its affiliates continue to adjust their tactics, techniques, and procedures for targeting the West.

Several U.S. persons have been identified after traveling, or attempting to travel, to participate in the conflict in Syria. Since March 2013, the FBI has arrested a few individuals who either fought in Syria and returned to the United States, or attempted to travel to join in the conflict either with Syrian opposition groups or pro-Asad regime elements. A few examples of this include Eric Harroun, Basit Javed Sheikh, and Mohammad Hassan Hamdan:

- In March 2013, the FBI arrested Arizona-based Eric Harroun upon his return to the United States from Turkey after having fought in Syria with al-Nusrah Front.
- North Carolina-based Basit Javed Sheikh was arrested in November 2013 for attempting to provide material support to al-Nusrah Front as he was attempting to board a flight overseas to join al-Nusrah Front.
- In March 2014, Michigan-based Mohammad Hassan Hamdan was arrested at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport as he was attempting to travel to Syria to fight alongside Hizballah, a foreign terrorist organization.

The key take-away for us is that this conflict has resulted in a real long-term threat for the United States and its interests. There is not only potential for further radicalization, but the cross-over and collaboration of various terrorist groups.

Conclusion

To succeed in combating terrorism we must remain intelligence-driven, continue to scan for looming threats, *effectively* share information with the right people at the right time, and continue our close collaboration with our partners around the world; the U.S. Intelligence Community; federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement; and public and private organizations. Close relationships with our partners is a requisite for the success of the FBI's unique national security and law enforcement missions. We must do all of this while respecting the rule of law and safeguards guaranteed by the Constitution.

The American public expects much from us, as they should. They deserve excellence, and they expect us to be a team. And they are right. We must be a team to be successful.

Revisiting U.S. CVE Efforts One Year After the Boston Bombing

■ JOHN COHEN

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

Today, the nature of the threat the United States faces from violent extremism is changing. The primary concern immediately after 9/11 was preventing attacks from centralized terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. These attacks originated from abroad and were ideologically motivated. While preventing attacks by al-Qaeda core and its affiliates remains a priority, we have learned over the years that mass-casualty attacks can also be carried out in the United States by domestic actors whose grievances may be against their workplace or other individuals, though they often use the same tactics. It is fitting to be talking about this subject one year after the Boston Marathon bombing, an event that replicates today's threat environment in many respects while illustrating how the methods for countering violent extremism (CVE) must continuously evolve. Terrorists and would-be terrorists are also continuously adapting, however, reviewing what the United States does and how it responds.

Concerns Today

Threats from beyond U.S. shores continue to be of concern. Al-Qaeda, whether in the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, or elsewhere, still aims to strike aviation infrastructure and U.S. targets abroad, and its membership remains focused on attacking the homeland. Syria has also become a great concern and will remain a top priority. Due to its ongoing conflict, the country has evolved into a meeting point for violent extremists all over the world, giving them an opportunity to establish informal social networks with like-minded individuals. Foreign fighters can be indoctrinated, receive training, and improve their tradecraft in Syria, then return to their hometowns in the United States,

Europe, and Canada. Those who come from visa-waiver countries are especially of concern, though any violent extremist able to return to the United States and remain in contact with his network of experienced operatives poses a unique and challenging problem for counterterrorism authorities.

Accordingly, cooperation with local communities is of the utmost importance, since traditional tools like intelligence platforms, military power, and international law enforcement relationships are not always best able to identify foreign fighters who are threats or to prevent attacks prior to them leaving the United States or once they have returned home. The Department of Homeland Security will continue to work with its partners across the board, including international, federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities as well as the private sector and faith-based organizations, to address the issue of violent extremists who travel to Syria and who represent a threat to the homeland.

Domestic Perspective

The U.S. government must also rely on different capabilities to detect and mitigate threats originating in the homeland, some of which may not have a direct operational relationship with foreign terrorists. These could include people who have lived in the United States for a long time or were born here. The government has made great progress in detecting and mitigating threats abroad, but at home it must leverage a different set of tools, operate under a different set of laws, and ensure that threat mitigation efforts are carried out in a manner that safeguards privacy rights and civil liberties.

Today, our efforts are focused on local communities, which must be empowered to prevent violent attacks by recognizing the warning signs of a threat, assessing the risk posed, and using existing multidisciplinary local tools to mitigate the threat. Clearly one such tool is an FBI or local law enforcement investigation, but depending on the threat, it can also be intervention by mental health professionals, religious figures, parents, friends, or siblings. When communities come together and have the capacity and awareness to identify a potential threat and use multidisciplinary approaches to address it, they are better able to prevent violent incidents such as school shootings, gang violence, and attacks motivated by extremist ideologies.

This type of local law enforcement cooperation with community members has been successful. Examples include CVE efforts in Montgomery County Maryland, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis/St. Paul—in the latter case, community engagement has been used to address both gang violence

and the recruitment of individuals seeking to join al-Shabab in Somalia. In such cases, local law enforcement has established a committed partnership with the community and created a platform for dealing with violence prevention.

For their part, American Muslim and Arab communities as well as other faith-based and community groups have said to authorities, “Don’t come to us and say you only want to work with us on the violent extremism problem; that makes it sound like we’re part of the problem.” We recognize that these communities are part of the solution -- working as partners to make our communities safer means working toward a

*Today, our efforts are focused
on local communities.*

mutual goal. This makes sense operationally and sends a very strong message. When such partnerships are based on collective responsibility, they become strong enough to deal with a whole host of community problems. In essence, then, the U.S. approach to CVE is to empower local communities to better understand the threats facing them, and to work together in applying their existing resources to prevent acts of violence regardless of ideology.

What DHS Is Doing

In partnership with the FBI, the National Counterterrorism Center, and other organizations, the Department of Homeland Security has conducted extensive analysis on past instances of violent extremist attacks, examining the path individuals have taken when deciding to violently

redress a grievance, whether ideological or not. DHS looks at behavior and indicators that were observed by family members, community members, or others. It also studies tradecraft—how these individuals prepared for attacks, how their plots were disrupted, or what was missed that allowed them to proceed. The department is then better able to help communities become aware of indicators they should be looking for as they seek to prevent violence.

DHS has also done research on community and environmental factors that may facilitate someone going down the path toward ideologi-

The Internet allows violent extremists to facilitate their own journey of radicalization to violence.

cally motivated violence. Thus far, this research has shown that a subset of America's population may be predisposed to violent behavior for a variety of reasons, and that a smaller subset of such individuals go through an evolutionary process where they are actually willing to commit violence to redress their grievances. Irrespective of their specific motivation, DHS has found that an increasing number of violent individuals take similar paths and adopt a similar tactical approach in preparing for and carrying out acts of violence. For instance, Norwegian gunman Anders Breivik and Colorado gunman James Holmes took similar evolutionary paths, had similar psychological backgrounds, and lived in similar environments. Their grievances were very different, but their plots involved very similar tradecraft.

The evolving role of the internet and social media has increased the number of individuals

going down this path. Previously, violent extremists had to collaborate in a nonvirtual way, but the internet allows them to facilitate their own journey of radicalization to violence, connect more easily with others who have shared ideologies, recruit potential members for a violent extremist organization, obtain knowledge and materials to conduct attacks, and, most important, prepare for attacks without ever leaving their homes.

From a prevention perspective, this changes the paradigm significantly. Behaviors that could have been observed and possibly reported in the real world may be unnoticed in the virtual world. The question facing DHS is how best to incorporate internet behavior into prevention efforts.

