

Rethinking Counter-Extremism

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Islam: *A fourteen-century-old faith of over a billion believers that includes everyone from quietist Sufis to violent jihadis.*

Islamism: *A totalitarian ideology that seeks to impose, through both violent and non-violent means, a theocratic state operating under a caliph and absolute Islamic law. Islamism comprises a variety of competing movements established in the last few centuries, from political networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami, to revivalist sects such as the Deobandis.*

Since 2013, Islamists have conducted at least 23,000 terrorist attacks around the world, murdering over 120,000 people.¹ Islamist terrorism in the West is increasingly carried out by ‘homegrown’ terrorists, many of whom grew up, and were radicalized, within Western Muslim communities, whose mosques, community centers, youth groups and charities have long been under the influence of a growing array of Islamist movements that mostly operate with impunity.

And yet, despite law enforcement’s acknowledgements that Islamist terror poses one of the greatest threats to the security of the United States, the country still lacks a functioning national program to counter domestic Islamist activity.

Existing efforts have been markedly disappointing. The Obama administration’s attempts to design a counter-extremism program – called Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) – sought only to deal with violence; refusing to acknowledge the distinct, underlying political ideology of Islamism.

The previous administration’s failures were not entirely of its own design. The global “CVE industry” comprises an international network of academics, government officials, social workers and community organizers. Its members may disagree over methods, but they agree with near unanimity on a curious, steadfast refusal to consider the relevance of ideology to ideological violence.

Most government CVE programs operate on little more than wishful thinking, producing few results to justify their existence. For example, no extensive study has shown “deradicalization” programs to be successful, despite the many hundreds of expensive programs around the world dedicated to its pursuit.

Indeed, because of the persistent political refusal to define and name the Islamist threat, counter-

¹ “Islamist Terrorist Attacks in the World, 1979-2019,” Foundation for Political Innovation, November 18, 2019.
<http://www.fondapol.org/en/etudes-en/islamist-terrorist-attacks-in-the-world-1979-2019/>

extremism programs have, in many places, made the problem worse by empowering the forces of Islamism within American Muslim communities, and marginalizing moderate Muslim voices.

The federal government must design a counter-extremism program that actually serves to tackle the threat of Islamist radicalization, while enabling moderate and reformist Muslims, who until now have been sidelined.

Despite promises by Donald Trump to establish a Commission on Radical Islam, along with his declarations that “networks for radical Islam in this country will be stripped out and removed,” little has been done. In fact, the administration’s recently re-launched federal CVE program, along with the White House’s published counter-terrorism strategies, are almost identical to the failed approaches of the previous administration. Under Trump, a number of prominent Islamist groups, tied to violent Middle Eastern and South Asian terrorist movements, even enjoy U.S. government funding and other forms of support.

This white paper offers a brief analysis of the CVE industry and its flaws. It provides an overview of failed British attempts to develop counter-extremism programs, so that we might identify what practices can and cannot work in confronting this problem in the U.S. To counteract the threat of Islamism, we have concluded, a new, bold Countering Islamism program, focused on the underpinning ideology, is absolutely necessary and long overdue. This paper provides some ideas about how it might look.

Rejecting the CVE Industry

Broadly, when it relates to Islam, CVE offers two branches: it can be an attempt to make communities more “resilient” to the threat of radicalization, by deputizing Muslim community organizations to provide social, educational and welfare programs; or it can be an effort to “de-radicalize” individuals who have already embraced violence through the use of political and theological “messaging.” Both these branches often operate on the premise that violent Islamists turned to violence because of a complex myriad of purported social and economic factors.

A vast body of literature documents counter-extremism programs around the world, mostly government reports and academic papers, many written by those who depend on CVE funding. Jargon heavy with intense debates over the metrics for judging CVE, these offer almost no insights or useful data. In fact, they rarely even reveal the details of what CVE actually involves. One prominent report, for example, unhelpfully summarizes current CVE work as “a holistic approach ... to de-prioritize national security and intelligence agency-led methods, and increase support for Civil Society Organizations resilience and capacity building programs, as well as social services.”² Plowing through the terminology reveals that most studies of counter-extremism programs deal only with violence; almost none touches on the underlying ideology. Islamism appears so infrequently that a reader should wonder what could possibly be motivating these “extremists.”

