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Challenging Extremism | Promoting Pluralism | Inspiring Change

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CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**The Role of Women in Countering Violent
Extremism**

**Testimony before
Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade Subcommittee**

Committee on Foreign Affairs

United States House of Representatives

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I wish to thank Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, and the other Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to discuss the role of women in Countering Violent Extremism.

My name is Haras Rafiq and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Quilliam International. Quilliam is the world's first counter-extremism organisation and aims to challenge extremist narratives while advocating pluralistic, democratic alternatives that are consistent with universal human rights. Quilliam has a full spectrum and values-based approach to counter-extremism which means promoting pluralism and inspiring change.

To pursue our work more effectively and ensure that we are localising our efforts. We are currently operating in the UK, USA and Canada as well as a Global team for projects around the world.

Challenging extremism is the duty of all responsible members of society. Not least because cultural insularity and extremism are products of the failures of wider society to foster a shared sense of belonging and to advance liberal democratic values.

Quilliam seeks to challenge what we think, and the way we think. We aim to generate creative, informed and inclusive discussions to counter the ideological underpinnings of terrorism, while simultaneously providing evidence-based policy recommendations to governments and building civil society networks and programmes to lead the change towards a more positive future.

Background and Rational for Empowering Women in CVE

Current strategies for tackling violent extremism –have a fundamental blind spot. This blind spot is the way in which civil society is underutilised to act as primary and secondary intervention providers to prevent the process of radicalisation to violent extremism and hence terrorism

Families and hence women are the best placed to counter violent extremism because they meet the 3 P's that we look for:

Proximity, Prestige and Passion.

Proximity: families are close to individuals vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism. Having identified vulnerable individuals through target audience analysis, families are ideally placed to intervene because of their Proximity to them.

Prestige: families have credibility as intervention providers that many other stakeholders lack and we know that reducing the role of the state in CVE and de-securitising this area is important for effective interventions. Because of their Prestige, families are much better placed to intervene effectively, as safe guarders, intervention providers, and messengers in counter speech.

Passion: families are uniquely placed to communicate emotionally to protect their loved ones from the social harms of violent extremism, and the security threats of terrorism. Whereas many stakeholders can only respond to extremism with logic and counters to violent extremism, families can respond with Passion, which is both a more effective counter to violent extremism, and a credible alternative

Violent Extremism and the Appeal of Groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda

The most recent Jihadist phenomenon that the world has witnessed has been ISIS and their claim to a utopian Islamic State. Although, ISIS has been militarily defeated for now, it would be a mistake to believe that the underpinning ideology of Islamist Jihadism has been defeated. It would also be a mistake to just focus on the ISIS brand as extremism in isolation as groups such as ISIS, AL Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al Shabab et al did not inspire extremism; extremism inspired them.

To establish terms up front, we make a clear difference between Islam and Islamism. Islam is a religion practiced by 1.5 billion Muslims, whose clear majority are non-violent and peaceful, but on the flip side of the coin, have been the victims of extremist brutality, barbarism and draconian tactics. We describe Islamism as a political ideology that seeks to impose any interpretation of Islam as State Law usually in the form to oppress, restrict and retard growth

Islamist extremism and the radicalization to violence relies on the following four factors being present

- The first, is a sense of grievance, whether real or perceived, that gives rise to anger and despair in some cases but more than that it begins the desire to seek out an alternative solution to and individuals' problem
- The second is an identity crisis that is born from that sense of grievance. So, for example, if the sense of grievance was the Bosnia genocide, as it was for many in the past, then the identity crisis born from it, is to question whether one really belongs in the society that they live in.
- The third factor is the presence of charismatic extremist recruiters, who provide a sense of belonging, where perhaps that sense of grievance, and the identity crisis, led to a vacuum in belonging. He or she steps in where family should be stepping in, where a father figure should be stepping in, or mother figure, and provides that sense of belonging.
- The fourth, is the ideology. In this case, the Islamist ideology, that is then peddled as the solution to that sense of grievance, the solution to the identity crisis, and the ideal that the charismatic recruiter says that he or she are adhering to themselves.