Supporting Local Efforts

DHS has also sought relationships with national religious organizations, helping to create a multi-faith-based advisory committee. Initially intended as a conduit for information sharing, this committee has since evolved into a group that helps mitigate incidents that could lead to tensions in communities, and in turn to potentially violent situations.

DHS also carries out engagement with local authorities throughout the country. It trains local law enforcement to recognize the behaviors and indicators associated with specific threats of violent extremism, terrorism, and criminal activity, as well as behaviors that are part of a constitutionally protected religious or cultural activity. This helps frontline officers distinguish between criminal behaviors and constitutionally protected behaviors. Overall, significant progress has been made in the past few years, and today the links between the federal government and local communities are stronger.

MARCH 14, 2014

Western Foreign Fighters in Syria: Implications for U.S. CVE Efforts

■ SHAARIK ZAFAR

PREPARED REMARKS

Thanks to Matthew Levitt, Richard Abramson, Robert Satloff, and everyone at The Washington Institute for hosting me today. I would also like to thank everyone in attendance, including my colleagues from the federal government. I understand how busy you all are, and I appreciate your making the time to attend.

The reason we are all here today is because we care about the events in Syria. As we all know, there is a humanitarian crisis, which rightly receives much of the attention. According to the latest figures I have seen, there are approximately 9.5 million Syrians who need some type of assistance. Six-and-a-half million are currently displaced and 2.4 million have sought refuge in camps, most of which are in surrounding countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

Of course, in addition to grave humanitarian concerns, there are also implications for security and stability. This is true regionally, as Matt Levitt recently stated in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. But as Director of National Security James Clapper and NCTC Director Matt Olsen have recently noted, there also are risks to the United States and our allies from individuals traveling to Syria and then returning home. It is in this respect that I would like to focus our discussion today.

I fully appreciate the importance of the broader discussion about the U.S. government's Syria policy and the international community's humanitarian response. But given my area of focus, let me state at the beginning that all questions concerning these issues are best directed to the State Department and USAID.

I would like to focus our discussion on the implications of Western foreign fighters in Syria and U.S. efforts to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment in the homeland.

Western Foreign Fighters in Syria

Simply put, we are concerned by the trend of foreign fighters traveling from their home countries to fight in Syria. Of the approximately 110,000 fighters opposing the Assad regime, more than 7,000 foreign fighters have come from abroad. Many of these foreign fighters have traveled to Syria to support secular oppositionists, although some fighters aspire to connect with violent extremist groups such as al-Nusrah Front or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Several Westerners have joined al-Nusrah Front, including a few who have perished in suicide operations.

So where are these fighters coming from? Estimates I have seen have fighters coming from more than 40 countries, including many in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, but also from North America, Central Asia, and even Australia. European governments estimate that at least 1,000 Westerners have traveled to join the fight against the Assad regime.

Of the dozens of Americans who have joined the fighting in Syria, a notable example is Arizona native Eric Harroun, who traveled to Syria in January 2013 and was arrested by the FBI in March after claiming to have fought with al-Nusrah Front. More recently on November 2, the FBI arrested North Carolina resident Basit Javed Sheikh for allegedly attempting to travel to Syria to join al-Nusrah Front.

So why are people choosing to fight in Syria? Individuals travel to Syria for a variety of reasons, including a desire to

- fight against an authoritarian regime;
- a humanitarian desire to help suffering Syrians;
- a desire to help establish a caliphate in Greater Syria and the Middle East;
- a desire to fight against Shiite Muslims who are perceived to be targeting Sunni Muslims in Syria; and finally
- a desire for adventure.

European Muslims who joined rebel forces in Syria commonly report they were motivated to go because they saw horrific images of the conflict or heard about atrocities committed by the Assad government and wanted to help their fellow Muslims.

Not surprisingly, terrorist recruiters recognize and try to exploit the identity and discrimination issues some European Muslims face by providing a vision of how they can belong to their version of the broader Muslim com-

munity, or umma. By urging European Muslims to become involved in what they call jihad on behalf of Muslims suffering in Syria, extremists can link grievances European Muslims might experience in their home countries to a larger narrative of Muslim oppression.

In terms of transportation to the battlefield, there are local networks of extremist recruiters in some European cities that help facilitate travel. Some Europeans are able to find advice and

The radicalization of foreign fighters who are going to Syria mirrors the broader radicalization process.

information about going to Syria on the Internet and travel on their own.

For example, a key figure from the group Shari-
a4Belgium was arrested in Brussels in December 2013 for allegedly radicalizing individuals through his sermons, video posts on the Internet, and dissemination of documentaries calling for violent jihad. And like other conflicts, the Internet and social media are playing a role. For example, al-Nusra Front regularly sends out tweets and posts images to Facebook. Westerners who are fighting in Syria also use these tools, as well as Tumblr and Ask.fm, to both share their experiences and encourage others to join them. For example, in some instances they were able to reassure potential recruits that it is okay if they do not speak Arabic.

To date we have not identified an organized recruitment effort targeting Americans to join the fighting in Syria. U.S. persons' travel to Syria generally has been based on peer-to-peer relationships or self-selection.

The challenge for the U.S. government and its

allies is that the decision to travel to Syria is not in itself indicative of some who may be radicalized to violence. As I mentioned, individuals may travel for humanitarian reasons. And as national security commentator J. M. Berger has written, for many individuals, becoming a warfighter is a much more appealing moral choice than terrorism. He recently made the argument that “Individuals who would have never volunteered to fly airplanes into civilian buildings can be swayed to take part in the fighting in Syria.” Nevertheless, regardless of the motivations individuals hold, if an individual decides to travel to Syria, there is a very real possibility that they will (1) come into contact with terrorist networks, and (2) acquire skills that could facilitate attacks in their home countries, including in the United States or against our interests overseas.

The Dynamics of Radicalization to Violent Action

According to our analysis, the radicalization of foreign fighters who are going to Syria mirrors the broader radicalization process. Meaning, Western foreign fighters are influenced by the same diverse factors—such as psychological and demographic backgrounds, social networks, and collective grievances—that interact in other instances of radicalization. Some individuals might only adopt a violent extremist ideology after they come in contact with violent extremist groups in Syria, while others could become disillusioned from their experiences in Syria and disengage from violent extremism when they return. So how does some become radicalized to violence?

Because we are dealing with an individualized phenomenon that involves social science vice hard science, we will never have absolute certainty about what causes someone to commit to violence. In this respect, our understanding of the dynamics of radicalization to violence continues to evolve. What was once thought of as a linear path is now best represented by three processes, which are in no way linear. These are (1) radicalization, (2) mobilization, and (3) action, which are dynamic, multifactored, and affected by context.

Let me emphasize: individuals do not progress in a linear fashion from thought to action. Instead they can move toward and away from action depending on their personal state of mind or circumstances. As such, radicalization involves interplay of personal, group, community, sociopolitical, and ideological factors. Importantly, no single factor accounts for why one individual radicalizes while another does not. Of course, in the United States, there is nothing illegal about being “radical.” The First Amendment protects radical thought alone. We become concerned when individuals begin actively supporting the use of violence.

Some of the factors that come into play during the mobilization process are the individual's willingness and capacity to act and perceived availability of likely targets. For example, are they acquiring specific skills and identifying military or civilian installations?