² Abbas Barzegar, Shawn Powers, Nagham El Karhili, *Civic Approaches to Confronting Violent Extremism: Sector Recommendations and Best Practices*, September 2016. <http://tcv.gsu.edu/files/2016/09/Civic-Approaches-Sept-8-2016-Digital-Release.pdf>

Meanwhile, the utility of CVE programs centered around “deprogramming” and “alternative messages” is almost impossible to determine. If such efforts are merely designed to reduce the risk of future terrorist attacks, it is evidently rather difficult to measure the number of times that something doesn’t happen – with or without the involvement of “deprogramming” – even if every potential perpetrator were known to authorities. One prominent paper, titled *Does CVE Work?* and published by the Global Center on Cooperative Security, distinctly fails to answer its own question.

Various critics of CVE share at least some of our concerns. Some point out the startling lack of hard data employed by CVE programs. Faiza Patel, a leading academic at the Brennan Center for Justice and widely-cited critic of CVE, laments that “the problem” with governments’ understanding of radicalization is that “I haven’t seen a single empirical study that backs it up.” She writes that while it is unclear what leads people to engage in “political violence,” government-backed CVE programs “nonetheless use discredited markers (e.g., concerns about human and civil rights, the view that the West is at war with Islam) and vague behavioural indicators (e.g., alienation, feelings of anxiety) to identify individuals as potential terrorists.”³

But while critics of CVE are right about the lack of empirical data, they are very wrong about the causes of terrorism. Terrorism expert Marc Sageman notes: “Despite decades of research ... we still do not know what leads people to engage in political violence.”⁴ In fact, we absolutely do in fact know what “leads people” to political violence. Opponents and proponents of CVE both ignore or downplay one extremely important self-evident fact when discussing Islamist terror: someone who subscribes to Islamist ideas is infinitely more likely to engage in Islamist violence than someone who does not. Ideology, unsurprisingly, turns out to be essential to understanding ideological violence.

It should be noted that the refusal to recognize this fundamental truth is selectively applied. When a white supremacist murders congregants at a synagogue or black church, few academics and politicians argue that there are unknowable social or economic reasons for such violence and that the solution lies with building white “resilience”; instead, white supremacist ideology itself is mostly understood to be the underlying danger that itself *must* be tackled.

When it relates to Islamist violence, however, the relevance of Islamism is mysteriously ignored. And on the rare occasions when Islamism is not ignored, it is ruinously proffered as a possible asset in the fight against terror. Whether out of ignorance or fear, the most dangerous dogma preached by the CVE industry (and even by some of its critics) is a premise that is self-evidently not true: that there is ostensibly no connection between Islamism and Islamist violence. For example, in a widely-praised (at least, within the CVE industry) September 2016 report funded by the European Union, the authors claim that there is “no causal, predictive link between ideology and violence.” The authors further advise against using the word “Islamism” and warn against “alienat[ing] potential allies, including Salafi and Wahhabi religious orientations.” The

³ Faiza Patel, “The Trump Administration Provides One More Reason to Discontinue CVE,” *Just Security*, July 12, 2017. <https://www.justsecurity.org/42998/trump-administration-reason-discontinue-cve/>; Faiza Patel, “Video and Highlights From a Conversation on Countering Violent Extremism,” *Just Security*, July 1, 2015. <https://www.justsecurity.org/24335/video-highlights-conversation-cve/>
⁴ Marc Sageman, “Declaration of Marc Sageman in Opposition to Defendants’ Cross-Motion for Summary Judgment,” Case 3:10-cv-00750-BR, United States District Court, District of Oregon, August 7, 2015.

authors are so convinced that Islamist violence has nothing to do with Islamism, that they even argue “non-violent Islamists” are “a vital asset in the struggle against violent extremism.”⁵

Once again, curiously, these claims are never applied to the far-Right. No CVE professional suggests partnering with a lawful fascist movement to temper the threat of violent neo-Nazis.

