
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

The Future of Counterterrorism: Addressing the Evolving Threat to Domestic Security

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Chairman King and distinguished Members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

My name is Robin Simcox. I am the Margaret Thatcher Fellow at the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation. My responsibilities at The Heritage Foundation consist of research on terrorism and security policy, issues I have published and written widely on for almost 10 years, both here in the U.S. and in Europe. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

My goal in this testimony is to highlight just some issues which have hindered either U.S. homeland security counterterrorism efforts or presented a threat to American lives in recent years. Allow me to suggest three specific areas which the U.S. could devote more attention and ultimately decrease the threat posed to American citizens.

Define the Enemy

The U.S. dedicates a huge amount of resources to counterterrorism. This issue is now part of the national conversation. It was discussed endlessly on the campaign trail and virtually every day in

national newspapers. Yet the U.S. government, and arguably us as a society, seem to be no closer to identifying who exactly it is we are fighting. We talk about needing to win the war of ideas—yet against precisely which ideas?

President Trump refers to the enemy as “radical Islamic terrorism.” He has received criticism from some for speaking so bluntly, but at least there is an attempt to define who or what the U.S. is trying to defeat in terms that most of the country understands. However, if this is the lexicon to be used, then serious thought needs to be given to what constitutes a radical Islamic terrorist.

I am sure we can all agree that al-Qaeda and ISIS constitute the enemy. They are the most pressing security threats and need to be treated with the utmost seriousness. Yet the unpleasant reality is that the ideology that propels these groups transcends the tens of thousands of their fighters that the U.S. is most fixated upon in the short-term.

In this context, we need to give greater thought to movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. There is currently discussion over whether to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.¹ The Brotherhood share almost identical goals to terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS but

with key differences regarding the use of violence in achieving these goals.

Yet whether the U.S. bans the Brotherhood or not cannot deflect from the broader questions that must be answered. Are we just focused on those willing to use violence to achieve their goals? What forms of Salafism constitute a threat? Are we aiming to defeat all forms of political Islam? If so, how do we reconcile this aim with broader diplomatic goals, such as when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Tunisia? What about other Islamist parties that could feasibly end up governing countries?

These are key questions to consider. As one Heritage Foundation report argues,

Countering the illiberal agendas of Islamist parties is vital to protecting American core national security interests. Islamists often pursue policies that undermine individual freedoms and lead to discrimination, repression, and violence against religious minority groups and women. Their lenient policies toward terrorist groups also undercut U.S. counterterrorism measures and encourage a permissive environment for extremists to plot, plan, and train for international terrorist attacks.²

The previous Administration took a minimalist approach focused very narrowly on the violent Islamists of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their belief system. My preference would be for a much broader approach. ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their supporters are manifestations of a broader Islamist movement. It is vital, therefore, that the appeal of the ideology of Islamism itself is undermined.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

According to the Department for Homeland Security website, “CVE aims to address the root causes

of violent extremism by providing resources to communities to build and sustain local prevention efforts and promote the use of counter-narratives to confront violent extremist messaging online.”³

This is a worthy cause and one that is not always well understood. Establishing lines of dialogue between local Muslim communities, local government, and the police, or providing alternative pathways for potential radicals—particularly the young—should be one option among many in reducing the threat posed by Islamism. Indeed, this kind of work is being pursued in various forms by governments across the West.

Yet such programs should be an occasional complement to law enforcement efforts and not a replacement. Furthermore, the U.S. must avoid mistakes some of its allies have made with such programs.

For example, there will be a temptation to allow the CVE agenda to metastasize. This runs the risk of wasting a lot of money and empowering some of the wrong people. Clearly it is only Muslims who have the knowledge and credibility within their communities to head up this fight. Yet by placing too much trust in certain groups or individuals claiming to be representative of Muslim opinion, the U.S. may end up empowering those who practice a highly intolerant form of Islam. This is precisely what happened in the U.K.

Another lesson from the U.K. was that well-organized Islamist groups gained the ear of the government and subsequently worked to shut down any conversation about the ideological and theological roots of terrorism and relentlessly pushed an agenda of grievances, usually related to foreign policy. These groups falsely portray themselves as gatekeepers to the entire, diverse Muslim population of a country. Some Muslim Brotherhood front groups even ended up being funded by the British government.⁴ I see a similar situation potentially arising in the U.S.

