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*Testimony of Vidhya Ramalingam
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before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs*

**Hearing on
“Helping Veterans Thrive: The Importance of Peer Support in Preventing Domestic Violent
Extremism.”**

March 31, 2022

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost and esteemed members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I appreciate your leadership on veteran welfare, specifically the need to prevent violent extremists from exploiting the challenges and vulnerabilities veterans often face in the years after their retirement from military service.

My name is Vidhya Ramalingam, and throughout my career, I have worked to design and deliver violent extremism prevention and deradicalization models globally. Eleven years ago, when a white supremacist terrorist murdered 77 people in Norway, as an American, I led the European Union's first inter-government initiative on domestic violent extremism and terrorism.

That experience led me to found Moonshot, an organization working with the U.S. federal, state, and local governments to build online prevention capabilities fit for the challenges of the 21st century. We discovered a dramatic shift in the way people were being radicalized over the last ten years. What used to occur through in-person recruitment and propaganda, was shifting to predominantly online radicalization. If we want to prevent people from radicalizing - we have to intervene where domestic violent extremist groups are recruiting: online.

Over the past six years, Moonshot has delivered programs across all 50 states to reach out to individuals engaging in violent extremism online and support their disengagement from violence. Our work has been delivered with partners such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Department of State, and the Global Coalition To Defeat ISIS, working with over 80 Coalition partners on online efforts to degrade terrorist recruitment efforts.¹

We advise the White House, Department of Homeland Security (DHS)(Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)) and

¹ Global Coalition (n.d.) Available at: <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/>. [Accessed March 24 2022].



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Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on the use of behavioral health methods online to counter domestic violent extremist recruitment, the spread of disinformation by extremist actors, and targeted violence. In our efforts to counter terrorist recruitment, Moonshot employs veterans and reservists, and seeks to support those who serve or have served.

Today I am going to discuss how we can build capabilities that disrupt extremists' ability to target veterans online. Initial results demonstrate the potential to reach vulnerable audiences online and channel them into counseling and other services to change their paths.

I. Domestic violent extremist mobilization of veterans

The engagement of veterans and active duty service members in violent extremist activity across the ideological spectrum is a growing but not new concern. In 1995, Army veteran Timothy McVeigh detonated a truck bomb beneath a federal building in Oklahoma, killing 168 people.² In 2009, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army psychiatrist killed 13 people, and injured 32 more in a mass shooting in Fort Worth, Texas.³ More recently, in 2021, former U.S. Army Airborne infantryman, Daniel Alan Baker, was convicted by a federal jury for calling for an armed confrontation against right-wing protesters on the day of President Biden's inauguration.⁴

Military expertise and experience are highly desirable for extremist groups,⁵ making veterans and active duty service members 'high-value' recruitment targets for domestic extremist groups.⁶ This is not unique to the United States, violent extremists recruit veterans in Germany, the UK, and Canada for example.⁷ They are often targeted for recruitment because of their skills, training, and knowledge they have gained from military training.⁸ Research has identified that across online platforms like Telegram, white supremacists use the military as a means of status signaling, and

² Encyclopedia Britannica Online (n.d.) Timothy McVeigh. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Timothy-McVeigh>. [Accessed March 28 2022].

³ Poppe, K. (2018) Nidal Hasan: A Case Study in Lone-Actor Terrorism. *Program on Extremism: George Washington University*. Available at: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Nidal%20Hasan.pdf>. [Accessed Mar 28 2022].

⁴ Levenson, M. (2021). Former Infantry Man is Convicted of Threatening Right-Wing Protesters. *The New York Times*. May 6 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/06/us/trump-daniel-baker-florida-capitol-plot.html>. [Accessed Mar 29 2022].

⁵ Davey, J., (2022) Radicalisation in the Military – A Pressing Issue. *Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right: Insights*. Available at: <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2022/01/24/radicalisation-in-the-military-a-pressing-issue/>. [Accessed March 24 2022].

⁶ Argos, H.R. and White, J. (2022) Female veterans and right-wing extremism: becoming 'one of the boys'. ICCT. Available at: <https://icct.nl/publication/female-veterans-and-right-wing-extremism-becoming-one-of-the-boys/>. [Accessed Mar 29 2022].

