

White House Set to Release National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

After months of drafting, heated interagency discussion, and many rounds of redrafting, the White House is reportedly set to release its long-expected national strategy on countering violent extremism.

Tomorrow, after months of drafting, heated interagency discussion, and many rounds of redrafting, the White House is reportedly set to release its long-expected national strategy on countering violent extremism (CVE). The report, titled the *National Strategy on Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism*, is intended to complement the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* released in June.

The new report's title offers a glimpse into the strategy's likely focus on countering violent extremism on the domestic front by working with state and local governments, nongovernmental and community organizations, and a wide spectrum of private American citizens. Such efforts should hone in on three key areas of concern: countering extremist ideologies, enhancing social cohesion, and building resiliency within American communities.

Countering Extremist Ideologies

Based on the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, the new CVE strategy can be expected to detail how the federal government will work with state and local governments to counter both the appeal and accessibility of violent extremist ideologies in the homeland. As the June report made clear, America is not impervious to violent extremism, which has successfully mobilized individuals both at home and abroad to carry out attacks targeting the United States:

Adherence to al-Qa'ida's ideology may not require allegiance to al-Qa'ida, the organization. Individuals who sympathize with or actively support al-Qa'ida may be inspired to violence and can pose an ongoing threat, even if they have little or no formal contact with al-Qa'ida. Global communications and connectivity place al-Qa'ida's calls for violence and instructions for carrying it out within easy reach of millions. Precisely because its leadership is under such pressure in Afghanistan and Pakistan, al-Qa'ida has increasingly sought to inspire others to commit attacks in its name. Those who in the past have attempted attacks in the United States have come from a wide range of backgrounds and origins, including U.S. citizens and individuals with varying degrees of overseas connections and affinities.

Enhancing Social Cohesion

The new CVE strategy will likely lay out a plan for whole-of-government outreach to immigrant and at-risk communities, involving not only law enforcement agencies such as the FBI and Department of Homeland Security, but also service agencies such as the Departments of Education, Housing and Urban Development, and more. The experience of key European allies, especially Britain, offers a clear and convincing lesson: governments should make a conscious effort to ensure that their relationship with communities is not over "securitized." Including the service agencies will empower Washington to proactively address key grievances -- real or perceived -- within certain communities and, in so doing, make at-risk individuals less open to radical ideologies. Terrorist radicalizers actively prey on such grievances in their recruitment and radicalization efforts. As noted in the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*:

To rally individuals and groups to its cause, al-Qa'ida preys on local grievances and propagates a self-serving historical and political account. It draws on a distorted interpretation of Islam to justify the murder of Muslim and non-Muslim innocents. Countering this ideology -- which has been rejected repeatedly and unequivocally by people of all faiths around the world -- is an essential element of our strategy.

Building Resiliency

Finally, as the counterterrorism strategy made very clear, partnership with local government and communities to build resiliency will also likely feature as a major theme of the new CVE strategy:

We are working to bring to bear many of these capabilities to build resilience within our communities here at home against al-Qa'ida inspired radicalization, recruitment, and mobilization to violence. Although increasing our engagement and partnership with communities can help protect them from the influence of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents, we must ensure that we remain engaged in the full range of community concerns and interests. Just as the terrorist threat we face in the United States is multifaceted and cannot be boiled down to a single group or community, so must our efforts to counter it not be reduced to a one-size-fits-all approach. Supporting community leaders and influential local stakeholders as they develop solutions tailored to their own particular circumstances is a critical part of our whole-of-government approach that contributes to our counterterrorism goals. As we refine our efforts in support of communities, state and local governments, and across the Federal government, we will continue to institutionalize successful practices and provide advice and guidance where appropriate, with the goal of preventing al-Qa'ida inspired radicalization.

The Washington Institute has published two major studies on countering violent extremism at home and abroad. The first, *Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=311>), was the product of a large, bipartisan Presidential Study Group and was published in March 2009. The second, *Fighting the Ideological Battle: The Missing Link in U.S. Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=332>), was the product of a small study group including the author and Institute adjunct scholar J. Scott Carpenter, along with former deputy national security advisor Juan Zarate and Steven Simon, then with the Council on Foreign Relations and now senior director for the Middle East at the National Security Council.

Several of the latter study's recommendations (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=332>) offer sound barometers by which to judge the national CVE strategy slated for release tomorrow. Below is a summary of the most relevant recommendations (the full recommendations can be downloaded for free from the above link).

Core Recommendations

- Explicitly recognize the impact of ideology as a key driver framing, motivating, and justifying violent extremism.