In particular, the EU-funded report recommends the work of a Syrian cleric named Muhammad al-Yaqoubi. The authors neglect to mention that Yaqoubi has endorsed jihadist attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq.⁶ (Yaqoubi was also included in an internal government resource list, circulated internally by the Department for Homeland Security, mentioning “ideological rebuttals” to ISIS.⁷) Similarly, the authors of the EU-funded report also cite the work of the AlMaghrib Institute, but fail to mention that the convicted terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to blow up an airliner after attending the Institute’s seminars; that the Institute’s founder, Muhammad Alshareef, claims that Jews are “cursed” and warns Muslims against working with them; or that AlMaghrib’s clerics openly incite violence against various minorities.⁸

How exactly has the CVE industry come to the conclusion that there is no link between ideology and violence, in the specific context of Islamist terror? The answer perhaps lies in the long-standing refusal by CVE advocates to acknowledge the relevance of Islamism, paired with their confusing, concurrent long-standing insistence that Islam be part of the solution.

By downplaying or even denying the very existence of this distinct, modern political ideology that grew out of Islam, the CVE industry instead forces itself to discuss the broader question of Islam itself, which it is confusingly insists has nothing to do with terrorism. And so CVE academics obsess over terrorists’ lack of general “religious literacy,” while CVE programs work to counter radicalization through the design of “theological counter-narratives.” In 2015, Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson told an audience at a mosque in Virginia that the government’s CVE approach meant “amplify[ing] your message about the true meaning of Islam, as a religion of peace.”⁹ This rhetoric serves to disregard Islamism completely and instead intimate that any instance of Islamic terrorism is an inexplicable ideological anomaly.

By focusing on Islam rather than Islamism, it becomes easy for the CVE industry to argue “ideology” has no link with violence because no CVE advocate is considering the specific ideology actually responsible for the violence. The CVE industry has turned a clear-cut threat of a totalitarian political ideology into a vague theological issue – all while trying to avoid implicating Islam in the first place.

This specious thinking has led the CVE industry to reject the common sense ‘conveyor belt theory’ of radicalization, which, at its most simple, holds that people who hold violent ideas are

⁵ Barzegar, Powers, El Karhili, *Civic Approaches to Confronting Violent Extremism*, 2016.

⁶ Brendan Bernhard, “White Muslim,” *LA Weekly*, December 2, 2014. <https://www.laweekly.com/white-muslim-2/>

⁷ *Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Resources*, Department of Homeland Security, obtained by the Middle East Forum under a 2018 FOIA request.

⁸ “A dossier on the AlMaghrib Institute,” Harry’s Place, June 12, 2016. <http://hurryupharry.org/2016/06/12/a-dossier-on-the-almaghrib-institute/>

⁹ Jeh C. Johnson, “Remarks By Secretary Of Homeland Security Jeh C. Johnson At The Adams Center - As Prepared For Delivery,” Department of Homeland Security, December 7, 2015. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2015/12/07/remarks-secretary-homeland-security-jeh-c-johnson-adams-center-prepared-delivery>

more likely to commit violent acts. A widely-cited report by the Brennan Center for Justice, found on DHS's own website, argues that "extremist beliefs do not cause terrorism." The paper quotes John Horgan, a CVE academic at Georgia State University, claiming that "there is increasing evidence that people who engage in terrorism don't necessarily hold radical beliefs."¹⁰ To back up its arguments, the Brennan Center mentions a number of studies and reports, the vast majority of which do not examine terrorists' previous involvement in nonviolent Islamist networks at all, often preferring to discuss religiosity instead.¹¹

One of the few cited CVE studies that does touch on Islamism - commissioned by the federal government and written by a number of CVE industry academics - claims that there is "no conveyor belt from [Islamist] activism to terrorism" because, among similar examples, "none of the individuals involved in the 7/7 bombing [in London] was a regular member of an Islamic activist group such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or al-Mahajiroun [sic], though several of the bombers seem to have been peripherally involved in these groups."¹² Astoundingly, while the authors sidestep their own admission that there was some involvement with the Islamist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir, they also fail to note that several of the 7/7 bombers had in fact been closely involved with Tablighi Jamaat, a shadowy missionary movement tied to the radical Deobandi sect that has been linked to dozens of high-profile terrorism plots in the West.¹³ It is foolish in the first place to judge the significance of Islamism only through evidence of association, rather than consider the actual ideological beliefs of a terrorist. But even wondering whether a terrorist was or was not a card-carrying member of two specific Islamist groups, while ignoring involvement in any of the other hundreds of Islamist movements operating in the West, is clearly a deeply flawed basis for denying a link between Islamist extremism and Islamist terror.

