

# Fort Hood: A Terrorist Attack on U.S. Soil

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Oct 7, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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



Brief Analysis

**T**he following is the first of a two-part series on U.S. government efforts to counter violent extremism in America; part 2 offers *[recommendations for establishing a comprehensive prevention strategy \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/an-innovative-approach-to-counterering-violent-extremism1\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/an-innovative-approach-to-counterering-violent-extremism1)*.

Last month, the United States and Turkey jointly announced the creation of the \$200 million Global Fund for Community Engagement and Resilience, described as the "first-ever public-private global fund to support grass-roots efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE)." The fund is a good idea, itself the product of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), a consortium of nations committed to promoting international cooperation to combat terrorism. Intended to undercut the ideological recruiting appeal of jihadists in places like Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan, the fund marks the first such attempt to combine financing from both government and nongovernment entities. The idea is to jointly identify credible local organizations, help develop, monitor, and evaluate their programs, and help channel the funds locally. Yet while the State Department promotes creative ideas for combating violent extremism around the world, those agencies and departments responsible for doing the same at home lag far behind.

## A Case of Workplace Violence?

In August, former U.S. Army psychiatrist Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan was convicted on forty-five counts of premeditated murder and attempted premeditated murder for killing thirteen U.S. soldiers and shooting thirty-two others at Fort Hood four years ago. In May, President Obama referenced this attack in a major speech at the National Defense University: "Deranged or alienated individuals -- often U.S. citizens or legal residents -- can do enormous damage, particularly when inspired by larger notions of violent jihad. That pull towards extremism appears to have led to the shooting at Fort Hood, and the bombing of the Boston Marathon."

This is the closest the president, or any government official from the executive or judicial branch, has come to calling the attack in Fort Hood what it is: an act of terrorism. Instead, the attack was classified even in the Department of Defense's final report as a case of "workplace violence." This is in sharp contrast to the Boston Marathon bombing, which the president described as an "act of terror" the day after the attack.

In fact, not only did Hasan display signs of radicalization, but acting as his own attorney he tried to plead guilty during the trial and stated that he had decided to "switch sides" in what he believed was a U.S. war against Islam. Army prosecutors could have incorporated federal terrorism charges into the case, but for reasons that are not clear, they instead charged him with murder and attempted murder. The judge restricted the use of evidence not related to the specific charges, therefore dismissing the possibility of labeling the attack an act of terrorism. In closing, the prosecutor argued that Hasan was motivated to kill fellow soldiers (in this purported case of "workplace violence") as part of his "jihad duty." Words matter, not only for the victims and their families but also for the development of effective policy to counter violent extremism.

## Policy Shortcomings in Countering Violent Extremism

Since he took office, President Obama has broadly continued the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies, including the use of indefinite detentions and defensive screening measures, but has rejected the Bush administration's "global war on terror." Instead, the administration has conceived a strategy to identify, isolate, and address pockets of violent extremism. Emphasis across the government, therefore, has been placed on collecting data on violent extremist activities, both domestically and abroad, so that hotspots of violence can be mapped globally. The major policy change has been to rhetorically narrow the definition of counterterrorism while pursuing an expansive public diplomacy effort to "restore America's image" in the world. The administration has sought to make clear that our principal enemy is al-Qaeda and its affiliates, to the apparent exclusion of other violent extremists who engage in no-less-violent activities based on equally dangerous ideologies. Counterterrorism efforts have focused on capturing and killing al-Qaeda's leadership, mainly in Pakistan, but with expansion to Yemen as well.

Today's global engagement and public diplomacy approach may be effective in significant ways, but it has done demonstrably little to hamper the spread and appeal of radical Islamic extremism. Meanwhile, here in the United States, it remains unclear which agency or department has overall responsibility for combating violent extremism. As analyst Bruce Hoffmann put it, "Who in fact is responsible in the U.S. government to identify radicalization when it is occurring and then interdict attempts at recruitment?" The administration is still lacking a full-throated recognition of the degree to which ideology fuels violent extremism, especially as international borders become less relevant due to the internet in general and social media in particular.

While not the sole tool for radicalization, the internet was certainly an enabler for both Nidal Hasan and Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev. The late al-Qaeda recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki, himself an American citizen, had served as the imam at the mosque Hasan attended eight years before the attack at Fort Hood. In the year leading up to the attack, they remained in contact via email while Awlaki was in Yemen joining what became al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In his capacity as AQAP's head of foreign operations, Awlaki actively sought to radicalize and recruit Western Muslims through AQAP's English-language online magazine, *Inspire*. In the investigation of the Tsarnaev brothers, a copy of *Inspire* was found at Tamerlan's home. U.S. officials also stated that Tamerlan had become an ardent reader of jihadist websites and extremist propaganda. His former brother-in-law stated that most of his knowledge on Islam came from the internet and a Muslim convert he befriended.

In both cases, authorities saw signs of possible radicalization but took insufficient action. In Hasan's case, U.S. intelligence intercepted emails prompting them to contact the FBI, but according to the special Senate report conducted after the incident, "The JTTF [FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force] that had reviewed the initial [REDACTED] communications dismissed the second JTTF's work as 'slim' but eventually dropped the matter rather than cause a bureaucratic confrontation." In Tamerlan's case, the Russians had contacted the FBI in early 2011 seeking information about him based on their intelligence that he was a follower of radical Islam, but again in the aftermath of Boston the FBI announced in a press release that when it responded to the request, it "did not find any terrorism

activity, domestic or foreign."

Each of these cases proves that a narrowly defined, if aggressively implemented, counterterrorism policy can only achieve so much. This approach inevitably creates gaps in U.S. efforts to intervene early enough in the radicalization process, especially domestically but also abroad, to prevent individuals or segments of communities from becoming radicalized to violence. There remains today insufficient focus on identifying and intervening when people are still in the process of being radicalized, in part because that is not a job for law enforcement officers. They step in once a person crosses the line and engages in acts of violence. As things stand today, U.S. policies do little to empower those in the trenches seeking to defend their communities from extremist subversion by making them more resilient.

## Steps toward More Effective CVE Policy

The 2010 National Security Strategy appropriately highlights the need to empower communities to counter radicalization, stating, "Our best defenses against this threat are well informed and equipped families, local communities, and institutions." It commits intelligence resources to better understand this threat and promises to "expand community engagement and development programs to empower local communities." But as a broad policy document, it does not define in detail these actions or indicate who precisely is to carry them out, how, and with whom.

There are many paths to radicalization, and there are no cookie-cutter explanations or shared underlying conditions that explain all cases of radicalization. Challenging and defeating the extremist ideology being peddled by the radicalizers is necessary, but it is clear that better integration of immigrant communities and promotion of a greater sense of social cohesion are essential to redress local grievances and can lower the susceptibility of these communities to radicalization.

The establishment of the Global Fund for Community Engagement and Resilience is a step in the right direction, addressing a vital gap in the U.S. global counterterrorism strategy. But a similar focus is needed to combat violent extremism at home, and for such a strategy to succeed it must be understood that words matter. Calling the Fort Hood attack a case of workplace violence instead of an act of terrorism blurs the stark difference between the two. Clearly, the types of policies and plans necessary to deal with workplace violence and acts of terrorism are different, meaning that the failure to categorize the Fort Hood shootings as an act of terrorism is not just a semantic issue. Rather, it undermines serious efforts to prevent the next Nidal Hassan from being radicalized and carrying out a similar act of terrorism here in the United States.

*Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and is the author of [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god).* ❖

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)