Action then occurs if the mobilized individual does not encounter inhibiting factors and then proceeds to carry out an attack. Changes in capacity or opportunity may inhibit action. Meaning, even if an individual is mobilized, it does not follow that they will automatically conduct an attack. Some individuals who are inhibited at this stage may remain mobilized and seek alternate opportunities to act, while others may fall back into a radicalized state of mind but fail to act.

Countering Violent Extremism

So what is the U.S. government doing to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment? The term “countering violent extremism” refers to the “preventative” aspects of counterterrorism. That is, efforts focused on preventing terrorist groups from recruiting new members or inspiring others to act. Notably, it is separate from disruptive actions, which focus on stopping acts of terrorism by those who have already subscribed to violence. Rather, CVE is a broad subject matter that ranges from general prevention measures—things that are not done for CVE purposes but which might have CVE effects—to directly addressing and countering the al-Qaeda recruitment narrative.

In August 2011, the White House released the first strategy to prevent violent extremism in the United States. In December 2011, a corresponding strategic implementation plan was issued, which provides a blueprint for the concrete steps the federal government will take to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment. The strategy outlines three goals:

- to enhance engagement with and support to communities targeted by violent extremists;
- to build government expertise for preventing violent extremism; and
- to counter the violent extremist recruitment narrative.

The strategy calls for a whole-of-government approach, which has resulted in an even stronger partnership between NCTC and the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and FBI. Notably, and where appropriate, we also work with nontraditional partners, which have many pro-

grams that may be relevant to preventing violent extremism, like the antibullying campaign.

Since the strategy's adoption, we have made substantial progress on the first two objectives—engagement and building expertise. With respect to engagement, DOJ and DHS have dramatically increased outreach efforts to communities who may be targeted by terrorist recruiters. And in many instances, this engagement is on issues

Individuals do not progress in a linear fashion from thought to action.

outside the security arena but which they—like all Americans—care about, such as civil rights and immigration. Initially, we do this because this is good governance and the right thing to do. We also hope such engagement efforts build ties and trust between communities and government. Where appropriate, however, we also have direct conversations about the threat of terrorist recruitment and radicalization.

Regarding expertise, we continue to make strides both in our understanding of the radicalization phenomenon as well as the CVE and cultural competency training we offer to federal, state, and local officials. Getting such information out to law enforcement and others is essential to recognizing and addressing the threat, as well as distinguishing cultural and religious norms from truly threatening behavior.

The third objective of the strategy—countering the violent extremist narrative—remains a challenge, which we are tackling head on. In the international sphere, last month The Washington Institute hosted Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, who discussed the U.S. Center for Strategic

Counterterrorism Communications' (CSCC) innovative efforts to confront the changing face of al-Qaeda propaganda, including through direct online engagement.

We are also addressing this challenge in the domestic context, consistent with our authorities. Initially, as I just mentioned, radicalization—having feelings or thoughts that support the use of violence—is protected by the First Amendment. And this is of course a good thing. But we have to acknowledge—and this is not a complaint but rather recognition—that we are limited in our

The U.S. government simply does not have credibility in the theological arena.

ability to discover when an individual may be moving toward violence. Actions that would trigger law enforcement action come in the mobilization phase, which is when someone begins taking steps to act on their thoughts in order to further a specific political or other goal.

Other First Amendment concerns apply to CVE. For example, the U.S. government can take some steps to undercut the narrative used by terrorists, such as underscoring that American Muslims are part of the fabric of America and vigorously enforcing civil rights protections, including those related to religious freedom. But we cannot and should not make religious arguments, despite the fact that terrorists often justify their actions on theological grounds. Any such actions by the government could violate the prohibition on establishment of a state religion or the placing of limitations on an individual's free exercise of religious thought under the First Amendment.

Beyond the important legal constraints, the U.S. government simply does not have credibility in the theological arena. Even if we could challenge the alleged religious basis of al-Qaeda's ideology, we would not be effective messengers.

As such, when it comes to countering violent extremist narratives domestically, we have come to the conclusion that in many if not most instances, communities must lead and government should play a supporting role. But this should not imply that American Muslims have done anything wrong or have some special responsibility. Like all Americans, American Muslims want to live in peace and security. Rather, we are seeking a more active, community-led role to countering violent extremist narratives because we need their help.

Toward this end, NCTC and DHS have developed a Community Awareness Briefing (CAB), which we use to (1) inform members of the public, specifically parents, about the threat of violent extremist recruitment by letting the terrorists speak for themselves; and (2) more importantly, to catalyze community efforts to counter it. Simply put, if we want individuals to challenge terrorist narratives, we must first share accurate and unfiltered information about the threat. We have delivered the CAB in cities across the country and thus far the feedback we have received has been generally positive. One consistent reaction stands out: parents and community leaders are surprised how easy it is to access terrorist propaganda on the Internet.

Together with DHS, we have also instituted a CVE leadership forum, which brings together government officials and community leaders with expertise in CVE to (1) address the challenges of violent extremism both domestically and overseas, and (2) exchange information and ideas on the best ways for communities and the U.S. government to counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment.

And just recently, and also in partnership with DHS, we have developed a CVE Exercise, which we have started conducting in key cities across the country. The "CVEX" is a scenario-based tabletop exercise that brings community members and government officials—including law enforcement—together to address the possible radicalization to violence of a young person with the goals of (1) building trust, (2) gaining appreciation of the respective roles of government and communities, and (3) advancing efforts to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment locally.

In this respect, a successful example of a local community-led effort worth noting is the Montgomery County Model, which Washington Insti-

tute fellow Hedieh Mirahmadi established with Montgomery County Police Chief Thomas Manger to increase awareness about the risks of homegrown violent extremism and empower the requisite experts to intervene with at-risk individuals.

Countering Violent Extremism in the Syrian Foreign Fighter Context

So how does the Syria foreign fighter challenge impact our domestic CVE efforts? In a nutshell, the attraction of participating in the sectarian war in Syria has created a new and significant opportunity for terrorists to recruit and radicalize. In response, we are taking a number of important steps.

In the intelligence context, in addition to analyzing and assessing threat information, NCTC has been working with DHS and the FBI to track any individuals that we have identified as having traveled to Syria to participate in violent extremist activity. And as NCTC Director Olsen recently testified, we are also working with our allies to understand more about how foreign fighters are “traveling to Syria, what routes they are using, what facilitation networks are supporting them, and what happens to those extremists both inside Syria and after they leave the battlefield to return to their place of origin.”

In the law enforcement context, DOJ and the FBI are continuing their efforts to investigate and prosecute illegal activity. And with respect to countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment, we are appropriately expanding our CVE efforts to address the Syrian foreign fighter context. As has been recently reported, the State Department’s CSCC has developed a pilot #thinkagainturnaway campaign for English-speaking international audiences, which highlights the brutality and atrocities of terrorist groups in Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, as well as the depredations of the Assad regime. Similarly, in the domestic context, NCTC and DHS are developing a Syria-focused version of our Community Awareness Briefing, which highlights the dangers and reality of traveling to Syria, and exploring ways to include the threat from Syria in the range of our domestic CVE efforts.

Conclusion

As the conflict in Syria continues, issues associated with Syrian foreign fighters will continue to be a high priority for the U.S. government. While the United States is fortunate that we have not had a high number of fighters travel to Syria, as the recent arrests indicate, we are not immune to this phe-

nomenon. And as the Boston attacks demonstrated, it doesn't take large numbers to kill and injure scores of innocents.

