

# Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Mar 13, 2009

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

**O**n March 10, 2009, *The Washington Institute's Presidential Task Force on Confronting the Ideology of Radical Extremism* released its ***final report (/policy-analysis/view/rewriting-the-narrative-an-integrated-strategy-for-counterradicalization)*** at a special Policy Forum at the Institute. The release also included a discussion led by three task force members: Tim Roemer, president of the Center for National Policy; Lorne Craner, president of the International Republican Institute; and Dr. Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### Tim Roemer

The release of this report occurs in a near perfect storm of political conditions, as a growing consensus on the importance of countering extremist ideology meets a receptive government in need of innovative solutions. With this set of pragmatic recommendations, we hope to move from debate to strategy, and guide the U.S. government and its allies in tackling the challenge of radicalization.

Al-Qaeda and other violent extremists are adept at initiating and sustaining the radicalization process. They provide the "glue" linking global grievances, including the U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo, to local ones. Whether facing a closed political environment, systemic unemployment, or state violence, would-be radicalizers construct an overarching narrative of Islam versus the West and use it to advocate violence against home governments or the United States. Ultimately, eliminating violent extremism requires alternatives to this narrative.

A few key members of the Obama administration have drawn attention to the ideological underpinnings of violent extremism. This morning, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair testified to the Senate Committee on Armed Services that "turning the corner" on violent extremism is crucial to protecting U.S. interests; he cited the slow pace of integrating Muslims into European societies as a recruitment opportunity for extremists. For its part, Congress seems to be increasingly interested in understanding and confronting radicalization.

Despite this new awareness, the United States lacks a cohesive strategy and has made strikingly little progress in this area, especially in comparison to some European countries. This shortcoming became apparent last month when

the FBI confirmed that a Somali-American disappeared from the United States, only to resurface and conduct a suicide attack in Somalia. Although the United States does not face a large-scale integration crisis, it needs to both preempt potential radicalization on the home front and address this critical challenge where it exists abroad.

The report recommends the formation of a counterradicalization forum to document best practices and lessons learned. The task force's research and fact-finding trip to Europe underscored the differences between each country's approach to counterradicalization. While the British "Prevent strategy" synthesizes law enforcement, social services, and religious education programs, the French focus on social integration instead of religion. Saudi Arabia provides religious reeducation and assistance for former extremists reentering society but exerts extreme pressure over communities and families by holding them responsible for recidivism. Although these programs may not be fully replicable in other countries, they offer instructive elements that should be mined and shared among countries undertaking counterradicalization.

### **Lorne Craner**

The United States and its allies can improve their policies to minimize global grievances, but it would be shortsighted to think of such efforts as silver-bullet solutions to radicalization. The report emphasizes the need to address local grievances and stimulate alternatives to the extremist narrative. It promotes democratic and economic reform as the best strategic response to improve day-to-day lives and reduce the pool of potential recruits.

In its first term, the Bush administration made important inroads in promoting democracy through the Freedom Agenda. These developments, however, largely unraveled during the second term, when many perceived the administration's withdrawal from the effort as a result of the regional blowback from Iraq and the 2006 electoral gains by Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Obama administration should not abandon democracy promotion for reasons based on this troubled history.

In fact, the report recommends that the Obama administration can and must pursue economic, social, and political reform in the region through a more consistent and long-term approach than its predecessor. In this effort, the United States should look not only to governments, but also to mainstream Muslims voices already competing against and advocating alternatives to the extremist narrative from within their communities. U.S. political engagement should give priority to these valuable partners.

The report includes several other specific recommendations to improve economic reform and democracy promotion. The United States must recognize the role of reform in expanding space for private economic activity and prioritize it appropriately. In addition, the administration should seek to provide additional resources for governance and democracy-related programs, especially the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Middle East Partnership Initiative. In communities where extremists gain popularity and support through the provision of social services, the United States should invest in programs to compete with this service delivery, preferably through support to local alternatives.

### **Rob Satloff**

As the final component to an integrated strategy, the report ties in specific recommendations on public diplomacy and strategic communications. It promotes a new mission for U.S. engagement with foreign publics grounded on two key principles: moving beyond the American brand and ensuring diverse partnerships.

In the post-September 11 world, a debate has arisen over the meaning and goals of public diplomacy. In response to rising anti-Americanism, some important actors in current and past administrations argue that the United States should try to enhance its image and approval ratings abroad. This report takes an alternative view that the first priority and main thrust of our policy should be to empower mainstream Muslim voices in the contest against radical extremism. Novel public diplomacy approaches should be directed toward identifying, nurturing, and supporting

these voices.

The report underscores that when seeking other voices, we should apply the principle of diverse engagement. The U.S. government should not promote a single substitute for radical extremism, but rather a kaleidoscope of political, economic, and religious alternatives. Whether pious or secular, partners' religiosity is less important than their willingness to stand publicly against extremism and promote those alternatives. The United States and its partners can also amplify the recanting voices of former extremists like Dr. Fadl, who have credibility within the extremist world. Both at home and abroad, no single Muslim organization, certifying body, individual, or institution should be the gatekeeper for access to the White House or the State Department.

The report provides specific structural recommendations to infuse this new mission into the machinery of public diplomacy. It urges the administration to strengthen the capabilities of the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, to create an assistant secretary position within that office, and to add a deputy assistant secretary in each regional bureau to link public diplomacy and counterradicalization efforts to the responsibilities of those bureaus. Although international broadcasting operates separately from the State Department, it commands half of all public diplomacy funding and should take on the same sense of purpose in engaging societies within and outside the Middle East.

To prevent the emergence of violence, the U.S. government must identify and address the early stages of the ideological process that sustains violence. In crafting a strategy to confront the ideology of radical extremism, the Obama administration will need to coordinate policy in counterradicalization, reform, and public diplomacy. It should act immediately to preclude the darkening skies of further radicalization. Rewriting the Narrative offers numerous practical recommendations for accomplishing this goal.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Larisa Baste. ❖*

---

## 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

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

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

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