The above is designed to move the individual through various stages of an identity that believes that all who do not belong to their world view are the other, are all the same, are all oppressing them, are all collectively guilty (hence no innocents), do not fit into their supremacism narrative and that self-defense and violence need to eventually be applied against them.

Women Radicalized to join ISIS from Western Countries

Our ground-breaking report *Caliphettes: Women and the Appeal of Islamic State*¹, examined the appeal of the Islamic State "caliphate" to women. To do this, we embarked upon a close analysis of Islamic State's official propaganda and unofficial proselytisers. In the process, four promises – empowerment, deliverance, participation and piety – are identified as the organisation's key pull factors.

- The promise of empowerment conveyed by Islamic State's official and unofficial propaganda encourages women to understand joining the organisation to reverse the ills that they face in life outside the "caliphate". By joining Islamic State, the line goes, women can defiantly take charge of their lives in the same way that men can: through living in Islamic State's "caliphate" and supporting its jihad by marrying a fighter, women are led to believe that they can emancipate themselves from *kufr* (disbelief).
- The deliverance promise focuses on the idea that, by joining Islamic State, grievances that women suffer in the West are immediately resolved. Women can be freed from daily degradations and disbelief and are instead assimilated into a tightknit collective sisterhood that will provide them with a network of support and friendship. Reflective of this, the ideas of redemption and deliverance tend to be directed to females by females.

¹ <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/shop/e-publications/caliphettes-women-and-the-appeal-of-islamic-state/>

- The participation promise incentivizes women to join Islamic State even though their role is strictly non-military. It conveys a sense that there is more to the “caliphate’s” jihad than fighting and that, for women, there is a specific state-building role. A constant theme in Islamic State propaganda is that supporting the “caliphate”, making it grow and flourish, is the job of everyone. For women, this takes the role of providing, maintaining and educating its” cubs”, the next generation of fighters, as well as supporting their soldier spouses.
- The last promise of Islamic State’s women-orientated propaganda is piety, something built up the theological imperative to join the group. The alleged pristine nature of an “Islamic existence” in the “caliphate” is a means of justifying each stress and sacrifice and acts as a means for recruiters to exert peer pressure to push others to make *hijra* (migrating).

These four solutions alone did not cause female supporters of Islamic State in the West to make *hijra* and *join ISIS*. However, when combined with the group’s copious amounts of audio-visual propaganda, they played a crucial role in the rhetorical armoury of the “caliphate’s” charismatic recruiters.

The discussion on the radicalisation of women is overly gendered and, all too often, predicated on misconceptions. In reality, when it comes to joining violent extremist causes, women are susceptible to the very same processes as men: narratives, ideology, grievances, and various push and pull factors. Reflecting this, the last part of this report delivers policy recommendations on how we must reappraise our attempts to counter the twin processes of female radicalisation and recruitment, in line with general counter-radicalisation, but using women as specific entry points.

Programs and Women Involvement

1. Tafakkur Critical Thinking Program

To amplify our point, at present our Executive Director for Quilliam North America, Dr. Muhammad Fraser-Rahim and our Quilliam team is in Nigeria, West Africa where we are incorporating a cutting-edge training called Taffakur.

Taffakur means to think, reflect and ponder in Arabic, is a critical thinking tool in which we are working directly with individuals from conflict zones in Nigeria, including Adamawa, Yobe and Borno States and directly with women.

