

Recent Trends in Terrorism and Counterterrorism: National Practices in Countering Violent Extremism

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To prevent violent extremism, programs must cover all ideologies and address the full spectrum of prevention, intervention, disengagement, and rehabilitation.

Your Excellency, Chairman Aboulatta, distinguished members of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, honored guests, it is an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to speak to you today about the findings of a Washington Institute for Near East Policy bipartisan study, *[Defeating Ideologically Inspired Violent Extremism: A Strategy to Build Strong Communities and Protect the U.S. Homeland](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-ideologically-inspired-violent-extremism)* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-ideologically-inspired-violent-extremism>).

Founded in 1985, The Washington Institute is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to scholarly research and informed debate on U.S. policy in the Middle East. Following in the tradition of seven previous presidential election cycles, the Institute's *[Transition 2017](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-administration-and-the-middle-east-a-washington-institute-guide)* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-trump-administration-and-the-middle-east-a-washington-institute-guide>) papers are designed to provide the new administration with sound analysis, creative ideas, and useful recommendations to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East. My comments today are drawn from the findings of the latest Washington Institute bipartisan study on countering violent extremism (CVE). (Previous Institute bipartisan CVE studies include *[Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rewriting-the-narrative-an-integrated-strategy-for-counterradicalization)* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rewriting-the-narrative-an-integrated-strategy-for-counterradicalization>) [2009] and *[Fighting the Ideological Battle: The Missing Link in U.S. Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fighting-the-ideological-battle-the-missing-link-in-u.s.-strategy-to-counte)* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fighting-the-ideological-battle-the-missing-link-in-u.s.-strategy-to-counte>) [2010].)

Over the past several years, the terrorist threat environment facing the United States and its allies has evolved into something more dangerous and complicated than ever before, with implications for both international and domestic

security. Authorities have reason to be concerned, given that the terrorist threats from homegrown violent extremists of all ideological stripes have increased significantly. For example, of the 101 Islamic State-related indictments in the United States between March 2014 and June 2016, 78 defendants were U.S. citizens. **Border security notwithstanding (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/americas-radicalization-problem-its-local>)**, U.S. authorities are grappling with the reality that radicalization to violence occurs here in the United States. The threats from violent extremist groups have both multiplied and become more complex, particularly with the tectonic political and security shifts in the Middle East, the media and Internet landscapes, communications technology, and domestic public security threats.

Here in the United States, CVE best practices are a matter of hot debate. Even the term "countering violent extremism" is a matter of discussion, with some in the Trump administration preferring the term "**terrorism prevention.**" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/from-cve-to-terrorism-prevention-assessing-new-u.s.-policies>) It is not clear, however, how much space that would allow for actual prevention efforts, what kinds of terrorist groups might be included in such a structure, or whether it would cover other types of community issues that could lead to extremism and violence. All of which makes today's meeting and this panel particularly timely.

Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is not a soft alternative to counterterrorism (CT), but rather a parallel and complementary policy option for dealing with disconcerting but lawful beliefs and activities that occur in the pre-criminal space. Countering terrorism requires both tactical efforts to thwart attacks and strategic efforts to address the extremist radicalization that fuels its hatred and violence and undergirds its strategy and global appeal. Building resilient communities capable of resisting and countering violent extremism is clearly in the national interest. But U.S. counterterrorism experts also see P/CVE as a key part of the toolkit necessary to preempt terrorist activity in the first place and to help handle the many cases of extremism that will fall below the legal threshold for investigation. P/CVE efforts are attractive to law enforcement for the way they reduce the pool of potential terrorist recruits across the spectrum of violent extremist ideologies.

