

# Combating Violent Extremism: The Counterradicalization Debate in 2011

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**O**n January 5, 2011, Peter Neumann, Maajid Nawaz, and Matthew Levitt addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Dr. Neumann is director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at King's College London and a visiting professor at Georgetown University's Center for Peace and Security Studies. Mr. Nawaz, a former member of the Islamist group Hizb al-Tahrir, is the cofounder and executive director of the Quilliam Foundation, a British think tank dedicated to challenging extremist narratives among Muslim communities in the West. Dr. Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Peter Neumann

**A**s the United States struggles with the recent phenomenon of homegrown Islamist terrorism, it is important that policymakers understand underlying principles and core components of radicalization. While varying models have been developed to describe the process by which individuals develop extremist worldviews, three elements are common to each model: grievance, ideology, and mobilization.

Grievances both real and perceived lie at the core of the radicalization process, providing what social scientists describe as a cognitive opening. First- or second-generation immigrants in the West are prime candidates for probing this opening. They may have suffered because of exclusion or discrimination, coupled with a lack of identification with the cultures of their parents or grandparents, and extremist narratives can take root in the resulting identity vacuum. But grievance alone cannot explain how individuals become radicalized; they must also be subjected to a methodology through which frustration or anger can be directed. Also needed is a target against which budding radicals can lash out.

One function of ideology is to convert personal grievance into a blueprint for a more positive future, with such a process relying on identification of those responsible for a perceived injustice. In general, ideologies are complicated intellectual constructs, yet the most successful and often most dangerous can be reduced to several key tenets. For proponents of Islamism, the argument goes that the West is at war with Islam, Islam is the solution to all individual and societal ills, and every Muslim is obligated to engage in armed jihad in support of Islam. Most violent Islamists

do not spend years studying Islamic literature and theology but rather simply accept the ideology's core concepts as justification for violent action.

While extremists can find potent motivation at the nexus of grievance and ideology, taking the step from mere radicalism to violent extremism is much more difficult without the aid of social structures and groups. Likewise, even as self-radicalization and lone-wolf attacks have increasingly become subjects of debate, a more thorough examination reveals that many of these individuals indeed belonged to social networks, albeit online in chat rooms and on Islamist websites.

Unfortunately, the radicalization debate often focuses on a single key factor -- grievance, ideology, or support structures -- rather than the interconnection of the three. The bottom line is that without grievance, ideology does not resonate, while without ideology, grievances are not acted upon. In the coming year, U.S. counterradicalization strategy should focus on addressing perceived grievances within the Muslim community, promoting a counternarrative to Islamism, and using current law enforcement and intelligence mechanisms to disrupt the social networks that can lead to violent action.

## Maajid Nawaz

In order to properly understand how individuals subscribe to radical Islamist ideology, it is necessary to fully understand the term itself. Islamism is a modern political ideology developed by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s that is separate from the Islamic faith. Its chief goal is to impose an Islamic state based on a selective interpretation of Islam. Taken further, violence -- or jihadism -- is viewed as the necessary means to create the type of state envisioned by Islamists.

Islamists and others often claim that the most effective way to prevent violence is to empower nonviolent Islamists. Yet the term "moderate Islamist" is a deception; even the most moderate Islamist adheres to an ideology that is diametrically opposed to Western values such as those enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Furthermore, though not all Islamists are jihadists, all jihadists are Islamists. Even the most moderate Islamists promote an intellectual environment in which non-Islamic or insufficiently Islamic governments and their citizens exist in violation of Islamic law and must be opposed. By the same token, "Islamist" must not be confused with "conservative" or "religious." Personal religiosity does not equal subscription to the political ideology according to which all governments should be based on one interpretation of Islamic law.

As governments take counterradicalization measures, enlisting nonsecurity agencies is just as important as understanding Islamism as an ideology. The British "Prevent" strategy failed mainly because UK security services were employed as the main interlocutors between Muslim communities and the British government. This, coupled with existing integration problems, gave the impression that the British government was interested in Muslim communities only because they were seen as presenting a security threat.

Regrettably, current counterradicalization strategies are often characterized by a misunderstanding of differences within the greater Islamic community and therefore can often do more harm than good. One approach commonly promoted is to endorse Sufism as an alternative to radical Wahhabism. But by endorsing one particular sect of Islam, Western governments in effect take sides in a theological debate, thereby flouting the principle of freedom of religion, and encourage sectarian divisions. Moreover, any proponent of Sufism as a way to counter radical Islamism should remember the approval with which the leaders of the Sufi Barelvi movement in Pakistan responded to the recent assassination of Punjab governor Salman Taseer, who had opposed the country's draconian blasphemy laws.

## Matthew Levitt

Topmost on the U.S. government's to-do list for counterradicalization must be identifying radical Islamist ideology as the driver framing, motivating, and justifying Islamist-inspired extremism and terrorism. The radical

narrative promulgated by Islamist ideology provides the intellectual basis for violence carried out in the name of Islam. This ideology, and not only the individuals acting on its tenets, must be the focus of our policies and actions. Moreover, counterradicalization should focus not on preventing persons already radicalized from mobilizing to carry out an act of violence -- a clear function of law enforcement and intelligence agencies -- but instead on contesting radical ideologies and preventing people from being radicalized in the first place. While many government agencies are studying extremism, it remains unclear whether the right questions are being asked and the right lessons learned and, furthermore, which of these are affecting policies and programs.

In the minds of many U.S. officials involved in countering violent extremism, relevant programs remain underfunded, understaffed, and underprioritized within the government bureaucracy. Effective counterradicalization requires a holistic approach from government that is based on long-term vision rather than reactive responses to events. In order for such a vision to be realized, an overarching strategy must be developed to direct all departments and agencies on how they can contribute to countering violent extremism instead of leaving counterradicalization efforts to law enforcement agencies by default. Leaving counterradicalization and community engagement efforts in the hands of security agencies alone is both unwise and counterproductive. Indeed, sometimes the federal government will be most effective in this area by partnering with the private sector and state and local governments rather than taking the lead itself.

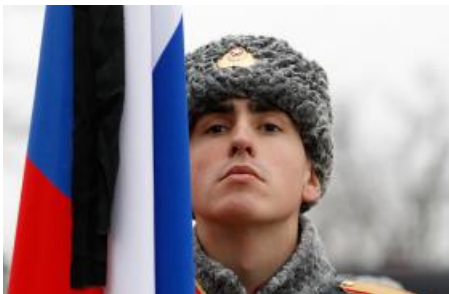
Counterradicalization involves two equal parts: addressing local grievances through efforts to integrate immigrant communities and contesting radical ideologies. At both ends of the spectrum, integration and counterterrorism efforts have been largely successful, and ideas abound on how to further improve their effectiveness. But the notions of engagement and counterterrorism elicit confusion on the bureaucratic level. Agencies tasked with engagement focus exclusively on integration efforts, devoting little attention to contesting the extremist narrative, while security agencies concentrate on preventing the next attack. Counterradicalization ends up falling through the cracks between these two poles.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Sam Cutler. ❖*

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