Successfully addressing this challenge requires a whole-of-government approach, including our traditional intelligence and law enforcement activities. But it also requires directly and appropriately challenging terrorist radicalization and recruitment, and discrediting narratives that might inspire individuals to travel overseas. In this respect, government clearly has a role. But as I have discussed—and specifically in the domestic context—this is not always a leading role. Rather, success also requires that we engage communities, share information, and appropriately participate in the development of community-led efforts to counter violent extremism.

While difficult, this is a challenge my colleagues at NCTC, together with our partners at DOJ, DHS, and the FBI, fully embrace. But we recognize that many of the best ideas will come from outside of government. This is why I feel very fortunate to participate in this discussion today, and I look forward to answering any questions you might have. Thank you very much.

FEBRUARY 25, 2014

Confronting the Changing Face of al-Qaeda Propaganda

■ ALBERTO FERNANDEZ

PREPARED REMARKS

It is a great pleasure for me to speak to you today as part of The Washington Institute's lecture series. I have followed and appreciated the work of The Washington Institute and its outstanding team of experts for years, ever since I was with Rob Satloff when his shoes were stolen at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus almost twenty years ago. And as far as counterterrorism analysis is concerned, Matt Levitt and Aaron Zelin are essential reading.

It is a little over two years ago, on November 18, 2011, since my predecessor, Ambassador Richard LeBaron, spoke here shortly after the White House executive order formally creating the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), and it is, perhaps, a good time for stock taking on where we are in the communications struggle, how al-Qaeda and friends are using media, and the very real challenges that remain.

Al-Qaeda has always valued the power of communications. It began its formal existence, in 1998, with a press release and a fatwa. In those early days, it sought to maximize the use of burgeoning Arabic-language broadcast media and even tried to have a media office in London. Those first attacks on the U.S. embassies in East Africa which imprinted themselves on our consciousness came months later. But before the deed, there was a story, a narrative to be told.

Over the years, al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers have transitioned to new platforms and mechanisms as circumstances have changed. As opportunities to use broadcast media became more constrained, they shifted to password-protected forums and in late 2012 the extremists' migration to social media such as Twitter and beyond accelerated. In the ceaseless search for an audience, they seek to spread their message in new languages, so we see al-Qaeda

in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) producing material in French and Spanish and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) subtitling material in English.

Each al-Qaeda branch seeks to have a robust propaganda arm, although their effectiveness waxes and wanes according to circumstances. AQIM's media arm, al-Andalus, is probably the least effective and active of all. AQAP for a long time had probably the most active and sophisticated media operation—they are the ones behind *Inspire* magazine—but in my estimation, their recent material is far less polished and effective since the Yemeni army drove them out of some of their safe havens in 2012. In Syria, ground zero for al-Qaeda's narrative for some time now, the messaging of Jabhat al-Nusra has been eclipsed for some time by the much more robust work of the “Zarqawist” ISIS, which was recently expelled from the movement by Ayman al-Zawahiri. The messaging from al-Qaeda's senior leadership continues but seems to lack relevance and immediacy. The fact that no one among the franchises seems to have implemented or followed, much less noticed, Zawahiri's recently released “Rules for Mujahedin” points to a central node disconnected from dynamic events occurring on the ground. Al-Qaeda today “thinks globally but kills locally.” Much of the rhetoric is still about America, the West, the Jews, but the actual victims of their actions are overwhelmingly local people, mostly Muslims. This is, of course, al-Qaeda's dirty little secret which can't be stressed enough. The disconnect between what they say and what they do is a feature, not a bug, of al-Qaeda's poisonous daily existence.

With an atrophied and isolated center, much of the dynamism of the movement is to be found in the regional branches. All of these franchises have tried over the past couple of years to show through their media operations that they can do governance, that they are not merely insurgent groups but can provide some sort of effective, approved rule and social services along the model pioneered earlier by Hezbollah and Hamas. They haven't proved particularly effective so far at demonstrating this and, in fact, some of the material they have produced has been counterproductive to them, but they keep trying.

So about a dozen years after al-Qaeda began to tell its story, to present its narrative to the world, CSCC was born. The idea was that given the huge emphasis that al-Qaeda places on media and propaganda, there was a need for a U.S. government entity that would function as a war room or operations center, like you may see in a political or advertising campaign, to push back.

And indeed, like a political campaign, we always begin with what the adversary is saying and whom it is trying to reach.

Our operations today are very similar to what Ambassador LeBaron outlined a couple of years ago. It can be described as falling into three broad categories:

1. **Supporting U.S. government communicators** working with foreign audiences: This includes the daily work of consultation and cooperation across the interagency and in the department; producing guidance on al-Qaeda-related activities and issues including opportunity analyses that are widely accessible to all U.S. government officials; developing specific frameworks to address new communications challenges; making available online countering-violent-extremism (CVE) material useful to communicators; and sponsoring seminars where experts share their relevant knowledge with government practitioners.
2. **Working with overseas partners** to strengthen their CVE communications strategies, capabilities, and activities: This means sharing best practices with friendly governments and working through our embassies to support local initiatives, especially those that commemorate the strength and resilience of communities in response to terrorist attacks. So far we have underwritten modest projects along these lines in at least a dozen countries.
3. **Direct digital engagement:** Our digital outreach challenges extremist messages online in Arabic, Urdu, Somali, and, most recently, English, through advocacy in social media using words, video, and images to undermine al-Qaeda's propaganda and narrative. This is daily, aggressive, attributed, and overt messaging by the Department of State.

Direct digital engagement is the one part of CSCC that is relatively well known. Since 2011, we have produced well over 20,000 engagements in the form of texts, graphics, and video. The immediate goals of our engagement are threefold: *To contest the space.* This is digital space that had previously been largely ceded to the enemy. The Internet is, all too often, another ungoverned space for al-Qaeda, and we seek, along with others, to challenge them in that space. *To redirect the conversation*—to make this as much as possible about the adversary and his shortcomings rather than about the many alleged transgressions of American foreign policy. In this, CSCC is quite different from traditional public affairs and public diplomacy as it is done by most in the

U.S. government. What we try to do is not to affirm the positive about ourselves but to emphasize the negative about the adversary. It is about offense and not defense. The third goal is to try to *unnerve the adversary*, to get in their heads. There is little doubt that we are doing that as we survive repeated efforts by al-Qaeda supporters to take us down on Twitter and other juvenile attempts to silence us.

I want to underscore that the work we do is not easy. If it was, someone would have done it long before we came into existence. The work of counterterrorism communications is not a sprint but a marathon, a daily grind of numerous skirmishes, of opportunities to influence audiences

The Internet is, all too often, another ungoverned space for al-Qaeda.

seized and lost, of trying to find the right mix of words and images at the right moment. This is an alchemy that is more art than science.

The work of CSCC is essential, but it is only a small part of the overall effort. As Secretary of State Kerry said a few months ago, “We must think creatively about expanding our tools and capabilities so we can address the issues that drive young people to despair and terrorism. The United States must take a leading role in presenting an alternative vision to that presented by extremists.”

We do, I believe, a good job with the resources we have of pushing back immediately and tactically, of poking holes in the daily narrative, but more work needs to be done in attacking the larger narrative, the ideological underpinnings of the big story al-Qaeda tells about itself, the

world, and us. This cannot and should not be done by the United States alone and requires supporting a much larger and more diffuse community of interest throughout the world dedicated to this goal. CSCC, and other parts of the State Department, seeks to grow this diverse and disparate community of independent actors who can challenge the narrative of the extremists in their own way and with their own voice.