Workshop Objectives

By the end of the Workshop, participants will be able to:

- Understand the genealogy of terrorism in Africa, the goals and objectives of extremist groups, and the discourse of P/CVE;
- Know Islam's contribution to civilization, it’s spread across the world, Islamic philosophy, and experientially understand the concept of Ikhtilaaf (respect for differences of opinions in Islam)

- Think for themselves, via learning about and practicing the Socratic Method via Tafakkur, Circles
- Understand the discourse of service learning, to design tailored P/CVE interventions

2. Ideological Rehabilitation

In the United States, our team has been working with women and men to help them on their exit and journey out of extremism. This one on one engagement requires skilled people who understand the issues facing individuals and communities as they remain vulnerable to both online and person to person recruitment. We continue to build on our work doing this globally and continue to seek to expand throughout the world.

There will be some announcements on the success of this project in the near future

3. AMATE (American Muslims Against Terrorism and Extremism)

- Officially launched – January 8, 2018
- Press release to media
- Online pickups: 129 outlets, potential audience = 134,167,900
- Geotargeting to mobile devices
- Social media outreach (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter)

The AMATE Initiative, American Muslims Against Terrorism & Extremism, launched officially on January 8th of this year and right away it garnered tremendous interest. The effort is anchored by a website complete with resources for those seeking a way out of extremism, those who might be on the path to extremism who know that they've gotten themselves into trouble and even video testimonials from former extremists. The resources are not only targeted to those who have already been radicalized or are on the path to radicalization, but it also targets the loved ones of those who have chosen that very dark path. We know that, often, families look on feeling nearly helpless as they try to bring their loved ones back from the brink. So, it was very important that we provided a solution that they could easily utilize as well.

Since the January 8th launch, the site has reached more than 705,000 individuals through the use of a robust mobile device geotargeting campaign. Close to 400,000 of those are men aged 25-34, nearly 240,000 are men aged 18-24 and close to 60,000 aged 35-44. But, we know that women are often the guiding lights helping to pull young men out of that dark world, so the campaign has also targeted women, leading them to those resources that will help them talk to their loved ones about the dangerous path that they've chosen. Since the campaign launch, more than 86,000 women have been reached with 65,000 of those being in the 25-34 age group, 15,000 aged 18-24 and over 6,000 aged 35-44.

Those numbers are phenomenal, but they could not have been possible without a thoughtful investment of financial resources. To continue this great work, it will take a further investment in order to continue to meet those who would wreck lives and cause havoc in the world where, more and more often we find they hide – on the world wide web.

4. FATE – Families Against Terrorism and Extremism

Please see case study below

Case Study – Project FATE (Families Against Terrorism and Extremism)

FATE - Families Against Terrorism and Extremism



Families are often the people most impacted by acts of violent terrorism and recruitment to extremist ideas. They are the first hit with loss and pain after a terrorist act and feel deep pangs of shame and guilt when a loved one becomes radicalized.

Yet, families are not just victims of violent extremism; they are vital partners in peace and their engagement in constructive responses to terrorism and extremism, of all kinds is critical in prevention, and mitigation of the impacts of violence and radicalization on individuals and communities.

Families are educators, guides and helpers. They are protectors and comforters, positioned to intervene if a loved one takes a dangerous path. They are trusted confidants, motivators and an anchor for the next generation. To effectively play their role in protecting their loved ones from radicalization and recovering from acts of terrorism, they need support, opportunities to connect with others in similar situations, training and a platform to share their stories so that the human impact of terrorism and radicalization is understood.

About FATE

Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE) was established in March 2016 by a partnership between Quilliam International and the US State Department division (GEC) to create a support network for civil society organisations (CSOs), state agencies, individuals and communities to come together to share ideas, experiences and resources around protecting and empowering families against terrorism and radicalisation. The US Government initiated the project for one year and have now handed the project over to Quilliam International. The first FATE Summit, held in Paris in March 2016, brought together over 100 CSO representatives and countering violent extremism (CVE) practitioners over two days to explore various themes around the role families can play in protecting their communities against radicalisation and to identify their support needs.

Some of the current participants and network members include The Association of British Muslims, Women Without Borders, Sons and Daughters of the World, The Breck Foundation and Mothers for Life and The Arq Foundation.