⁷ Davey, J., (2022) Radicalisation in the Military – A Pressing Issue. *Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right: Insights*. Available at: <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2022/01/24/radicalisation-in-the-military-a-pressing-issue/>. [Accessed March 29 2022]

⁸ Argos, H.R. and White, J. (2022)



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consider the few individuals with military backgrounds who have successfully carried out attacks as heroes of the movement.⁹

Many of the vulnerabilities understood to increase susceptibility to engaging in extremism¹⁰ disproportionately affect the veteran community. For example, veterans and active duty personnel typically have a greater need for mental health and psychosocial services than the general population.¹¹ Research has shown that veterans die by suicide at a rate 1.5 times greater than non-veterans, i.e., veterans represent 7.9% of U.S. population, but account for 13.5% of the deaths by suicide.¹² Veterans involved in extremism often reference their own experiences of mental health crises post-deployment as central to their journeys.¹³

Domestic violent extremist groups also seek to manipulate the values that attract many individuals to join the armed forces in the first place. For example, domestic violent extremist narratives are often framed around calls to brotherhood, loyalty, honor, heroism, defense of the nation or one's people, and being part of a meaningful cause.¹⁴

There has been dedicated investment in veteran support services in the U.S., both formally by the federal government and also from thousands of veteran support organizations. There is, however, extremely limited research on the engagement of these support services by those vulnerable to extremism.

⁹ Davey, J. and Weinberg, D. (2021) 'Inspiration and Influence: Discussions of the U.S. Military in Extreme Right-Wing Telegram Channels'. *Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD)*. Available at: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/inspiration-and-influence-discussions-of-the-u-s-military-in-extreme-right-wing-telegram-channels/>. [Accessed March 28 2022].

¹⁰ See for example: Taylor, M., & Horgan, J. (2006). A conceptual framework for addressing psychological process in the development of the terrorist. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 18(4), 585–601; Horgan, J. (2008) From profiles to pathways and roots to routes: Perspectives from psychology on radicalization into terrorism. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618(1), 80–94; Silke, A., and Brown, K. (2016) "Radicalisation": The Transformation of Modern Understanding of Terrorist Origins, Psychology and Motivation.' In Shashi Jayakumar (Ed.), *State, Society, and National Security: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, pp.129-150.

¹¹ Denning, L.A., Meisnere, M., Warner, K. E. (2014) Understanding Psychological Health in the Military: Preventing Psychological Disorders in Service Members and Their Families: An Assessment of Programs. Institute of Medicine, Washington DC. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK222167/>. [Accessed March 24 2022].

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Goldwasser, R. (2021). Extremism Among Active-Duty Military and Veterans Remains a Clear and Present Danger. Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). October 12. Available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2021/10/12/extremism-among-active-duty-military-and-veterans-remains-clear-and-present-danger>. [Accessed March 28 2022].

¹⁴ Miller-Idriss, C. (2021) Comments during 'How to address extremism among veterans'. *The Brookings Institution Webinar*, December 3 2021. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/fp_20211203_veterans_extermism_transcript.pdf. [Accessed March 28 2022]; Also see: Argos, H.R. and White, J. (2022)



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Within a landscape where domestic violent extremist groups are becoming more violent and connected online,¹⁵ there is an even bigger gap in understanding how online spaces and platforms shape the experiences of veterans at-risk of engaging with violent extremism.

II. The need for online prevention

The growth of domestic violent extremism - and the deliberate targeting of veteran communities by extremists - is intrinsically connected with the emergence of internet cultures. Domestic violent extremists use technology to organize and recruit, and like jihadists, the rise of social media has provided a rich opportunity for these groups to support one another across borders. They are active on mainstream platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and on more niche forums such as 4chan, 8kun, BitChute, and Gab.

Since 2016, Moonshot has been gathering data to evidence the steady escalation of engagement with domestic violent extremism across all 50 states. As the global COVID-19 pandemic spread, and Americans spent more time online,¹⁶ we tracked a 37% increase in attempts to access white supremacist content on search engines across the U.S. By April 2021, this had increased to 140% higher levels of engagement, as compared to pre-pandemic.