But even challenging, as we must, the language of *takfir* and jihad is not enough. The great scholar of al-Qaeda Thomas Hegghammer made an extremely important point in a recent paper when he noted that “a growing number of micro-level studies of jihadi recruitment downplay the role of doctrine and emphasize proximate incentives involving emotions: the pleasure of agency, the thrill of adventurism, the joy of camaraderie, and the sense of living an ‘authentic Islamic life.’ In other words, there is much to suggest that jihadi recruitment is not just a cognitive process, but also an emotional one.”

“Jihadi recruitment is not just a cognitive process, but also an emotional one.”

There is a reason, then, why some al-Qaeda propaganda looks more like *Call of Duty* than Ibn Taymiyyah. Despite its traditional religious trappings, the al-Qaeda mindset is mostly, as Olivier Roy described it, “both a product and an agent of globalization, first of all because it embodies in itself an explicit process of deculturation...neofundamentalists dream of a tabula rasa.” And what better time than the present and better medium than the Internet for presenting an a historical worldview that is shallow and artificial even when it attracts?

This “emotional dimension” requires us to constantly look at ways to be on the cutting edge, constantly honing an appeal that must be multifaceted, emotional, immediate, and authentic. There is little doubt that, in the aftermath of tumultuous political events in the Middle East and with al-Qaeda’s recent migration to social media, we are operating in a vastly changed environment today, one that makes it much easier for al-Qaeda to peddle its propaganda. But that same space also provides an opportunity for the bold willing to challenge the siren call of the *takfiris*.

This “new normal” I have described is a situation where the role of public diplomacy will be, or should be, a major element in the exercise of “soft power” in countering violent extremism. Radicalization has important online and on-the-ground components. The post-Arab Spring Middle East is a highly charged, fluid political environment where the tradecraft and expertise of savvy State Department officers on the ground and in Washington, working closely with colleagues across the country team and in the interagency, can be key in influencing new audiences and nontraditional players. In such a scenario, the face-to-face work of a public diplomacy officer drinking multiple cups of bitter coffee and arguing in the local language late into the evening in a stuffy, smoky room—that same officer strategically using the tested tools of the public diplomacy trade, whether exchanges or grants or speakers—and all of that augmented by Washington elements with a rough-and-ready attack philosophy, like CSCC, could prove to be decisive. The challenge for all of us who work in government and particularly in public diplomacy is to make sure that we have the right mix of people, programs, vision, and mandate to achieve the desired effects on the ground we all want to see.

We see, in the daily onslaught of extremist propaganda, real opportunities to use the tools of engagement to expose their deeds and the disconnect between their words and their actions. In the ongoing struggle against al-Qaeda and its allies, the time is neither one for empty triumphalism nor for unmerited despair at the challenge of combating violent extremism but rather a sober call for constant, steady, and serious work. CSCC will look to constantly hone the contents of our toolkit, work productively with others in government, expand the circle of allies and fellow workers worldwide, challenge the adversary wherever he may go, and find new and creative ways to fulfill our mandate.

New Strategies for Countering Homegrown Violent Extremism

■ LEVITT, MANGER, MIRAHMADI, AND SELIM

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

■ MATTHEW LEVITT

When it comes to countering violent extremism (CVE), there are two problems, one conceptual and the other structural. The conceptual problem involves figuring out who—comfortably within the law—will be able to move the needle so that violent extremists can be countered earlier in the process, instead of when they have already been radicalized and are thinking about committing a violent act. The FBI and other federal law enforcement agencies, for their part, are not set up to engage in such earlier participation. A federal agency does not want to be seen as the thought police, nor are its officials trained to be social workers. In addition, a central challenge involves determining how to identify the ideas that drive people to violent extremism rather than focusing on a particular religion. This type of reckoning must also include consideration of the sociocultural factors that may affect a person's susceptibility to radical ideas.

As for the structural problem involved with CVE, this can be traced to the U.S. bureaucracy's inability to work at the local level. There is no federal "Department of Communities and Local Government," and the federal government, frankly, is not doing enough to remedy this shortcoming. This is not meant to discount the many efforts, some of them quite effective, under way to counter violent extremism both online and abroad. In the former case, the United States has an innovative interagency communications strategy that challenges the al-Qaeda narrative on social media platforms that reach thousands of viewers. However, what is lacking at the federal level is the coordination and oversight of a comprehensive grassroots strategy to counter violent extremism originating on U.S. soil.

Mandated through the White House's Strategic Implementation Plan, U.S. Attorney's Offices are responsible for coordinating the federal effort in CVE, but visits with various officials around the country reveal that, in some cases, not much or very little is being done. Excellent work by the FBI in preventing attacks by homegrown violent extremists focuses on individuals who are already radicalized—and provides very little guidance for how to prevent radicalization from occurring in the first place.

Tensions between the Sunni and Shiite communities, fueled by events abroad, particularly in Syria, have contributed to a couple of incidents in the United States and Canada, classified as hate crimes, not terrorism, that have raised concerns for both local and federal law enforcement officials. As the civil war in Syria drags on and sectarian tensions continue to rise in places like Pakistan, such incidents could further complicate efforts to prevent radicalization at the grassroots level.

Given the present inadequacies, the federal government should consider implementing an innovative, successful local model like Montgomery County's Faith Community Working Group (FCWG) at the national level. Enlisting communities to deal with their own issues would allow for an organized, yet flexible, approach to this complicated issue. Federal officials, in partnership with local government, could facilitate the process by providing training, resourcing, and direction for state and local officials to follow. The rest should be left up to communities themselves.

TRANSCRIPT

■ J. THOMAS MANGER

Good afternoon, it's a pleasure for me to be here. I want to begin by telling three police stories. I hope you are as entertained by these as my children. I have two children who, when most of you were telling your kids bedtime stories at night, my kids wanted to hear police stories. They are only twelve and ten right now. It all started about eight years ago when I was driving home—I had my wife and two kids in the car, and it was our family car, not my police car, and I was stopped at a traffic light, and I looked up ahead, I was about five cars back, and I looked up ahead and saw a huge fight going on in the middle of the intersection. There were people just rolling around on the ground, and I looked and noticed that one of them was a police officer. So again, I was in shorts and a T-shirt, it was summertime, and I jumped out of the van, and I told my wife, "You drive." And I ran up and assisted one of my police officers

in actually taking into custody a man who had just escaped from a mental institution, and they were in fact fighting in the middle of the roadway. It was a pretty violent fight, and my officer was actually happy to see someone show up to help him, as he needed a little bit of assistance getting this guy into custody. So, as my wife was driving by with my children, my son just said, “Mommy, why is Daddy fighting with that man in the middle of the intersection?” And ever since then, they have been hooked on police stories, so I have three police stories to tell you.

The first one occurred in 1978. I was a very young police officer, and I had a good friend and trusted partner who had begun to work

“You turned me into a monster.”

undercover. Back in the '70s, motorcycle gangs were still very active. On the West Coast, it was the Hells Angels; on the East Coast, it was the Pagans. And so we had a number of Pagans who were operating in our jurisdiction, and they were very active. Not only were they doing armed robberies, but they were manufacturing and distributing meth, LSD, and a number of drugs that were harmful to the community. They had a pretty big business going at the time. Well, my former partner had infiltrated one of these gangs, and he was starting to develop good information, and he got wind that there was going to be a major drug transportation—over five pounds of illegal narcotics were going to be transported by van across the area of Fairfax city. And he asks me, “Well, can you just—I don’t want this to be a SWAT operation where we take them down, because then I’m done. They’re

going to know something's up. Can you just make what appears to be a routine traffic stop? And we'll just go from there." I said, "Sure, we'll do that." And, in fact, I just waited until I saw the van do something and I stopped the van. Ended up arresting three people in the van and confiscating the narcotics. As a result of that, he remained undercover, we got more information, we ended up serving a series of search warrants, and it ended up being an excellent case, and put probably close to a dozen members of the Pagan motorcycle gang behind bars, some of them for a long, long time. A very good operation for us at the time.