Law enforcement, security, and intelligence agencies must continue to pursue counterterrorism cases at all times. But there is a pressing need for programs that move the needle earlier in the process, before an individual has stepped over the Rubicon and a crime has been committed or is imminent. P/CVE done right involves proactively intervening to prevent the radicalization of individuals in the first place or to off-ramp those already along the radicalization process away from the extremist ideologies radicalizing them and mobilizing them to violence. In other words: someone recruiting individuals into a terrorist network or plotting an attack would be the target of law enforcement and/or intelligence counterterrorism authorities, while the persons being targeted for radicalization could be candidates for intervention. The "countering" part of P/CVE involves proactive measures to counter extremist narratives and ideologies intended to radicalize individuals to violent extremism, and intervention to prevent the radicalization of individuals already on the path of radicalization.

Often, law enforcement officers will be the first to come across a case of radicalization in the course of their regular community policing or federal law enforcement and intelligence functions. But law enforcement will never be able to identify all cases of radicalization, which is why working with local community groups is so important. It is critical that parents, teachers, clinical social workers, mental health professionals, counselors, and other such figures have somewhere to turn other than law enforcement when they encounter individuals who appear to be drawn to radical ideas and behaviors but have not yet acted on these ideas, increasing the likelihood that they could come forward and get help. Local service providers and community organizations are best positioned to spot radicalization in its earliest phases. Creating local networks of trained professionals to attend to such cases, as clinical social workers and mental health professionals do in all kinds of cases daily around the country, helps complement a whole-of-

government counterterrorism approach with a whole-of-community approach to public safety and community resilience. Community policing has an important role to play here, where the goal is not investigating crimes but working with local community partners to solve problems and address the conditions that could give rise to public safety issues.

It is critical that authorities and communities address the full gamut of extremist ideologies radicalizing individuals and mobilizing them to violence. In the United States, that means focusing not only on Islamist ideology and narratives but also on white supremacist, far-right, and far-left ideologically inspired violence. Consider that two months before the Boston bombings, authorities arrested two New York men who were in the process of building a truck-borne radiation weapon for use in a mass attack on Muslims and others. Indeed, local law enforcement agencies across the country often push back on federal government directives to focus too heavily on international terrorism threats at the expense of the everyday criminal and public safety issues that dominate the day-in, day-out work of police officers. A study funded by the National Institute of Justice found that "new terrorism-related demands and resources are now competing with other national public safety priorities, placing a strain on local law enforcement agencies. Local officials cite drug enforcement and community policing initiatives as two local priorities that are being affected by shifting federal programs." That is not to say they do not want to counter international terrorism, they just want to be able to prioritize and resource the full spectrum of their responsibilities according to the level of threat they see in their locality.

Given the slippery ideological slope between extremist radicalization and mobilization, it is important not to ban or criminalize but to actively challenge and debate even extremist narratives that do not explicitly advocate violence yet do provide the "moral oxygen" for supporting violent extremist groups. A clear distinction must be made between lawful beliefs and unlawful behaviors when it comes to law enforcement activity, but society need not sanction or leave unchallenged extremist narratives and radical ideologies. When a person has the kind of cognitive opening that can be filled by violent extremist ideas, someone needs to be there to provide alternative narratives and ideas.

In short, to effectively prevent violent extremism in the homeland, it is critical that P/CVE efforts address the full spectrum of ideologically inspired violence, including Islamist, far-right, and far-left violence, as well as non-ideologically inspired violence. And it must include programs addressing the full spectrum of prevention, intervention, disengagement, and rehabilitation. This is the case not only because the country faces threats from across the ideological spectrum, but also because efforts to address Islamist violent extremists will be more effective as part of a comprehensive approach that addresses other types of extremists as well.

The benefits of applying a public health-style model to complement existing violence prevention and public safety efforts are many, not least of which is that doing so helps build resilient communities, engenders social cohesion, and represents good governance at its most fundamental level.

It is a particular honor to be able to share the findings of The Washington Institute's bipartisan CVE study group with CTED and members of its Global Research Network here at the United Nations today, on November 16. Today, the UN marks the International Day for Tolerance, something which is sorely needed and which would go a long way toward helping us all achieve our shared goals not only to combat terrorism or to counter violent extremism but to build strong communities and resilient societies.

Thank you very much.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ❖

Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), United Nations

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