It is increasingly challenging to distinguish domestic violent extremist narratives from wider mis-, dis-, and malinformation (MDM) on public health, education, elections, and other contentious issues. In addition, the prevalence of MDM online has contributed to heightened expressions of anxiety and suicidal ideation within conspiracy theory communities online. In November 2020, Moonshot tracked a 66% increase to references of suicide in conspiracy theory communities online (specifically QAnon boards on 4chan and 8kun). Violent extremists take advantage of popular disinformation narratives spreading on social media to engage with wider audiences. They also exploit those expressing mental health needs online to incite violence. The shift to loosely affiliated networks poses challenges to law enforcement efforts to track, monitor, and disrupt planned violence.

Extremist communities online are highly responsive to current affairs, and specifically mobilize recruits in response to crises. For example, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, militant white supremacists and Anti-Government or Anti-Authority Violent Extremists (AGAAVE) groups have been encouraging like-minded individuals to travel to Ukraine and gain fighting experience. Moonshot has tracked messages encouraging Americans espousing extremist ideologies to travel

¹⁵ Davey, J. and Weinberg, D. (2021)

¹⁶ McClain, C., Vogels, E.A., Perrin, A., Sechopoulos, S., Rainie, L., (2021). The Internet and the Pandemic, *Pew Research Center*, September 1. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/09/01/the-internet-and-the-pandemic/>. [Accessed March 29 2022].



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to Ukraine being shared in U.S. domestic violent extremist Telegram channels.¹⁷ The instructions ask potential recruits espousing domestic violent extremist ideologies to send digital copies of state ID and passports, along with descriptions of any military experience.¹⁸

III. Effective prevention offline and online

There are considerable learnings we can draw on from the wider terrorism prevention field. In particular, the DHS's [Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships](#) is assisting states, cities, and practitioner communities to implement prevention frameworks which leverage both a public health approach to violence prevention and behavioral threat assessment and management. Such efforts hold promise, but need to be scaled rapidly. The U.S.' investment is behind our European allies' efforts.

We can learn from our European allies and partners who have long tested behavioral health methods - particularly counseling - to address underlying vulnerabilities and drivers of violent extremism and facilitate referrals to other social services.¹⁹ The most effective models also offer off ramps for those looking to leave violent extremism. Offramping and exit programs, such as those in Sweden, Finland and Germany demonstrate high caseloads and low recidivism rates, and have served as the model for Life After Hate in the United States.²⁰

There is increasing evidence to suggest that behavioral health methods show promise when applied to audiences online. In Moonshot's recent studies, jihadist audiences were 47% more likely than the general public to take up offers of psychosocial support services online. Neo-Nazis were 48% more likely. If neo-Nazis were interested in joining extremist groups, this increased to 115% more likely.

¹⁷ While there are reports of veterans traveling to fight in Ukraine not influenced by extremist ideology - but rather by a sense of injustice and desire to fight for Ukrainian liberty, our concern with the domestic violent extremist influence is that they are pushing recruits to gain battlefield experience, building a network, and increasing the likelihood of violence in the U.S. upon their return (Phillips, D. (2022) 'I Just Can't Stand By': American Veterans Join the Fight in Ukraine. The New York Times, March 5. Available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/us/american-veterans-volunteer-ukraine-russia.html> [Accessed March 29 2022].

¹⁸ Moonshot (2022). Moonshot Threat Bulletin: National Trends - February. Available upon request.

¹⁹ Weine, S. M., Ellis, B. H., Haddad, R., Miller, A. B., Lowenhaupt, R., & Polutnik, C. "Lessons Learned from Mental Health and Education: Identifying Best Practices for Addressing Violent Extremism," Final Report to the Office of University Programs, Science and Technology Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. College Park, MD: START. Available at:

https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_LessonsLearnedfromMentalHealthAndEducation_FullReport_Oct2015.pdf.

[Accessed March 28 2022].

²⁰ Hall, N., Corb, A., Giannasi, P., & Grieve, J. (eds.) (2014). The Routledge international handbook on hate crime.

Routledge; National Council for Crime Prevention - Finland (n.d.) *Aggredi*. Available at:

<https://rikoksentorijunta.fi/en/aggredi-programme> [Accessed March 24 2022]; Exit Germany. Available at:

<https://www.exit-deutschland.de/> [Accessed March 24 2022]; Life After Hate (n.d.) Available at:

<https://www.lifeafterhate.org/>. [Accessed March 28 2022].



