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## Mobilizing Against a 'Preeminent Challenge of the Twenty-First Century': Countering Violent Extremism

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Thank you Matt and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy for inviting me to speak with you all today. And, thank you for all the insightful and thought-provoking analysis you produce on a wide range of security challenges, including today's topic. I just wish it were not so timely.

One week ago, followers of ISIL brought their barbarism to the City of Light. In a coordinated and cowardly act of terror, they slaughtered 132 innocent lives and wounded over 350 others. Before that, they attacked peaceful shoppers in Beirut, demonstrators in Ankara, and vacationers in the Sinai. Earlier this week, suicide bombers struck a market in Kano killing at least 30 people. And just today, gunmen stormed a hotel in Bamako and took 170 hostages. These attacks are grim reminders that, more than a decade after 9/11, the global threat of terrorism has not receded -- it has reconstituted and remains grave.

As we grapple with this spate of violence and steel ourselves for the struggle ahead, we must be careful to heed the lessons of the last decade. As President Obama said, the U.S. will never shy from using force to protect our citizens and allies, and we are intensifying the campaign to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL with new strikes against their leaders, oil fields, and territory. We must continue to capture and kill terrorists of all stripes, whether they are fighting in Syria's civil war, fomenting insurgency in Mali or Iraq, plotting in safe havens in Libya, or slaughtering innocents in Nigeria. But at the same time, we must remember that no number of air strikes, soldiers, or spies can eliminate the complex motives and hateful ideologies that feed terrorism.

That is what I will discuss today -- how the U.S. and a growing number of our partners around the world are mobilizing a broader approach to address the underlying forces that make people vulnerable to violent extremism. We call this broader approach Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE.

How did the U.S. come to push broader, civilian-led, and preventive efforts as an essential complement to our military and intelligence actions against terrorism?

There's a simple answer: learning.

Learning from more than a decade since the searing experience of 9/11 -- those lessons are particularly relevant in this current moment of heightened international outrage following the recent spate of attacks. After

September 11, the U.S. arrayed extraordinary military and intelligence tools to dismantle terrorist networks abroad. Our efforts decimated core al-Qaeda leadership and prevented a catastrophic attack on the homeland.

Yet as we targeted al-Qaeda, its remnants dispersed and adapted. Some terrorist groups aligned with aggrieved communities by merging with regional militias or insurgencies. Others entered areas of failed governance and began controlling territory, resources, and populations. Many exploited digital platforms to disseminate twisted ideologies, recruit vulnerable individuals, and coordinate cells around the world.

The rise of ISIL epitomizes the evolution and endurance of violent extremism over the last decade and the complex ways it can intertwine with other national security challenges like civil conflict and failing states. ISIL's ability to both hold territory with ground forces while simultaneously conducting and inspiring global attacks against soft targets makes it a threat at multiple levels.

The continued spread and resurgence of ISIL's brand underscores that, while traditional "hard" approaches remain vital, they are insufficient for addressing the conditions that make people vulnerable to joining these groups in the first place -- whether it's an individual halfway around the world, or an entire community that sees ISIL as a better bet than its own government.

As President Obama has said, "our military and intelligence efforts are not going to succeed alone; they have to be matched by political and economic progress to address the conditions that ISIL has exploited in order to take root." That is the rationale for what our government calls Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE.

While non-military means to address ideology or strengthen community resilience to violent extremism are not new, the Obama Administration has more fully developed them within a broader, preventive, and civilian-led framework and seeks to expand their role in how we address threats of terrorism at home, abroad, and in concert with our international partners.

Early in the Obama administration, the United States began expanding our civilian tools to counter terrorist propaganda and build resilience in vulnerable communities.

In 2010, we established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorist Communications, or the CSCC, to amplify our counter-messaging efforts across the inter-agency. A year later, the U.S. Government began piloting development and other programs to build community resilience to violent extremism and counter radicalization abroad. It helped establish *Hedayah*, the first international center to support civilian-led approaches to counter violent extremism.

While all of these efforts fell under the moniker of CVE, the efforts remained modest, uncoordinated, under-resourced, and lacked an overarching national and international framework. That has begun to change over the last year, as the Obama Administration began broadening CVE in our practice at home and with partners abroad in three critical ways -- which I will outline in turn.

**First, CVE increasingly emphasizes prevention.** It calls for pushing back against the recruitment methods terrorist groups use to target vulnerable individuals while providing those individuals with off-ramps from the path of radicalization. In doing so, CVE seeks to tighten the flow of recruits to the current generation of terrorist groups and better prevent the next one from emerging.

CVE also recognizes the need to address so-called "push" factors that make people vulnerable to call of violent extremism. This means helping governments and communities address the political, social, and economic grievances that terrorists exploit.