1. For example, see Peter Baker, “White House Weighs Terrorist Designation for Muslim Brotherhood,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/world/middleeast/muslim-brotherhood-terrorism-trump.html?_r=0 (accessed February 23, 2017); Eric Trager, “The U.S. Should Be Wary About Overplaying Its Hand,” *The Cipher Brief*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/us-should-be-wary-about-overplaying-its-hand-1089> (accessed February 23, 2017); and Lorenzo Vidino, “Why the United States Should Be as Circumspect as the British About the Muslim Brotherhood Ban,” *Lawfare*, February 12, 2017, <https://lawfareblog.com/why-united-states-should-be-circumspect-british-about-muslim-brotherhood> (accessed February 23, 2017).
2. Lisa Curtis, Charlotte Florance, Walter Lohman, and James Phillips, “Pursuing a Freedom Agenda Amidst Rising Global Islamism,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 159, November 17, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/pursuing-freedom-agenda-amidst-rising-global-islamism> (accessed February 23, 2017).
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Countering Violent Extremism*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.dhs.gov/countering-violent-extremism> (accessed February 23, 2017).
4. Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, *Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim groups* (Policy Exchange, 2009), <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/choosing-our-friends-wisely-criteria-for-engagement-with-muslim-groups/> (accessed February 23, 2017).

So CVE should be limited in scope and the U.S. must develop robust ways of measuring the success of its initiatives. Its CVE partners should be carefully vetted and be supportive of basic American principles: such as a belief in democracy, religious freedom, equality, tolerance, freedom of speech, and the rule of law.

There is one additional comment on CVE I would like to make.

It was recently reported by Reuters that CVE is to be renamed either “Countering Islamic Extremism” or “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism.”⁵ These may not be my precise preference as a choice of words—I believe a focus on the political ideology of Islamism is preferable—but I think this is a step forwards.

Changing the language is not a panacea in and of itself, but greater honesty about the area of primary concern is a positive development. It conveys a clearer idea to the American people that the White House is aware of the threat of Islamism specifically and is tailoring policy accordingly. I find the generic “violent extremist” does the opposite.

The U.S. should not be hampered by an approach which implies that all extremists pose the same gravity of threat to the homeland. This is not the case. Eco-terrorists do not pose the same threat as ISIS-inspired terrorists.

All terrorist threats must be vigorously addressed but there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to every ideology. The greatest threat to American lives comes from Islamist terrorists and our counter-radicalization efforts should surely reflect that.⁶

Encourage Reform from International Partners to Reduce the Threats to American Citizens

ISIS would clearly like to carry out a terrorist attack in the U.S. So far, however, there are no known cases of ISIS operatives being able to infiltrate the U.S. from abroad and then carry out an attack.

This is not the case in Europe, for example, where ISIS has had far more success.⁷ I have just returned from a research trip meeting security and

counterterrorism officials and I believe that the situation is grave.

Europe faces a severe and ongoing threat from terrorism. This has a clear impact on the U.S. The threat to American lives is not simply restricted to those living in America. According to the Association of American Residents Overseas, approximately over 1.5 million American citizens live in Europe.⁸ This does not include all those Americans on military bases housed throughout Europe, which are also an appealing target for Islamist terrorists. Already, an American was killed in the Paris attacks of November 2015. Four Americans were killed in Brussels in March 2016. Another three were killed in an attack in Nice in July 2016. More casualties are likely.

Unfortunately, European countries that are threatened by ISIS usually do not have the robust counterterrorism defenses in place that the U.S. does. Therefore, the U.S. must do what it can to protect its citizens by:

- **Maintaining** a strong intelligence-sharing alliance with relevant European partners.
- **Encouraging** our European partners to spend more money on counterterrorism efforts.
- **Encouraging** our European partners to take a tougher approach to law and order (for example, jail those convicted of terrorism-related activity for longer periods).
- **Helping** certain European countries to reform their unwieldy and complex intelligence and security apparatus.
- **Imploring** Europe to get tougher on border security. The borderless travel that exists in much of continental Europe has proven to be easily exploitable for a transnational terror network like ISIS.

5. Julia Edwards Ainsley, Dustin Volz, and Kristina Cooke, “Exclusive: Trump to Focus Counter-extremism Program Solely on Islam – Sources,” Reuters, February 2, 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-extremists-program-exclusiv-idUSKBN15G5VO?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=Social (accessed February 23, 2017).

6. David Inserra and Robin Simcox, “How to Turn Countering Violent Extremism into Combating Islamist Terrorism,” The Daily Signal, July 8, 2016, <http://dailysignal.com/2016/07/08/how-to-turn-countering-violent-extremism-into-combating-islamist-terrorism/>.

7. Robin Simcox, “The Threat of Islamist Terrorism in Europe and How the U.S. Should Respond,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3142, August 1, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/the-threat-islamist-terrorism-europe-and-how-the-us-should-respond>.

8. The Association of American Residents Overseas, *About AARO*, <https://www.aaro.org/about-aaro/6m-americans-abroad> (accessed February 23, 2017).

Anyone who has any experience in dealing with European approaches to counterterrorism is aware of what a challenging task this is. However, it is important for the U.S. to focus even more attention on such issues.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and I look forward to your questions and comments.

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