Since the Summit, FATE has facilitated online and offline communication, provided support to CSOs and practitioners through creating networking opportunities and resource finding and offered guidance and advice to network members in their work.

With a strong and active network across Europe, FATE was then able to broaden its work in the North Africa region. Convening its second Summit in Tunisia in November 2016, where a further 120 CSO representatives and countering violent extremism (CVE) practitioners over two days to explore various themes around the role families can play in protecting their communities against radicalisation and to identify their support needs. This was followed by online and face-to-face training around 'Building Family Resilience against Terrorism and Radicalisation,' that took place in Morocco and Tunisia, FATE hopes to build a global movement that strengthens family's resilience against the radicalization process and provide them with the support they need when impacted by acts of violent extremism.

In March 2016, Quilliam founded the Families Against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE) Network in Europe. FATE is a countering violent extremism project that aims to empower civil society to generate effective CVE interventions, especially by using with family-oriented themes

FATE's strategy is to:

- 1) Develop a network of civil society organisations who have direct contact with families
- 2) Collaborate with this network of organisations and families to create engaging, hyperlocal counter speech content with family-oriented themes
- 3) Engage this network and use hypertargeting with social media tools to deliver counter speech to our target audience: individuals vulnerable to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism

- 4) Incorporate calls to action within this counter speech to allow us to identify individuals for online and offline CVE interventions, then use FATE's triage model to identify the right intervention for each individual
- 5) Build the capacity of the FATE network to provide effective CVE interventions through skills-building workshops (spotting the signs of radicalisation, conducting targeted interventions, developing counter speech, providing direct intervention online or on the phone, and cooperating with authorities), a train-the-trainer model, and the FATE Support Request Form.
- 6) Empower families in the FATE network to understand radicalisation, extremism, terrorism and how to counter these phenomena so they can play a prevention and intervention role through skills-building workshops, online modules, and as eventual beneficiaries of the train-the-trainer model.
- 7) Link vulnerable individuals to organisations within the FATE network so they can deliver the right intervention in each case.
- 8) Monitor the performance of FATE counter speech and its reception among our target audience, with a focus on the success of our calls to actions in providing FATE with individuals for further intervention. Evaluate the skills increase among network organisations and families trained by FATE. Record the individual intervention journeys of beneficiaries within our target audience to ensure high retention rate and track the link between attitudinal shift (online) and behavioural change (offline).

Highlights from Year One

In Year One, FATE has focused on building a brand and growing trust among organisations that are crucial to the successful implementation of its strategy. We have done this by building a fully-interactive website hub for our members that houses our counter speech content, other resources and information about our events, a blog for members to write on and a forum where members can engage with each other, and which will soon be the portal for our online workshop modules. We have delivered a successful media and social media strategy that has seen over 1 million views of FATE's counter speech videos, 94 articles and stories published, 84,000 engagements through our presence on 5 social media platforms and in 5 languages.