Similar stupidities are found throughout CVE publications. Another report on "rethinking radicalization," published by the Brennan Center, tacitly acknowledges that extremism can lead to terror while simultaneously claiming that no indicators for violence exist: "It [is] nearly impossible to predict who will move from espousing 'radical' views to committing violent acts."¹⁴ Outside of the CVE industry, critics might suggest this uncertainty is hardly a reason to ignore those who do indeed espouse "radical views" and to point vaguely to unproved social and economic factors instead. The fundamental fact remains that, indisputably, the likelihood of Islamists engaging in violence is far greater than the chances of finding violent extremists in a random sample of ordinary Muslims.

¹⁰ While John Horgan does not dismiss the importance of acknowledging radical beliefs, he does seem to argue that because not all individuals with radical beliefs will become terrorists, efforts to challenge ideology may be a waste of time. Interestingly, these arguments have been picked up and promoted by Hizb ut-Tahrir, one of the most notorious Salafi extremist movements in the world, whose graduates have included dozens of high-profile terrorists. See: "Advice to the Muslim community following the murder of Imam Jalal Uddin," Hizb ut-Tahrir Britain, September 29, 2016. www.hizb.org.uk/resources/leaflets/advice-to-the-muslim-community-following-the-murder-of-imam-jalal-uddin/ For a more nuanced explanation of Horgan's point of view, see his 2012 article: John Horgan, "Discussion Point: The End of Radicalization?," National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, September 28, 2019. <https://www.start.umd.edu/news/discussion-point-end-radicalization>

¹¹ Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik, *Countering Violent Extremism*, Brennan Center for Justice, 2017. <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Brennan%20Center%20CVE%20Report.pdf>

¹² Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Individual and Group Mechanisms of Radicalization," in *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats*, Topical Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (Sma), Multi-Agency and Air Force Research Laboratory, Multi-Disciplinary White Papers in Support of Counter-Terrorism And Counter-WMD, January 2010. https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/publications/U_Counter_Terrorism_White_Paper_Final_January_2010.pdf

¹³ Andrew Norfolk, "Muslim group behind 'mega mosque' seeks to convert all Britain," *The Times*, September 10, 2007. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/muslim-group-behind-mega-mosque-seeks-to-convert-all-britain-dhr0d6fkfg0>

¹⁴ Faiza Patel, *Rethinking Radicalization*, Brennan Center for Justice, 2011. <https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/RethinkingRadicalization.pdf>

Also outside of the CVE industry, there have been a number of studies that actually consider the influence of Islamist networks in the radicalization of terrorists. Unsurprisingly, these investigations reach some rather different conclusions. In 2017, for instance, a study by the Tony Blair Institute for Social Change found that 77% of a random sample of 113 British Islamist terrorists had been “associated with non-violent Islamist groups and networks before turning to jihadism.”¹⁵

At their best, current CVE programs are futile academic exercises that deploy meaningless jargon to reach predetermined conclusions. At their worst, they deny a link between Islamism and Islamist violence, while simultaneously insisting that Islamists make good partners in the battle against Islamism. This is lunacy.

The British Experience

America can learn a great deal about crafting a counter-extremism program by studying Europe’s mistakes. Britain, in particular, offers some vital lessons. Counter-extremism programs in Britain have been in place for decades, and the failures of the different approaches employed are well-documented.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the British government established a wide-ranging counter-terrorism program named Contest, which comprised four parts: “Prepare for attacks, Protect the public, Pursue the attackers and Prevent their radicalisation in the first place.” After the 2005 London bombings, carried out by second-generation British Muslims, government ministers invested heavily in Prevent, the preempting radicalization element of Contest. Over the next six years, the taxpayer spent over \$110 million on 1,000 counter-radicalization schemes across the country.¹⁶ These efforts aimed to distance young Islamists from violence by promoting “shared values” and providing a theological “counter-narrative” to that of Al-Qaeda.