So fast-forward to October 2002, and there's a man who is in his thirties, he's ex-military, pretty disgruntled about life. He's angry that his children have been taken away from him. He's just angry about the hand that life has dealt him. He goes to Jamaica and meets up with a fourteen-year-old boy, whom he befriends—a boy who has lived in poverty, a boy who has been starved from any male influence in his life—and he proceeds over the next year to radicalize this boy and turn him into a cold-blooded killer. In fact, years later at a criminal trial, this then young man turned to John Muhammad and said, "You turned me into a monster." And, of course, I am talking about the D.C. sniper case, the Beltway sniper case that originated in Montgomery County in October 2002. For anybody who was here in this region during that time, you know how, during those twenty-two days, this region was just paralyzed; how people's daily routines of their lives were absolutely changed as a result of the actions of these individuals.

The third story I want to talk about occurred just about three years ago, in September 2010. There was a man named James Lee who was alternately homeless and renting rooms in Montgomery County. In 2008, he started developing mental issues to the extent that he was convinced that the Discovery Channel programming was harming our community, harming our nation. And he would begin to do protests in front of the Discovery Channel headquarters, which was based in Silver Spring, in Montgomery County. He would walk with signs protesting their programming, saying it was doing all sorts of terrible things, sending the wrong message to our nation and doing bad things to our nation. He actually put up a website that had all of the information about his doctrine and all the issues he had with Discovery. On September 1, 2010, he walked into the Discovery Channel headquarters and shot a gun into the ceiling and told everyone in the lobby to get down. Everybody actually just ran out of the building, and he was left with one hostage, a security guard. In the next couple of minutes, two more employees

walked in and he took them hostage. So he had a total of three hostages for about four hours.

We were negotiating with him for four hours, and during that time he kept talking about what he was trying to accomplish by this act, why he was holding these hostages, the fact that he was ready to die for his cause, the fact that he was ready to kill these hostages, despite our negotiations with him. At one point, the hostages decided their lives were absolutely in danger, and I think they were. They decided to make a run for it, and they took off running for the exit. He had an explosive strapped to him, he went running after them, and by that time our SWAT team had gotten to right behind the wall where he was; they came out and eliminated the threat. Fortunately, no innocent people were harmed during that case. We served a search warrant. The next day, a man came into one of our stations and said, “I think that Mr. Lee guy, the suicide bomber who took hostages at the Discovery building, was renting a room in my basement.” So we served a search warrant on that room, and we got a lot of things from his computer, not the least of which were training videos that he had made. In terms of putting his explosives together, that he actually narrated himself. So we got a lot of information after the fact of what he had been involved with over the last couple of years.

So I share these three stories with you because I think they all relate directly to this issue of countering violent extremism. And if you are looking for someone who is an expert in that, you have a couple of experts up here on the panel. I don’t happen to be one of them. What I do know about is being a cop, and for the last thirty-seven years, I have tried to believe in my own head that I have been a crime fighter.

So we have these three instances: We’ve got a group back in the ’70s that was certainly a group that was engaged in criminal activity, engaged in violent criminal activity, an organized group that was responsible for a great deal of bad things, many bad things—and certainly terrorized certain communities, certain areas with some of their activity. You’ve got two individuals who, as I said, paralyzed this region for three weeks. And then you’ve got Mr. Lee, who, the FBI told me afterward, was the first case of a suicide bomber to take hostages in the United States that we had to deal with. All homegrown terrorists, these individuals crossed paths with the criminal justice system because they were committing crimes in our community.

Back many, many years ago—probably thirty years ago—the word “community policing” was really being thrown around, and if you asked one hundred cops what community policing meant, you would have gotten one hun-

dred different definitions. But I will tell you there are two cornerstones of community policing: one is community partnerships and the second is problem solving. And you can get any other definition of community policing, but I'm telling you that is what it comes down to. And so what we've learned is that police officers, police departments, law enforcement cannot arrest our way out of any crime issue, terrorism issue. We'll never arrest our way out of these problems. The way that we solve these problems, whether it's criminal gangs,

There are two cornerstones of community policing: community partnerships and problem solving.

whether it's violent extremism, is to prevent it in the first place, is to intervene before it becomes a criminal act. So that's the reason we're using the community policing model. We've decided that the best way to do this is to make the right community partnerships and then to solve the problem—come up with a strategy that addresses the root cause of the problem.

And whether it was the kids drinking in this park—you know, every Friday night, we'd get dispatched to these kids drinking in this park, and then someone came up with this brilliant idea to put lights in this park so that they weren't hidden by darkness. And then the kids decided they would have to find someplace else, so this park was now a safer place at night. You know, or we could have kept responding every night to the park, but somebody actually thought about solving the problem. We partnered with the people who, you know, could actually put the lights up in the park.

A simple, simple example. Countering violent extremism is a much more complicated example.

I will tell you that if you asked me on September 10, 2001, what the local law enforcement's role in dealing with terrorism was, I'd have told you we really haven't dealt with it. It's, you know, federal law enforcement, it's the intelligence community, they have that responsibility. Well, there is a shared responsibility now, absolutely a shared responsibility. But we are not—local law enforcement's role is not to replace what the federal government can do, what the intelligence community can do. They all have a role, they have a responsibility, but we have a unique role, and we have an ability to come at this from an angle that the federal government and the intelligence community cannot. And this is where—and I'm not going to steal any of Hedieh's thunder, because what she's put together is nothing short of groundbreaking, it's as groundbreaking as it is effective. I was certainly trying to do my part in terms of our role in trying to keep Montgomery County safe from all types of threats when I crossed paths with Hedieh, and she talked to me specifically about what we could do to address this issue of violent extremism and how the local police could play a role in preventing and intervening in this effort. What she described and what she has put together is a master class in community policing. It is putting the right community partners together. The foundation of that was the faith community. One thing that any cop knows, any politician knows, is that if you want to communicate with people, the best time to do that is very often, you know, on Sunday mornings, or for some folks on Saturday nights. That's when you can really get folks together, because that's when folks get together to practice their faith. And to get the faith community involved in this and to get them to join in as willing partners, and to understand what we are trying to accomplish, where everyone has a stake in this, I thought was going to be a very difficult task, but it turned out to be much easier than I thought. And a lot of that was because of the work that Hedieh did and does, and the fact that she is so inspiring in terms of the message that she gives.

I think that the role the police can play is we give a certain amount of legitimacy to this effort. You figure that if the police are involved, I think that does offer some legitimacy, but it also—there can be a trust component there, and not every police department has the trust of their community. And not every police department, not even Montgomery County, has the trust of everyone and every segment of their community. There are folks who—and I think that in Montgomery County we have a good working relationship with the public—we don't have a huge issue with people not reporting crime, although I

will tell you in some of the newer immigrant communities, in Langley Park and in Wheaton and in some other areas of my county, I do know that there is a lot of unreported crime that goes on.