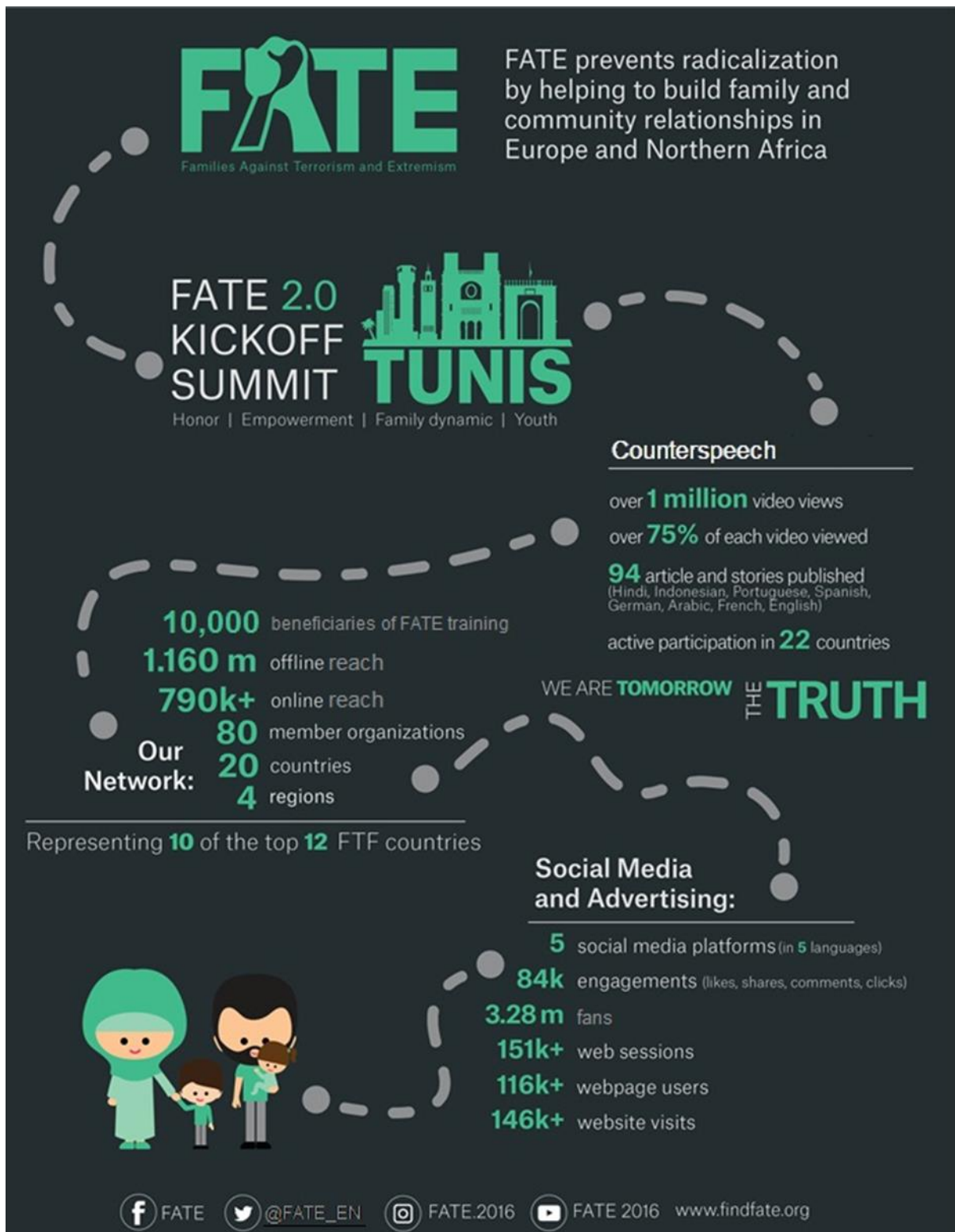
FATE has run international summits in Paris and in Tunis, which have brought together civil society organisations that work in counter-extremism, or who engage with families, with an aim of cross-pollinating them, and incorporating them into the FATE network. At these summits, we hosted world-renowned CVE experts to share good practices and to educate our network. We ran a series of skills-building workshops at these summits, including topics such

as Spotting the Signs of Radicalisation; Developing Effective Counter speech; The Role of Families in CVE; as well as collaboratively developing a FATE action plan for the two regions. Our offline events have been attended by

FATE has had active participation in 22 countries, built a consortium of 115 organisations in our network (representing 10 of the top 12 foreign terrorist fighter countries), and we have been invited back by nine network members in France, Germany, Belgium, Tunisia and Morocco to run follow-up skills-building workshops for their beneficiaries in their local areas.

We have conducted a full target audience analysis for Europe and North Africa which has shaped the counter speech we have developed centrally, campaigns that we have generated through our network members, the FATE Playbook, which we use to guide members for their work and campaigns, and the upcoming FATE online workshop modules.

