

Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Combating Homegrown Terrorism

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to be invited to speak on the threat of homegrown terrorism in the United States and efforts to prevent it.

The Islamic State's American Adherents

Homegrown extremism inspired by groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) has been a persistent threat for the United States. The FBI reportedly has over 1,000 active terrorism investigations in all 50 states.¹ At least 250 U.S. persons have attempted to or have traveled to join extremist groups in Syria or Iraq.² Since March 2014, 128 individuals have been charged with terrorism-related activities in connection with IS. A near majority were accused of attempting to travel or successfully traveled abroad to Syria or Iraq. Nearly 30% were accused of being involved in plots to carry out attacks on U.S. soil.³

These individuals are quite a diverse group. Their backgrounds vary, from a minor from South Carolina to interested in traveling to the so-called Caliphate, to a 31-year-old man coordinating Syrian extremist organizations' pledges of allegiance to IS from a New York pizza shop. A careful review of the cases points to a mobilization of individuals, not a widespread community-level phenomenon.

It is a 'homegrown' phenomenon in the truest sense of the word. The vast majority are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents.

Individuals in America were drawn to the Islamic State for a variety of reasons. By in large, early cases appear to indicate a sense of moral responsibility to fight against the atrocities committed by Bashar al-Assad. Shortly after the announcement of the Caliphate in June 2014, the motivations of Americans inspired by the IS largely shifted towards perceived religious obligations and the hope to live in what they saw as a perfect society. This call was reinforced by a sustained online campaign by IS and its supporters to encourage Westerners to travel to Syria and Iraq.

Other Western countries have experienced much larger IS-related mobilizations than the United States. Though, in the American context, the current mobilization has been unprecedented. Traditional counterterrorism approaches form the backbone of the US response. However, this strategy must be augmented and complemented by initiatives that extend beyond law enforcement efforts. In this regard, the U.S. must develop a more robust, transparent, and effective domestic prevention program.

¹ Mali, Meghashyam. 2015. "FBI Investigating ISIS Suspects in All 50 States." *The Hill*. February 25. <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/233832-fbi-investigating-isis-suspects-in-all-50-states>.

² Schmitt, Eric, and Somini Sengupta. 2015. "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts." *The New York Times*, September 26, sec. Middle East. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html>.

³ "GW Extremism Tracker - June 2017". *Program on Extremism*, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/June%202017%20Update.pdf>

Countering Violent Extremism

The United States' domestic countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts can best be understood as a series of fits and starts. In August 2011, the U.S. Government released their first domestic CVE strategy, entitled *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism*.⁴ The strategy contained three elements: 1) enhancing engagement with communities 2) building state and local expertise on CVE and 3) countering violent extremist messaging. The strategy directed efforts away from federal programs and placed the onus on local governments and partners to implement its goals. A few months later, the strategy was accompanied by a Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) which outlined the roles and responsibilities of four primary agencies, the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Justice, and the National Counterterrorism Center ("The Group of Four").⁵ The SIP, like the strategy, was explicit in acknowledging that no new resources would be devoted to the issue. Local officials, specifically, U.S. Attorney offices in the field, were directed to use existing funding. The federal government would provide guidance where needed.

This new approach was introduced to hesitant local officials and community partners, who struggled to understand the intricacies of radicalization and prevention of terrorism. Due to the lack of an explicit definition of and direction for CVE, it became a catch all phrase for a large swath of programming, from broad-based community engagement on non-terrorism related issues to more direct one-on-one intervention programs for radicalized individuals. Civil rights and civil liberties organizations rallied to stymie CVE efforts, which they saw as, among other concerns, government overreach.⁶ Some CVE opponents have very legitimate concerns; others simply used the beleaguered issue as an opportunity to attack a larger counterterrorism approach (primarily unconnected to CVE) that they disagreed with. Lacking dedicated funding and personnel, government officials struggled to complete the Strategy's goals and objectives.

Under this backdrop, the previous Administration refocused domestic CVE efforts on three pilot cities. Boston, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Los Angeles became the incubators of the national strategy. Each city took a decidedly different approach to implementation. Minneapolis-St. Paul focused on societal-level concerns, Boston on interventions for radicalized individuals, and Los Angeles primarily on community engagement.

Following the completion of the pilot program, the Group of Four, with support from the White House, created a CVE taskforce. This interagency group, with rotating leadership from DHS and DOJ, would be comprised of detailees from various agencies, complimented by a cadre of DHS employees. In October of 2016, the Department of Homeland Security issued its Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism. The stated aim of the strategy is to ensure that "communities possess the information, resources, and tools to effectively counter radicalization and recruitment

⁴ "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States". *The White House*, August 2011. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/empowering_local_partners.pdf

⁵ "Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States". *The White House*, December 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf>

⁶ "Coalition Letter to Obama Administration on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Program". *ACLU*, December 8, 2014. <https://www.aclu.org/other/coalition-letter-obama-administration-countering-violent-extremism-cve-program>

to violence” by the year 2019.⁷ Under the scope of this strategy, DHS seeks to achieve several objectives, including: 1) broadening the research base of the department on violent extremism, radicalization, and CVE programs; 2) disseminating findings to community partners in order to sufficiently prepare them to participate in CVE; 3) providing support to community organizations undertaking CVE projects; and 4) clearly defining measurements and benchmarks for what constitutes a “successful” CVE program.⁸

Congress approved funding for DHS to award grants for CVE initiatives nationwide as part of the CVE Grant Program in 2015.⁹ DHS issued its first call for CVE grant applications in July of 2016, and sought to provide over \$10 million to 60 local organizations nationwide.¹⁰ For community organizations, the program’s areas of focus within CVE were resilience-building, training and engaging with community members to pursue CVE projects, and building capacities for intervention programs; applicants from the non-profit sector and academia were challenged to develop counter-narrative programs and assisting community organizations in designing programs.¹¹ In June 2017, DHS Secretary Kelly announced the results of the application process: 26 organizations, spanning the five target areas, received funding.¹² The current Administration’s proposed budget significantly curtails CVE funding. While the continuation of current DHS grants for community-based CVE programs is a step in the right direction, the ability to “scale up” these projects without an influx of additional grant funding is doubtful. Moreover, the proposed budget cuts reduce the number of employees at DHS and other agencies that can serve on the CVE taskforce, limiting the possibility that interagency cooperation will result in innovative program design and management in the future.

