

# The Importance of CVE in Light of the Changing Nature of the Threat

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Apr 27, 2017

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**To decrease the likelihood of terrorist attacks, governments should complement traditional CT with de-securitized tools on the front and back end of the radicalization process.**

Over the past few years the idea of countering violent extremism (CVE) has become part of the lexicon when discussing issues related to terrorism. But contrary to popular misunderstanding, CVE is neither a replacement to counterterrorism (CT) efforts nor a way for the US government to spy on citizens. Rather, CVE is a complement to CT and has become all the more relevant in the aftermath of the Boston bombings and the Islamic State and other jihadi groups' recruitment of unprecedented numbers of Americans to fight abroad. FBI Director James Comey has noted that there are currently 1,000 open homegrown terrorism cases in the United States.

The sharp rise in recruitment and interest in extremist groups is a consequence of a number of interrelated events over the past half-decade. In [a report on preventing and countering violent extremism \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-ideologically-inspired-violent-extremism\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/defeating-ideologically-inspired-violent-extremism) recently released by a bipartisan study group at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, of which I was a member, we identified five main factors that have led to an increased threat: the Arab uprisings and failed states, the Syrian war, the media and internet landscape, foreign fighters and returning fighters, and the growth in other ideologically-based extremist movements.

First is the space provided to jihadi groups in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, whether through the opening of public squares or the creation of safe havens. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt between 2011-2013, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Ansar al-Sharia in Egypt were allowed room to openly proselytize their ideas and recruit new members. Safe havens, meanwhile, were a consequence of civil war in places like Yemen or Libya, which provided new avenues for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and new groups like Ansar al-Sharia in Libya to exploit and fill

vacuums left in under-governed parts of the countries.

The civil war in Syria, provoked by the Bashar al-Assad regime, turned Syria into a magnet for jihadi groups seeking to establish themselves, most notably al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The particular conditions in Syria, such as ease of travel and the emotional resonance of the conflict, opened the foreign fighting recruitment pool in a way that surpassed the flow during the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s. Another factor was the change in technologies that coincided with the onset of the conflict. For one, groups were able to exploit the open system that Twitter provided to push their message and reach out to individuals that might not have come in contact with jihadis in any other context. This kind of platform also allowed immediacy and intimacy not possible in previous times when foot soldiers and mid-level individuals were unable to communicate in war zones and much of the interactions between group and individual took place at the level of official messaging. Barriers to entry were thus lowered, as more recruits connected and then traveled to fight in Syria (and then later also Iraq and Libya). As a consequence, individuals gained training and could be dispatched back home to conduct terrorist attacks like the ones we saw in Paris and Brussels. At the same time, and more relevant to American sympathizers of IS in particular, connecting with IS members and leaders has allowed those figures the opportunity to remote-control homegrown attacks, as seen in the case of the Garland, Texas shooting (as well as other broken up plots), or more simply a way to provide inspiration like in San Bernardino, California and Orlando, Florida.

Although jihadis encompass a tiny subset of the American Muslim community, some far-right extremists have capitalized on the growth in domestic jihadi extremism to conflate most Muslims with those that sympathize or join up with AQ or IS. This has led to a spate of hate crimes and terrorist plots that are directed against Muslim citizens. Jihadi groups then use these incidents as recruiting opportunities, spinning them as evidence that Muslims are not truly a part of American society. In many ways, the result is a feedback loop where each extremist side of the coin benefits from the other's narratives and actions at the expense of the broader population that just wants to live in peace.

In light of these factors and the changed nature of the threat, more must be done to prevent future terrorist attacks and plots. That is why countering violence extremism on the front end (prior to an individual committing a crime or act of violence) and back end (when individuals that had been prosecuted for terrorism-related crimes are set to be released from prison after serving time) make sense. Without adding tools that are complementary to traditional CT, the threat and likelihood of attacks will likely grow. Such tools could include de-securitized alternatives such as bringing in communities to help get misguided or uninformed youth back on track. A whole-of-society approach is the best way to avert disaster and gain buy-in from communities most affected.

*Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the [Lawfare website \(https://lawfareblog.com/importance-cve-light-changing-nature-threat\)](https://lawfareblog.com/importance-cve-light-changing-nature-threat). ❖*

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