Summary Metrics over first 12 months



Recommendations

To challenge the persistent appeal of Islamist extremism, it is crucial that the messages its proselytisers convey are understood, publicly denounced, and meaningfully contested. Based on our analysis of the four key promises of empowerment, deliverance, participation, and piety, we put forth the following policy recommendations to address the continued appeal of Violent Extremism to women.

Our recommendations centre, reducing the exposure of individuals to Islamist propaganda and increasing resilience towards it; and furthermore, equipping families with the appropriate critical consumption skills to make this propaganda less appealing. Part of this strategy must focus on combating gender extremism, which we define as ideologies that significantly and negatively impact the human rights of one gender by control, coercion, violation, or the systemic promotion of the superiority of one gender over another

- We propose to build an even stronger network in Europe and North Africa and add a North America, Sub Saharan African and Middle Eastern network to spread the message, support network, and resources even further and build global movements. Create counter speech content and dissemination strategies for network members and offer tech solutions to them about website and apps, and creating content for campaigns
- We advocate the advanced training of women in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) to build awareness on tackling Islamist propaganda. This should take the form of confidence training workshops for mothers, where CVE and knowledge-building on conflict situations are prioritised. Conflicts are regularly manipulated as potential grievances to be exploited by groups such as ISIS and AQ, especially if they can be used to demonstrate the idea that the West is at war with Islam.
- Teachers should also be enrolled in training modules to familiarise them with these grievances. As manifestations of institutional best practice, sessions should focus on debunking extremist claims regarding the importance and duty of marriage, the struggle against the West, and the significance of "honour".
- Relationships should be built between mothers and teachers. As such, workshops including both should be provided alongside gender extremism toolkits. All workshops, and toolkits and packages arising from them, should be delivered in multiple languages,
- Young people at risk of radicalisation often use ISIS and AQ propaganda as an authentic source of religious information. Arenas where young women can talk about spirituality beyond a religious ritualism must be encouraged. These should not be exclusively for Muslims, so they can provide spaces for active engagement and interfaith debate, enabling women to voice concerns and discuss gendered extremism.

- We recommend the utilization of media campaigns that foster female empowerment and liberation from gender violence, such as honour-based violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), and forced
- More air-time needs to be given to women who have been affected by gender extremism; they must be empowered to let other women know that they are not alone. A good example of this is the video “I Can Hold My Breath”² produced as a result of Quilliam’s arts, media, and outreach work. Using creative messaging, and providing a media platform for inspirational speakers, not extremists, would prevent radical groups from being able to propagandise through the mass media and claiming, as they do, to be spokespeople for the majority.
- At a community level, we advise regular workshops on life and employability skills for young women and the provision of scholarships to help women make the most of education and workforce opportunities. This will enable those at risk of radicalisation to have more, and better, opportunities. It must be encouraged and organised by governments.
- Projects that focus on empowering critical inquiry and thinking must be at the forefront of projects abroad. These will enable local communities to build resilience against narratives that may look to build on grievances and start the journey towards violent extremism
- There is a lack of consistency when it comes to programmes and projects. If programmes and projects are producing results against pre-determined criteria for success, there has to be mid and long-term determination at a Political level to ensure that programmes are continued
- The term CVE is redundant as it only focusses on combating an ideology once its manifestation becomes violent – often this is too late. We propose splitting the strategy into two parts
 - Combating Extremism – this involves empowering men and women collectively in helping to build resilience before people are radicalised
 - Terrorism Prevention – This allows for the focusing on people who may show empathy, sympathy or support for violent extremist ideas
- Working with Former Extremists and Voices that address all forms of extremism. Quilliam has over a decade of experience globally and is able to engage constructively in a meaningful way to combat extremism in all forms. Working with voices that are honest and direct, will help make the difference in making sure we are winning the fight.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjMqbMJEYu4&feature=youtu.be>