- *Ensure that Islamism -- a radical political ideology separate from Islam as a religion -- is recognized internally within the U.S. government as the key ideological driver of the violent extremist threat posed by al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups.* Meanwhile, U.S. public diplomacy efforts should sharpen the distinction between the Muslim faith and the violent political ideology of Islamism.
- *Mobilize government to counter the impact of ideology that motivates and justifies Islamist extremism and violence.* This will require a more explicit expression of the ideological challenge that individual agencies and offices are trying to tackle. Otherwise, the unity of purpose and whole-of-government integration essential to counter radicalization will prove elusive.
- *Broaden and expand U.S. government cooperation with foreign governments, nongovernmental organizations, activists, and peoples around the world to empower credible Muslim voices* that can marginalize the purveyors of radical Islamist ideology and win the contest for control of public space, public institutions, and public debate in Muslim communities.

Strategic Recommendations

- *Identify radicalizers within communities and empower alternative influences to compete with them.* Both at home and abroad, the United States must more effectively identify and support Muslim activists, entrepreneurs, writers, businesspeople, media personalities, students, and others who lead opinion within their communities, particularly at the local level.
- *Highlight diverse voices, from secular to religious.* Religious piety is not synonymous with radicalization. U.S. policy should be to recognize that religious diversity and education can be a bulwark against extremism. In its engagement with Muslims, at home and abroad, the administration should reach out to a broad spectrum of groups and individuals, from the pious to the secular.
- *Contest the radical narrative.* When extremist speech articulates a threat of imminent violence, which could qualify as criminal hate speech, law enforcement authorities should take appropriate action. Short of such an imminent threat, however, extremist speech should not be banned but contested. Given First Amendment and Establishment Clause considerations, silencing objectionable views or arresting their proponents is anathema to American democracy. In contrast, debate is a cornerstone of the American project. Without banning violent extremist views, responsible leadership demands debating them. Short of arresting their proponents, authorities must be aware of who the radicalizers are and foster alternative influences promoting moderate ideas more in line with traditional American tolerance.
- *Identify, connect, and empower domestic Muslim opinion leaders to compete with the message of extremists within the United States.* These are the voices al-Qaeda leaders fear most. We should reach out to a broad spectrum of Muslim groups and individuals, pious and secular, following the successful examples of groups such as LibForAll, an Indonesia-based nongovernmental organization that partnered with a local rock star to produce a bestselling album, Laskar Cinta (Warriors of love), condemning Islamist extremism. The United States is engaged in such efforts abroad, but not domestically.
- *Treat Muslim Americans as full-fledged partners on the panoply of issues, foreign and domestic, with which the whole of American society is concerned, not solely on those related to CVE.* U.S. governmental interaction with the Muslim American community should be broad-based and reflect the diversity of the community.
- *Engage not only with the most vocal groups, but also with the most representative.* Ensuring maximum diversity in U.S. government outreach especially at home but abroad as well is critical. Domestically, this applies not only to determining which groups are invited to attend government functions and host major addresses by senior officials, but also to the organizations that train and certify chaplains in U.S. prisons and in the armed forces. Some prominent Muslim American groups have questionable links to banned groups that should disqualify them as trusted government partners in the effort to combat extremism. Others, perhaps less vocal and often active at a more local level, warrant greater institutional recognition and support.

STRUCTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Extend efforts to contest the radical narrative down to the state and local levels, where officials know their communities best.* Federal aid will be critical to support such efforts and could be modeled on the longstanding and highly successful Justice Department community development programs aimed at protecting vulnerable youths from recruitment into violent gangs. Such programs -- which provide federal grants that are executed at the local, grassroots level based on knowledge of the local community -- should be disbursed locally in coordination with the Department of Homeland Security.
- *CVE activities domestically and overseas.* Domestically, law enforcement agencies in particular remain the primary interlocutors with the Muslim American community. Town hall meetings and other forms of local engagement should be expanded to include representatives from service agencies as well, such as Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Education, and others. Integration programs should include Treasury Department financial literacy courses and other means of facilitating smooth integration into American society.

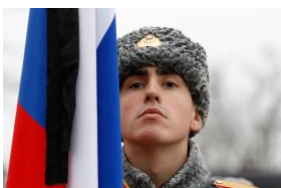
Functional Recommendations

- *The National Counterterrorism Center should complement data collection on hotspots of violent activity, at home and abroad, with parallel efforts to track radicalization hotspots where the ideology that fuels violence is being peddled to vulnerable youths.* Analysis that identifies critical tipping points, geolocates clusters of radicalization incidents, and spots at-risk communities is critical. Such analysis should enlist social scientists, anthropologists, and field researchers to understand particular nodes and conduits leading to radicalization. That said, timely analysis should inform near-term programming instead of leading to "analysis paralysis."
- *Recognize that the potential for controversial U.S. government action to radicalize populations at home or abroad is a legitimate concern, but proactively prepare public diplomacy plans to mitigate possible fallout.* Predator missile attacks in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, for example, have become increasingly precise in their targeting and effective in disrupting al-Qaeda activities even as they have raised concerns about creating more terrorists than they have killed. Proactively developing public diplomacy campaigns to mitigate potential fallout from the kind of "hard counterterrorism" actions that are sometimes necessary is critical.

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and author of the forthcoming book *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's 'Party of God.'* ♦

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