These grievances vary enormously, which explains how ISIL has drawn recruits from nearly every region and walk of life -- from conflict-ridden provinces in western Iraq to working-class neighborhoods in Brussels. Their sources exist at the individual or community level, and some will be beyond a government's capacity to address.

But national governments have an impact in key areas. A recent study showed that over the last 25 years, up to 92 percent of all terrorist attacks have occurred in countries where state-sponsored violence -- like torture and extra-judicial killings -- was widespread.

But by governing effectively and inclusively, upholding the rule of law, respecting human rights, and avoiding heavy-handed responses to terrorist and other security threats, governments can reduce discontents that are exploited by violent extremist networks to mobilize recruits and support.

Of course, grievance alone cannot fully explain -- and can never justify -- the rise of violent extremism. Whatever fertile soil enables terrorist radicalization, it is extremist ideology, propaganda, and terror networks that channel people to violence. A critical piece of CVE's preventive work is pushing back against the twisted beliefs and recruitment tactics that violent extremists wield to influence communities and target vulnerable individuals.

If we can identify when individuals begin their path to radicalization, law enforcement and community-level interventions can divert them. But this requires constructive relationships between at-risk communities and local officials rooted in mutual trust and respect.

When communities feel they can turn to local officials without fear of persecution, they are more likely to report suspicious activity and seek assistance for friends and family showing signs of radicalization. Yet such trust and respect are often absent in places in greatest need of this preventive work.

As we have seen in the U.S. with all variety of lone wolf actions who kill fellow citizens in schools or make threats, we lack strategies to assuredly prevent every individual from descending into violence. For radicalized individuals, imprisonment can be necessary to prevent violence. At this stage, CVE means ensuring that time spent behind bars helps individuals rehabilitate.

And finally, when former members of violent extremist groups are released from jail, or when current members become disillusioned and "want out," CVE requires finding secure and effective ways to reintegrate them into our communities.

CVE encompasses all of these efforts in a preventive, civilian-led framework that must be adapted to the local context. After all, the forces that can fuel violent extremism are remarkably complex, overlapping, and are oftentimes only apparent at the community level. Though national governments have an important role in all of this work, effectively addressing these complex forces requires a much broader set of actors.

**Which brings us the second core element of CVE** -- an emphasis on "whole of society" approaches. CVE calls for broadening the bench in the shared struggle against violent extremism to include local officials, businesses, religious leaders, researchers, women, youth, and even former members and victims of violent extremist groups.

Local leaders are better positioned to cultivate partnerships in their communities. As President Obama said in Ankara earlier this week while discussing our strategy to defeat ISIL, "if you do not have local populations that are committed to inclusive governance and who are pushing back against ideological extremes, they resurface."

What does a "whole of society" CVE effort look like? Essentially, it is reinforced trust and cooperation among government and people, with local actors empowered to contribute to this shared struggle. Mainstream religious leaders are critical CVE actors for several reasons. They can teach tenets of faith to vulnerable youth searching for spiritual guidance. But mainstream religious voices feel too vulnerable to speak out or lack of tools to communicate widely, CVE efforts can help protect and empower them as messengers of tolerance.

Civil society can help youth develop a sense of purpose through civic engagement. Women are often the first to detect warning signs of radicalization and can help off-ramp children into alternative opportunities. Young people are some of the most persuasive voices against violent extremism among their peers. And few have greater credibility to debunk terrorist lies and propaganda than former members and victims of violent extremist groups.

The U.S. has shifted its CVE efforts at home and galvanized a global movement to reflect this "whole of society" approach. As the CSCC steps up efforts to push back against terrorist propaganda online, it now does more to empower credible voices outside government by connecting them with at-risk individuals and equipping them with effective counter-messages. For example, a recent campaign under the hashtag "Why They Left Daesh" gave defectors a platform to dissuade potential recruits by exposing the brutality of life under the so-called Islamic State.

Actors outside of national government have also assumed greater roles in this shared struggle. Earlier this year, young leaders from every region gathered at the first-ever Global Youth CVE Summit to showcase innovative tools they developed to counter the appeal of violent extremism among their peers.

At home, Boston, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles have seen local officials partner with educators, social service providers, academics, and community leaders to build resilience to violent extremism through holistic and tailored approaches.

Last September, mayors from around the world launched the Strong Cities Network to exchange good practices for building local resilience against violent extremism. Today in Aarhus, Denmark, the Network is wrapping up its first event to explore how best to develop city-level tools and partnerships for CVE. Local communities are on the front lines of this struggle. Few cities appreciate that more than Paris, so it is fitting that it will host the Network's first annual summit next spring.

The attacks in Mali and Paris, and before that in Beirut and Ankara, underscore the global reach of violent extremism. The breadth of this threat suggests the importance of directing our CVE efforts effectively.

**Which brings me to the third aspect of CVE** -- focusing on the most vulnerable individuals and communities using evidence-based approaches.

