

From the Boston Marathon to the Islamic State: Countering Violent Extremism

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As recently as two years ago, countering violent extremism was hardly at the forefront of U.S. policy imperatives. Osama bin Laden was dead, al-Qaeda seemingly in retreat. But the months ahead would prove this assessment shortsighted.

The Boston Marathon bombings undercut America's sense of security so carefully rebuilt post 9/11, while in the Middle East, the Arab Spring revolutions devolved into collapsing governments fueled by factional and increasingly violent confrontations. The Syrian fight sparked the break of ISIS--now the Islamic State--from al-Qaeda, and large swaths of territory in Syria and later Iraq fell to its advance. Sunni jihadists from both camps met with stiff opposition from Iran-backed Shiite foreign-fighter militias. And as ever more radicalized nationals returned home, Western nations witnessed a frightening growth of extremism on their own soils.

The sixth series of The Washington Institute's Counterterrorism Lectures spanned the period from November 2013 to May 2014 and included presentations by the following speakers (*positions held at time of presentation*):

- **John Cohen**, counterterrorism coordinator for the Department of Homeland Security
- **Alberto Fernandez**, coordinator of the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications
- **Mark Giuliano**, deputy director, FBI
- **Matthew Levitt**, director of The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
- **J. Thomas Manger**, chief of police, Montgomery County, Maryland
- **Hedieh Mirahmadi**, president of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education
- **George Selim**, director for community partnerships on the White House's National Security Staff
- **Shaarik Zafar**, deputy chief of the Homeland, Cyber, and Countering Violent Extremism Group in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

The prescriptive measures proffered in these lectures hold as much relevance for policymakers today as they did two years ago. Americans owe a great debt to these agencies, who are today more alert than ever to the threats posed by violent extremism.

The Editor

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](#) at The Washington Institute. He is a former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury as well as a former State Department counterterrorism advisor to the special envoy for Middle East regional security. Dr. Levitt is the author of a number of highly acclaimed studies, most recently [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](#).