So how do we build that trust? How do we reach out, make sure that folks know that we are there to help them, help everyone, and make them comfortable to contact us when they have an issue? And all of this is part of developing a relationship with the community. It's not just talking about reporting thefts and that type of thing, but when somebody runs across a young person who finds themselves on a computer looking at websites that are not healthy for them and that are perhaps getting them to start thinking radicalized thoughts. How do we intervene there? How do we get folks to know that contacting the police is actually appropriate and actually might end up helping this individual? Well, I don't want this young man arrested, but I know that this person needs help. And again, we're not here to arrest our way out of a situation, we're here to solve problems, we're here to prevent bad things from happening. So you've got to get the right community partners together. And it started with the faith community, we expanded to the school community, and we spread the message every way that we can. We've had a number of forums, and Hedieh is going to talk about some of those, and we're going to do more.

Problem solving—we talk, specifically when we get a chance to communicate with the public, about how we can intervene in these individuals' lives. We educate parents and teachers and educate the community about what goes on when these kids get in front of a computer. Every parent, every single parent in this country, if you say to them, "Hey, we're going to talk about internet safety issues and some threats that are out there for your children," all parents are interested in that. They understand that there are tremendous threats on the internet. And so you bring people in to talk about that, and then you have a willing audience and you can talk about all the issues you want to talk about, to include countering violent extremism, but we're not just limited to that. Because we don't want to just limit ourselves to that. We don't want this to be, you know what, we want to talk to this segment of the community about preventing terrorism. That's not going to get you very far. This has to be a broader approach, and you have to involve more people so that there's a feeling that, you know what, everyone in our community, we all have an interest in our children's safety, and that's what brings people together. That's one of the ways we've gotten the response that we have. Hedieh has just a tremendous strategy in terms of getting the right people to talk to these folks, and that's the problem-solving end of it.

I want to finish up by just talking very briefly about how this is not the first time the federal government and local law enforcement have tried to partner together on an issue, but I can tell you this is a much more successful one. Back in 2002, then attorney general John Ashcroft decided that he wanted to get local law enforcement involved in identifying and arresting people who were here undocumented, and basically tried to rope all of local law enforcement into becoming the immigration police. It was a disaster. It ran counter to our mission, that mission of building trust in the

We're not here to arrest our way out of situations; we're here to solve problems.

community. And especially in places like Montgomery County, which has huge diversity, where we have a large number of new immigrants, both documented and undocumented—and I will tell you it's my responsibility to deliver police service to all of them. Just because someone is here as undocumented doesn't mean they can't be a victim of a crime, and certainly doesn't mean they don't deserve the best police service we can provide them. And yet when we were looked at, or when any police department was looked at, as the immigration police, you did get crime that was unreported, you did have victims of domestic violence, of rape, of just awful crimes not coming to the police because they were afraid to report it, because they were afraid they would be identified as being undocumented and be deported. So this ran counter to our mission.

I can tell you that this effort of countering violent extremism is a great partnership. It's the way partnerships should occur. I will not try and take over what the NSA does, I will not try and

become—there’s enough intelligence agencies in this country doing great work, I don’t need to be another one. But I can tell you that I have my fingers in the community, I have the trust of a community that I can get a message to, and people feel like they can reach out and, with one phone call, contact the authorities or police, health and human services, the schools, all these people who are sitting at the table saying, we’re here to help you, we’re here to keep your kids safe. We’re easily communicated with, so we are coming at this from a very different angle than the federal government. And I think that this is what makes this effort so effective.

I’ll finish by saying this: that what we’re doing in Montgomery County is not just going to work in Montgomery County. This would work anywhere you have a police chief, or a sheriff, who is willing to help lead this partnership with wonderful experts like Hedieh Mirahmadi at their side. I’ve already talked to Hedieh about the fact that I know for a fact that friends of mine in jurisdictions all over this region would jump at the chance to get involved in an effort like this. There are probably one or two police chiefs who might not have an interest, but I can tell you that 99 percent of them would. This is something we want to highlight, that we want to duplicate, that we want to see occur in every jurisdiction that we can, because all it’s going to do is make us all safer.

RAPPORTEUR’S SUMMARY

■ HEDIEH MIRAHMADI

Montgomery County’s model to counter violent extremism—a community-led, public-private partnership rooted in interfaith collaboration—was initiated a month before the Boston bombings in April. The model is very much driven by the agenda, interests, and support of the faith-based community’s leaders and their congregations. Schools, the county executive’s office, law enforcement officials, faith leaders, health and human services officials, and the emergency management team all play a role in CVE and addressing other local issues.

The program can best be described as consisting of three parts. The first involves educating and building awareness among public and private stakeholders of the various factors involved in violent extremism. This includes specific training for law enforcement, based on these same contributing factors to radicalization and with an emphasis on enhancing cultural competency. As for the factors themselves, alongside ideology are struggles associated with

acculturation, social alienation, and a number of psychiatric conditions. The second part of the program, meanwhile, centers on cultivating the expertise within the community to intervene. This is achieved by identifying social scientists, psychologists, trauma case workers, and clergy who could provide the mentoring and counseling needed to deter an individual from the path of violence. The third phase is then developing these professionals' competency to apply their expertise when the program receives referrals from both the private and public sectors. Although interventions are always intended to be successful, cases of failed intervention show the necessity of trust and a communicative, bidirectional relationship with law enforcement.

Other models for intervention exist in Montgomery County, such as the Kennedy Cluster Project, which provides services to families of children who are performing poorly in school or have other disciplinary problems. The stakeholder agencies meet every two weeks to review cases and assess a family's needs for housing assistance, mental and other health services, as well as counseling. CVE cases can be placed either within models such as this or in a parallel system based on appropriate memorandums of understanding.

On the public side, the Faith Community Working Group, begun out of the county executive's office, was designed to increase faith-based participation in all aspects of county life, from food insecurity issues to upholding religious land-use laws or disaster preparedness. The interfaith liaison, who facilitates relationship building, helps bring together nontraditional partners and serves as an overall uniting force in this effort. On the private side are leaders representing all the monotheistic faiths, as well as the county's sizable Buddhist community, joined by Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and members of the Bahai faith.

After the Boston bombing, the FCWG cochairs held a town hall at which all faith communities displayed their solidarity with the Muslim community while also expressing a desire to collaborate to prevent future violence. The original town hall participants signed on to be the first members of the FCWG.

A subcommittee specifically focused on intervention and the prevention of violence was formed, with the word "violence" chosen to cover all topics that might affect "violent extremism." At the first subcommittee meeting, members of the Muslim community were asked to offer their views on how to frame discussions of violent extremism. While useful in policy and academic contexts, terms like "Islamist," "Salafist," "radical Salafist," and "jihadist" are

divisive at the community level and were thereby omitted. It is important to note that most members of the Muslim community had no knowledge of the radical materials flagged by the National Counterterrorism Center and Department of Homeland Security. Most community imams, trained in mainstream Islamic ideology, had never even read the writings produced by prominent jihadists, and they were shocked by their contents. Agreed terminology, therefore, issued from themes such as ideology, grievance, the social science behind in-group and out-of-group conflict, efforts to decrease conflict and increase social cohesion and to reduce alienation, as well as psychological factors, specifically trauma.

The other two subcommittees, solidarity programming and clergy response, also seek to strengthen social cohesion by reducing the alienation experienced by minority groups, whether real or perceived. These subcommittees have held events such as a friendship picnic, a disaster-preparedness session for houses of worship, and a brainstorming event with the county executive. Such efforts are aimed at building relationships that facilitate trust and mutual respect. The clergy response subcommittee was set up specifically as a postcrisis resource, designed to provide ministry and counseling to victims of violence and insights to police officers and other county officials dealing with a crisis.