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From November 2020 to February 2021, we ran nationwide campaigns to reach audiences consuming domestic violent extremist content across the United States, aiming to de-escalate them from violence. We served over 100 million advertisements to Americans searching for, watching, or engaging with domestic violent extremist content in its many forms.²¹ The most effective advertisement we tested began with the statement “Anger and grief can be isolating,” and offered resources to de-escalate users from violence. We additionally served 4.03 million advertisements offering users watching extremist content mindfulness exercises aiming to de-escalate them from violence. 14.23% of this audience actively chose to watch a 52-second de-escalation breathing exercise in its entirety. Behavioral health messages, addressing the underlying emotional drivers of violent extremism, show most potential in engaging extremists online. The VA’s National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD) has already been involved in the development of apps designed specifically to help veterans and others experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can be leveraged to support those engaging with extremist content.²²

In the last year alone, Moonshot has channeled over 150 individuals at-risk of domestic violent extremism across the United States into text-message counseling sessions via online engagement. We realize this is a drop in the bucket given the size of the problem. But given the short duration of the project, we think it demonstrates progress and we are leveraging those findings to do more. For example, Moonshot is currently delivering a pilot program in partnership with Life After Hate, with support from the Department of Homeland Security, to offer audiences at-risk of violent extremism online services to exit violent extremism.

To prevent radicalization within veteran communities, we can build on the already robust and well-resourced infrastructure for veteran support across the United States, and the developing practitioner networks dedicated to preventing targeted violence.^{23 24} By working with existing veteran services, including mental health support, education and career counseling, community outreach and family support, we can integrate existing expertise and resources to develop effective

²¹ It is important to note that 100 million ads does not equal 100 million unique Americans.

²² Research shows that the use of mindfulness apps like Calm and Headspace are effective in reducing stress, reducing symptoms of PTSD and other trauma related symptoms, as well addressing wider public health challenges; Sander L.B. et al. (2020) ‘Help for trauma from the app stores?’ A systematic review and standardized rating of apps for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). *Eur J Psychotraumatol*. 2020; 11(1); U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (n.d.) PTSD: National Center for PTSD - Mobile Apps. Available at: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/>; Owen, J.E. et al. (2018) VA mobile apps for PTSD and related problems: public health resources for veterans and those who care for them. *Mhealth* 4(8).

²³ U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (n.d.) VA Benefits for Users. Available at:

<https://www.va.gov/service-member-benefits/#va-benefits-you-can-use-during>. [Accessed March 28 2022].

²⁴ McCain Institute (2020) Prevention Practitioners Network. Available at:

<https://www.mccaininstitute.org/programs/preventing-targeted-violence/prevention-practitioners-network/>. [Accessed March 29 2022].



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interventions.²⁵ Finally, we need to actively signpost these services in online spaces where extremists are looking to exploit veterans.

Recommendations

Based on my experience and our work at Moonshot, there are established, evidenced, and effective intervention and prevention strategies, which can help reduce the vulnerability of veterans at-risk of radicalization, facilitate their withdrawal from violent extremist groups, and support reintegration of those who once posed a threat.

- 1. Congress should direct the VA and DHS to build on preexisting veteran support services for prevention and provide the funding necessary to rapidly scale prevention efforts.** The most effective prevention programs build on preexisting behavioral health and other wrap-around services. Rather than develop stand-alone terrorism prevention programming, we should draw on pre-existing services provided by the VA, States, and Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs). Specifically, mental health support, educational and career counselling, community outreach and family support programs, as well as adjacent fields such as suicide prevention. This will be more sustainable and cost-effective. Evidence shows us that such efforts should not be run out of Washington. They should be coordinated at the VA's regional Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN) level. These efforts should leverage the local prevention frameworks being built out by states and major cities today (see [DHS CP3](#) website for more information).
- 2. Congress should increase funding to equip practitioners with tools needed to address risks of radicalization.** Behavioral health practitioners and service providers already providing trauma-informed care for veterans, with a focus on trauma and PTSD, are uniquely positioned to deliver effective interventions. However, gap analyses of prevention capabilities at the state level often find that the frontline providers - behavioral health counselors and social services - feel intimidated and ill-prepared to engage with individuals on a radicalization pathway. These concerns can be mitigated through training that has already been developed and is in use in places across the country.²⁶ Practitioners should be trained on the key risk factors of extremism²⁷ common across different ideologically-driven groups and movements.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (n.d.)