No government can fully eliminate discontents and grievances that terrorists exploit to recruit individuals or mobilize whole communities. Here in the U.S., the case of individual 'lone wolves' who have no prior affiliation with ISIL's nominal aims, let alone with Islam, are a growing concern that shows the difficulty -- just as the rash of school shootings -- of prevention at an individual level. But where there is evidence that

terrorist propaganda is luring recruits, we should prioritize CVE efforts to help communities protect their children from the siren call of violent extremism.

Identifying these vulnerabilities and underlying forces requires rigorous analysis and research, which are also vital for measuring the impact of CVE efforts so that we invest in the most effective approaches and can course-correct as needed. Though we still have much to learn, we are making progress.

For example, on the international CVE front, the Department of State recently established a new unit within the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations to analyze the underlying drivers of violent extremism in different global contexts. This analysis feeds into a new State initiative to develop CVE programming through an integrated and holistic process. Now, State is launching CVE pilot programs in Africa focused on the most at-risk communities and key drivers of radicalization with carefully tailored, evidence-based approaches.

We also look to actors outside government, like the Washington Institute, for contributions to this research and analysis. A few months ago, I attended the launch RESOLVE, a new network for researchers, especially those at the local level, to share their findings and resources as they uncover the community-level drivers of violent extremism and most effective remedies to address them. I encourage The Washington Institute to support this network by contributing its own scholarship or by mentoring local researchers.

In summary, the three tenets of CVE are: *preventing* more individuals and communities from aligning with violent extremist movements, *partnering* with a broader range of actors for a "whole of society" approach, and *focusing* on the most vulnerable communities. In doing so, CVE seeks to move U.S. counterterrorism toward a more proactive, affirmative, and preventive approach. By containing the spread of terrorist threats, CVE is an essential complement to military efforts, from drone strikes in Libya to the global campaign against ISIL. CVE makes it more likely that our hard security approaches can succeed. This is not a question of 'either' 'or' -- this complex and generational threat requires 'both.'

Over the last two years, the Obama administration has dramatically elevated CVE in the international agenda and focused the world on the need for more holistic, civilian-led efforts to prevent the rise and spread of violent extremism. This effort kicked into high gear last February at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, where representatives from foreign governments, multilateral bodies, civil society, business, and the faith community outlined a concrete action agenda to put the CVE approach into practice around the world. When participants gathered again this past September to review progress, the global CVE movement had grown to more than 100 countries, 20 multilateral bodies, and 120 civil society groups with much to report.

Governments in every region had stepped up to engage new states, municipal governments, civil society, and the private sector around CVE. Several countries had developed National CVE Action Plans with meaningful roles for nongovernment actors. The United Arab Emirates established a regional messaging center to counter violent extremist propaganda, and Nigeria, Malaysia, and the Organization for Islamic Cooperation have announced plans to do the same.

Multilateral bodies like The World Bank and the United Nations have become increasingly engaged in CVE. And in the coming months, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon will release his plan of action to mobilize a "whole of UN" response to violent extremism that outlines steps for all UN bodies and member states to contribute to this shared struggle.

While these developments are positive and hopeful, we are mindful of the challenges ahead. It is no secret that many of our closest partners for counterterrorism may publicly welcome a more civilian-led approach, but in practice continue to rely on short-term and often heavy-handed responses that do little to address the underlying conditions that enable violent extremism to take root.

That is why the Obama administration continues to press the case for CVE around the world, fully aware that changes in the government behavior require tough and persistent engagement. Even as the President has committed the U.S. to military efforts, we will not shy from explaining to our international partners how respecting human rights, upholding the rule of law, and empowering civil society are inseparable from the larger struggle against violent extremism. In fact, our in-house analysis shows that violent extremist groups are up to four times more likely to emerge in states that do not respect human rights.

In Secretary Kerry's recent trip to Central Asia, he echoed this point, warning that "terrorism is not a legitimate excuse to lock up political opponents, diminish the rights of civil society or pin a false label on activists who are engaged in peaceful dissent...Practices of this type are not only unjust but counterproductive; they play directly into the hands of terrorists." So too, warned President Obama, does xenophobic rejection of Syrian refugees, which is a rejection of our fundamental values and feeds directly into terrorist narratives.

The CVE effort becomes especially critical during this moment of heightened grief and anger. As the world demands justice for ISIL's recent crimes and continued savagery, it can become easy to rely exclusively on hard security actions in a quest for "immediate results." Similarly, it can be tempting to invoke counterterrorism as a pretext to disregard human right and discount more complex, longer-term approaches.

So as we intensify the global campaign against ISIL's territory, finances, and followers abroad, we cannot lose sight of the fundamental truth that no bomb, bullet, or wiretap can address the complex factors and hateful ideologies that feed violent extremism. We will break violent extremism through not only our force of arms, but by upholding our values and empowering our communities.