Unfortunately, there are very few built-in advocates of CVE efforts in the United States. On one side of the political spectrum, CVE is seen as thought policing and stigmatizing. On the other side, it is considered too soft of an approach for a problem as serious as terrorism. I share many of my colleagues’ concerns on both sides. There is little to no benefit for advocating for CVE. However, my views are shaped by years of traveling around the country meeting with American Muslim community members, with various backgrounds and personal concerns, who want to engage on these issues in a thoughtful and productive way. The views are also guided by interviews of family members of those who joined terrorist organizations, or were arrested prior to committing a violent act: these families had no tools available to intervene and potentially their loved ones from a violent path. I believe it is morally binding on government and civil society to provide avenues for prevention. Furthermore, there is a public policy benefit to get prevention right, so that law enforcement has the bandwidth to tackle more immediate threats.

Domestic CVE efforts should largely focus on deradicalization and disengagement programs aimed at radicalized individuals. Those programs have the best chance for measures of

⁷ Department of Homeland Security Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, October 28, 2016. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/16_1028_S1_CVE_strategy.pdf

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fact Sheet: FY 2016 Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Grants. July 6, 2016.

<https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/07/06/fy-2016-countering-violent-extremism-cve-grants>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² DHS Countering Violent Extremism Grants. June 23, 2017. <https://www.dhs.gov/cvegrants>

effectiveness and limiting some of the civil liberties concerns that arise from broad based community engagement.

Additional challenges:

- Radicalization is not a linear process. There is not a step by step guide to why some individuals join terrorist organizations, while others with similar experiences do not. Conversely, deradicalization and disengagement also does not adhere to a straight-line path. Developing countering violent extremism programs must not fall into the trap of one-size fits all approach.
- Current federal CVE initiatives show a preference for broad-based messaging programs over one-on-one interventions. In our review of Islamic State-related cases in the United States, many exhibited warning signs. Without targeted intervention programs, some outside the scope of law enforcement, individuals concerned by the radicalization of someone close to them must either report them to the FBI, which may result in decades-long prison sentences, or keep the information to themselves and hope for the best. In this case, families must have access to a “third way”, based on one-on-one deradicalization or disengagement programs that have been tried and tested in various European countries, that allow the individual to disembark from the path of radicalization while providing an alternative to arrests and lengthy prison sentences.
- CVE efforts in both the previous Administration and the current one appeared to considerably target only one form of extremism. The previous Administration, while not explicit in its public messaging, but clearly in its implementation, focused almost entirely on countering Islamic State-inspired terrorism. The current Administration’s withdrawing of a grant award to an organization that counters white supremacist-inspired terrorism indicates a similar, singular focus. CVE programs would do well to concentrate not only on the threat posed by individuals such as Omar Mateen, but also others like Dylan Roof.
- As territory held by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq contracts, the United States is faced with the prospect of returning foreign fighters. This threat is substantially less pressing in the U.S. than it is for other Western countries, due to the smaller number of successful American “travelers”. Arguably, the United States justice system is more prepared than other Western countries to address returnees. The recent case of Mohamed Khweis is a striking example. A Virginia native, Khweis left the US and joined the Islamic State, was arrested by Kurdish forces, and was subsequently extradited, tried, and convicted in a US criminal court. Despite these advantages in numbers and legal frameworks, the threat from returnees is less about quantity and more about quality - the select few fighters that manage to return to the United States will possess concerning new skills. In this regard, efforts by our intelligence services to identify and track potential returnees, as well as share intelligence with allies facing similar threats, are of paramount importance.
- A significant number of individuals imprisoned for terrorist charges are scheduled for release in the coming years. For some, they will move on with their lives and hopefully

become productive members of society. For others, a more systematic approach for reintegration may be warranted to prevent regression into past criminal activities. In American IS cases, where the average prison sentence is 13.7 years, the risk of recidivism is slightly more long-term. However, one of the roots of the problem is a lack of relevant disengagement programs within the U.S. prison system, giving inmates who were initially arrested for terrorism little incentive or opportunity to reject their former ideology, and thus creating the possibility that they may continue to be involved in extremism post-release.¹³

Domestic CVE efforts are in a tenuous state. Decisions by the government and community partners in the coming months will help determine whether CVE is a truly viable option in the current fight against extremism. As we have written at the Program on Extremism, CVE is a delicate tool that, if properly implemented, can help sway young people away from radicalizing. Apart from saving lives, prevention programs outside law enforcement allow law enforcement and intelligence agencies to better concentrate their resources on those who have made the leap into violent militancy.¹⁴ The Administration would do well to develop a CVE program with clear strategic goals, transparent in its implementation, with a focus away from broad-based community engagement to more measurable one-on-one intervention programming.

¹³ For a deeper discussion on and an acknowledgement of the lack of disengagement programs in U.S. prison systems, see the sentencing court transcript of U.S. v. Natsheh

¹⁴ For a longer historical review of U.S. and European CVE programs, see Vidino, Lorenzo, and Seamus Hughes. 2015. "Countering Violent Extremism in America." *Program on Extremism*. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/downloads/CVE%20in%20America.pdf>.