For any collaborative event of the FCWG, both public stakeholders and faith community members are involved in the planning, organizing, and implementation stages, as well as in contributing resources. The enlistment of private funding for programming helps supplement budget-restrained county programs and gives the group flexibility to decide what events it would like to support.

PREPARED REMARKS

■ GEORGE SELIM

Good afternoon. I'd like to start by thanking The Washington Institute for putting together this important Policy Forum, and a special thank-you to both Matt Levitt and Hedieh Mirahmadi for asking me to participate today.

First, I'd like to lay a foundation for today's discussion. For those of you who have followed the evolution of the terrorist threat our nation has faced in the months and years since 9/11, you will notice that the title of today's panel, "Countering Violent Extremism," is a somewhat newer term, relatively speaking, and one that didn't exist in our national security lexicon on September 12, 2001. The tools and tactics the U.S. government has used to pro-

tect the homeland in the past twelve-plus years have evolved considerably, and today I look forward to talking about one of those tools and the process by which local communities like Montgomery County, Maryland, are implementing it.

From the outset of this conversation, it is important to keep in mind that the programs and policies for preventing violent extremism are not, and can never be, static. That is to say, they must evolve as the nature of threats in the homeland changes and evolves. Today, I share the panel with two people who have recognized

Our strategy prioritizes al-Qaeda and its affiliates as the preeminent terrorist threat to our country today.

the evolution of threats to their communities and have gone above and beyond to put in place measures to allow for violence intervention and prevention efforts at the intersection of faith communities and local government.

Let me start by sharing some important background on how the federal government views this issue and steps it has taken to address the threat of homegrown violent extremism:

In August 2011, the White House released the first ever strategy to prevent violent extremism in the United States. It is important to note that unlike other documents such as the National Security Strategy or National Counterterrorism Strategy, which are issued every several years, this is the first ever U.S. government strategy to address ideologically inspired radicalization to violence in the homeland. Our central goal in this effort is to prevent violent extremists and their supporters from inspiring,

radicalizing, financing, or recruiting individuals or groups in the United States to commit acts of violence.

While our approach is flexible enough to address the various forms of violent extremism, the strategy does prioritize al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents as the preeminent terrorist threat to our country today. Since 9/11, these groups—and homegrown violent extremists inspired by them—have been responsible for numerous plots, attacks, and attempted attacks against the homeland.

The words we use matter, and clear definitions provide transparency and clarity to our policies and programs. Our U.S. government strategy for preventing violent extremism in the United States defines violent extremists as “individuals who support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further political goals.” The term “countering violent extremism” refers broadly to some of the “preventive” aspects of counterterrorism, which include: (1) broad engagement and trust building with communities targeted by violent extremist recruiting; (2) efforts focused on preventing terrorists from recruiting or inspiring others to act; and (3) improving the capacity of communities and law enforcement to identify individuals who pose a risk of carrying out acts of violence.

Shared Responsibilities

Security of the homeland is not the charge of a single department or agency, but the responsibility of all of us, from our largest city police force to smallest law enforcement jurisdiction, our biggest company to smallest independent business, from parents and teachers to county councils, and from the whole community to each individual within those communities. As President Obama said in a past State of the Union address, “[A]s extremists try to inspire acts of violence within our borders, we are responding with the strength of our communities, with respect for the rule of law, and with the conviction that American Muslims are a part of our American family.”

The efforts that Dr. Mirahmadi and Police Chief Thomas Manger have forged under the Faith Community Advisory Council of Montgomery County are indeed part of the whole-of-community response that government calls upon. Their efforts are part of the shared responsibility of protecting our communities from a range of threats, from illegal drugs to human trafficking to online predators to other illicit actions that often prey on immigrant or minority groups.

But where do these shared responsibilities start and stop?

The responsibility of federal officials on matters of homegrown violent extremism has become increasingly clear in the past several years, but as the process of radicalization to violence migrates to online spaces, a new and different set of tools is needed, and these tools must go beyond conventional law enforcement practices.

Young people in communities like Montgomery County, Maryland, can be affected and negatively influenced by the social media campaigns of groups like al-Shabab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), just as young people in North Africa or South Asia can be.

Beyond the legal framework that guides all federal investigations and prosecutions in the United States, the federal government has the shared responsibility and technical expertise to communicate the threat posed by violent extremists to state and local law enforcement, municipal government officials, and concerned communities nationally.

Preventing violent extremism in the homeland is based on a complex set of relationships, mostly at the state and local levels. Programs at those levels provide the best opportunities to mitigate the radicalization process, with sensitivities for regional and local realities as well as the ability to address accompanying social and psychological issues.

The development and incubation of programs like the Montgomery County Intervention and Prevention of Violence Subcommittee will serve as a great example of both pluralism and local ingenuity. The progress of the Montgomery County effort will help guide federal government focus in a number of key regions nationally, and will allow us to leverage ongoing, albeit nascent, efforts in many cities and make substantial investments of time and effort in a few critical places. I hope that the success of the Montgomery County model will spur action in other cities in the D.C. metro area as well as in nearby regions.

Homegrown violent extremists motivated by al-Qaeda's distorted interpretation of Islam have not been able to carry out large-scale attacks on the homeland since 9/11, but their repeated attempts can nonetheless terrorize a nation. Terrorists prey on vulnerable individuals, on people who feel victimized and humiliated and find their identities by joining violent extremist movements.

Our arsenal of tools against terrorism must continue to evolve and strengthen the resilience of communities that may be targeted by calls to violence from al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, and similarly aligned groups, and these tools should include formal roles for education officials, mental health professionals, and faith leaders.

Our panel today is a prototype for the shared responsibility on preventing violent extremism in the homeland. Communities—made up of parents, teachers, and concerned citizens alike—didn't ask for this added burden and shared responsibility, but, alas, a post-9/11 reality is that our best homeland security is equal parts public sector and private citizens.

Toward a More Comprehensive Approach

Since issuing our national policy on preventing violent extremism just over two years ago, our domestic interagency efforts have relied heavily on community policing strategies. While our public outreach programs are effective in many ways, this law-enforcement-centric approach has somewhat limited the federal government's ability to customize programs and innovate at the local level. These efforts need to be complemented with available options for intervention against the threat of radicalization to violence in the homeland through partnerships with community-based education officials, mental health professionals, and faith leaders.

Prevention must be paramount. Augmentation of existing federal, state, and local efforts nationally with more non-law-enforcement-oriented alternatives for individuals or segments of communities at risk of radicalization to violence could provide a far greater capacity to address individuals earlier and potentially more effectively. Law enforcement officials such as Chief Manger have recognized this, and could make use of these additional tools to address potential threats to public safety that do not necessarily yet justify a legal-based response.

Community-Based, Locally Focused Problem Solving

So, in conclusion: We are fortunate that our experience with community-based problem solving, local partnerships, and community-oriented policing provides a basis for addressing violent extremism as part of a broader mandate of community safety. We will strengthen partnerships among local actors, civil society, the private sector, governments, law enforcement, and others to counter today's evolving threat.

Our guiding principle for today's conversation is that federal efforts must support local capabilities and programs, like in Montgomery County, to address problems of national concern.

I would like to again thank The Washington Institute and my fellow panelists for today's discussion, and I look forward to engaging with the audience during the question-and-answer session.

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