

Asserting Liberal Values: The Future of British and U.S. Counterradicalization Strategies

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Counterterrorism Lecture Series \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/counterterrorism-lecture-series)

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How are U.S. and British counterterrorism strategies evolving?

On February 25, 2011, Matthew Levitt, Mark Williams, and Seamus Hughes addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the future of British and American counterradicalization strategies. Dr. Levitt is director of the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. Mr. Williams is first secretary for justice and home affairs at the British embassy in Washington. Mr. Hughes is a professional staff member on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Matthew Levitt

Radicalization lies at the intersection of grievance and ideology. However, grievances are ever-present and very

few individuals choose to act upon them. Ideology, on the other hand, offers a blueprint for action that mobilizes potential terrorists.

A key criticism of the British Prevent strategy has focused on its failure to recognize the importance of ideology in the radicalization process, as evidenced by partnerships with nonviolent Islamist organizations. Though many of these groups reject violence against the UK itself, they are either silent about or even supportive of attacks against Israel or coalition troops in Iraq. Counterradicalization efforts cannot be effective when partnerships are made with those who explicitly reject liberal values. And we must not forget that extremist ideology calling for violence in the name of Islam presents the most pressing terrorist threat to the West. Whether advocated by violent or nonviolent extremists, such radical ideology promotes a worldview at odds with the fundamental principles of Western society and must be contested.

American society has a fundamental discomfort with the government dictating acceptable versus unacceptable ideas. Freedom of speech and religion are arguably the most cherished values in the United States. This position stands in stark contrast with legal and societal norms in the UK or the Netherlands, where distribution of terrorist literature can be investigated and the drafters jailed for creating a threat to national social cohesion. Therefore, in keeping with American values, the United States must develop a strategy that confronts the ideology head-on. While the state cannot act as thought police, it can offer and amplify an abundance of voices, thereby dispelling the notion that Islamist ideology offers the only solution to one's problems and, in effect, limiting its appeal. Without banning extremist (but protected) speech, the government can and must take action to contest extremist ideas and undercut their attraction.

Lacking a version of Britain's Communities and Local Government Department, the United States must immediately develop a roadmap delineating the responsibilities of agencies and departments -- federal, state, and local -- in addressing local grievances, engaging immigrant communities, and contesting extremist ideologies. The last of these items remains the missing link in an otherwise robust effort by the United States to foster social cohesion and counter violent extremism.

Mark Williams

During his recent speech in Munich, British prime minister David Cameron made the case for fundamentally altering the method by which the United Kingdom counters the threat of radicalization at home. In particular, he declared the failure of British state multiculturalism, recognizing that the UK had not succeeded at articulating a shared national identity for all its citizens, based on liberal, democratic values. The state, he said, had encouraged different cultures, especially Muslim immigrant groups, to separate themselves from the rest of society, creating a situation in which young men could identify neither with the cultural mores of their parents nor with the values of modern British society. In just such a crisis of identity, radical ideologies of all stripes thrive.

The British government, as a result, must now take steps to change the relationship between the government and immigrant communities. Every effort should be made to implement policies that promote integration, or the so-called Big Society. The creation of a National Citizen Service, aimed at crafting a shared British identity among young adults, is just one example of such efforts.

In his speech, the prime minister also made clear that the current terrorist threat is driven by Islamist extremism, an ideology antithetical to Western values. While grievances both local and global contribute to terrorism, they are not the root causes, and acts of political violence would occur even if real or perceived grievances were resolved. Rather, radical Islamist ideology, propagated by both violent and nonviolent ideologues, has fueled radicalization in the UK and abroad.

The UK's "Prevent" counterradicalization strategy has been evaluated continually with the intention of promoting a

more active, "muscular liberalism." Under Prevent, groups supporting Islamist ideology, but rejecting violence, were sometimes considered effective partners for countering violent extremism. While these groups may indeed have heightened access to vulnerable individuals, they adhere to an ideology that has allowed radicalism to flourish. Indeed, the biographies of convicted terrorists make clear that many were influenced by nonviolent extremists. Correspondingly, a key shortcoming of Prevent involved the failure to amplify voices that could provide an effective counternarrative to that of the Islamists. Future partners in the counterradicalization effort must therefore adhere to the values upon which British society is built.

In the past, the main responsibility for counterradicalization efforts as well as community relations fell to law enforcement agencies, prompting the charge that the British government's interest in its Muslim population stemmed mainly from concerns about terrorism. In the future, cohesion and integration efforts will be conducted by the Department of Communities and Local Government, while the Home Office will focus solely on counterterrorism and counterradicalization operations.

Seamus Hughes

A thorough investigation by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee shows clearly that the November 2009 shootings at Ft. Hood resulted directly from systematic failures within the FBI and Department of Defense. As news of the shootings circulated, an FBI agent detailed to a Joint Terrorism Task Force in San Diego remarked to a Defense Department colleague: "You know who this is? That's our boy." The statement is just one of many pieces of evidence indicating that, prior to the attack, both the FBI and Defense Department held evidence of Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan's growing radicalization yet both agencies failed to understand its ramifications or take appropriate action.

In light of these failures, the [Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee report](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/files/Fort_Hood/FortHoodReport.pdf) (http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/files/Fort_Hood/FortHoodReport.pdf) concluded that significant changes are necessary to adequately confront the threat posed by Islamist extremism. To begin with, the FBI must improve its analytic capabilities and coordination between local offices. Better intelligence sharing would have allowed the FBI to construct a far clearer picture of the extent of Major Hasan's descent into radicalism. More important still, the report contended that Islamist ideology must be recognized explicitly as a unique threat facing both the military and the general public. Had Hasan's colleagues and supervisors been trained to understand the nature of the radicalization process and the extremist ideology fueling it, a tragedy might have been averted. As such, a comprehensive national counterradicalization strategy must be developed to confront this threat.

This national strategy should bring together the U.S. government, Muslim-American communities, and the private sector. In large part, such a coordinated approach comes in response to current counterradicalization strategy, which exists in a gray area in the period before a violent act is perpetrated.

Often, security agencies attempt to conduct counterradicalization operations, an untenable situation that both strains limited resources and can alienate Muslim communities who feel targeted unfairly. To address the situation, these communities must be made partners in both countering radicalization and preventing violence. Support for such an approach appears in a recent RAND Corporation report, which found that one third of terrorism cases were brought to the attention of law enforcement by the Muslim community. Outreach to the private sector, too, can pay dividends, particularly in the online arena. A key method of radicalization, for example, could be disrupted if YouTube were successfully pressured to remove videos overtly supporting terrorism.

Ultimately, a more nuanced approach, taking advantage of local governments' ability to meet individual communities' needs but focused on carrying out a strategic vision aimed at countering the Islamist narrative and empowering positive voices, will go far in combating the threat of radicalization.

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