²⁶ See: Colorado Resilience Collaborative. Available at: <https://psychology.du.edu/CRC>. [Accessed March 29 2022].

²⁷ Bosley, C. (2020). *Violent Extremist Disengagement and Radicalisation: A Peacebuilding Approach*. United States Institute of Peace. Available at: https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/20200729-pw_163-violent_extremist_disengagement_and_reconciliation_on_a_peacebuilding_approach-pw.pdf. [Accessed March 24 2022].



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- 3. Make these services more accessible to those at-risk of radicalization** by leveraging the online spaces, platforms, and communities frequented by people at-risk of extremism in order to signpost essential services and deliver effective interventions. These services need to be actively signposted within online spaces where extremists are looking to exploit veterans. A recent RAND study highlighted the potential of online advertising mechanisms to reach active duty service members who may be at-risk.²⁸ This model could be used to reach veterans expressing an interest in extremist content online.
- 4. Provide targeted advice for concerned family and friends of vulnerable veterans.** The success of prevention and intervention work hinges on a ‘whole of society’ approach. In addition to working with local practitioners, it is important to work alongside veterans’ families, civil society, communities, and religious leaders, among others.²⁹ This includes provision of clear guidance for family and friends concerned about loved ones.
- 5. Amplify veterans' voices in the fight against extremism.** Veterans can provide a powerful and credible counter voice against domestic violent extremism. Veterans’ organizations have an important role to play, especially in terms of combating the narratives, disinformation, and conspiracy theories that extremists use in attempts to recruit veterans.³⁰
- 6. Develop off-ramps for those veterans looking to leave violent extremism.** As with anyone trapped within a domestic violent extremist movement, veterans who are deeply involved in these movements will require more targeted assistance to disengage, and help to rebuild their lives outside of extremism. It will be more cost effective to work with pre-existing off-ramp services in the United States, for example Life After Hate,³¹ an organization founded by former neo-Nazis and now supporting domestic violent extremists to exit these groups. Off-ramping opportunities for veterans need to pay attention to the unique lived experiences of those who have served in the armed forces.

²⁸ Helmus, T, Byrne, H, Mallory, K. (2021). Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA1200/RRA1226-1/RAND_RRA1226-1.pdf. [Accessed March 28 2022].

²⁹ RAN Local Working Group (2021) RAN activities on local coordination and the local approach to P/CVE. Special Working Paper 09/06/2021. Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-06/ran_activities_local_coordination_and_local_approach_to_p-cve_june_2021_en.pdf. [Accessed March 24 2022].

³⁰ ADL (n.d.) Veterans and Extremism: What we know. Available at: <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/veterans-and-extremism-what-we-know#what-can-be-done-to-combat-extremism-among-veterans>. [Accessed March 22 2022].

³¹ Life After Hate (n.d.) Available at: <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/>. [Accessed March 28 2022].



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- 7. Ensure all prevention mechanisms are adapted for online delivery.** At every stage, prevention mechanisms need to be adapted for online delivery, including risk assessment frameworks and counseling services. This means building the digital literacy and capacity of practitioners across veteran support services involved, to enable effective online delivery of key services. Online prevention and intervention strategies must also be designed with user privacy at heart. Moonshot has spent the past six years working with governments to design and implement digital components to offline terrorism prevention infrastructures. This must be done safely, ethically, and responsibly.

Final remarks

At Moonshot, we are working hard to find new ways to support veterans, and reduce the vulnerability of those at-risk of engaging with extremism. Moving forward, we need to strengthen partnerships between civil society and government to develop effective online strategies to prevent the engagement of veterans in violent extremism.

The veteran community is and should continue to be a resilient and powerful force in the fight against domestic violent extremism. Our veterans have fought to keep this country safe. Now it's our turn to put the support in place to keep them safe from extremists at home. They deserve nothing less.

Thank you for your time today, I look forward to your questions.