Prevent was initially only aimed at “violent extremism.” For assistance, the government turned to Muslim organizations that claimed to be the representatives of British Islam, handing them millions of dollars to teach “true Islam.” These partners, however, were not just Muslim; they were prominent lawful Islamist organizations. British journalist Martin Bright discovered that a leading recipient of taxpayer funds, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), was in fact run by a dangerous Islamist group from South Asia named Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which has close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood in the West and had been involved in the mass-killing of Bangladeshis during their nation’s 1971 Independence War. While the MCB received government funding, it also organized boycotts of Holocaust Memorial Day and openly expressed support for Hamas terrorists. It even used its government-provided political power to exclude moderate Muslims from government programs and events.¹⁷

¹⁵ Rachel Bryson, *For Caliph and Country: Exploring how British jihadis join a global movement*, Tony Blair Institute for Social Change, September 2017. <http://institute.global/insight/co-existence/caliph-and-country-exploring-how-british-jihadis-join-global-movement>

¹⁶ Dominic Casciani, “Analysis: The Prevent strategy and its problems,” *BBC*, August 26, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28939555>

¹⁷ Martin Bright, “Radical links of UK’s ‘moderate’ Muslim group,” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/aug/14/religion.immigrationpolicy>

In 2009, the government finally cut ties with the MCB after its secretary-general signed a Muslim Brotherhood statement supporting violence against British troops and Jewish communities.¹⁸ But the damage had been done. Government patronage had funded Islamist ideology and legitimized Islamist groups as the leaders of British Islam, despite one extensive survey revealing that only 6% of British Muslims believed the MCB represented them.¹⁹

Although the government eventually wised up to the extremism of the MCB, other government money continued to flow into the hands of Islamists. Across the country, Prevent-funded events on university campuses featured notorious extremist clerics who incited hatred against Jews, homosexuals and non-Muslims. In 2007, the government handed almost \$80,000 of counter-extremism funds to the Woolwich Mosque, which, just a few years later, was accused by British media of involvement in the radicalization of Michael Adebowale, the terrorist who hacked a British soldier to death on the streets of London.²⁰ In 2008, a Conservative MP discovered that over \$640,000 of Prevent money had been given to the Lokahi Foundation, an Islamist organization headed by Tariq Ramadan, perhaps the most famous Islamist academic in the world.²¹ Lokahi used its taxpayer funding to teach other public officials that radicalization is the product of Western foreign policy and Islamophobia (but not Islamism). In 2009, money to bring about “religious tolerance” was given to the U.K. office of Ayatollah Shirazi, an Iranian regime cleric and a notorious holocaust denier.²² The list goes on.²³ Between 2005 and 2011, the British government entrusted extremists with tackling the threat of extremism; and rewarded them richly for it.

In 2011, after years of investigative journalism had exposed Islamist extremism in mosques, schools and charities, along with a growing chorus of Muslim voices sounding alarm over the Prevent program’s failures, the newly-elected Conservative government knew that something was wrong. It commissioned a review of the Prevent program, which agreed with the criticisms of counter-extremism efforts made by anti-Islamist Muslim groups, and stressed the importance of countering “non-violent” extremists as part of a comprehensive strategy to combat radicalization. The then-Home Secretary, Theresa May, wrote:

The Prevent programme we inherited from the last Government was flawed. It confused the delivery of Government policy to promote integration with Government policy to prevent terrorism. It failed to confront the extremist ideology at the heart of the threat we face; and in trying to reach those at risk of

¹⁸ Hazel Blears, “Our shunning of the MCB is not grandstanding,” *The Guardian*, March 25, 2009.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/mar/25/islam-terrorism>

¹⁹ Munira Mirza, Abi Senthilkumaran and Zein Ja’far, *Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the paradox of multiculturalism*, Policy Exchange, 2007.

²⁰ Josie Ensor, Edward Malnick and Martin Evans, “Woolwich attack: Michael Adebowale's mother 'tried to prevent radicalisation,’” *Daily Telegraph*, May 24, 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/10079781/Woolwich-attack-Michael-Adebowales-mother-tried-to-prevent-radicalisation.html>

²¹ Paul Goodman, Commons Debates, Parliament, June 11, 2008.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080611/text/80611w0022.htm>

²² Sam Westrop, *The Interfaith Industry*, Stand for Peace, November 2013. <http://standforpeace.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Interfaith-Industry.pdf>

²³ “Islamist hatemongers funded by the taxpayer with money earmarked for schools,” *Daily Mail*, June 7, 2011.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2000492/Theresa-May-admits-63m-terror-fighting-fund-GIVEN-extremist-groups.html>

radicalisation, funding sometimes even reached the very extremist organisations that Prevent should have been confronting.²⁴

The same year, British Prime Minister David Cameron noted:

As evidence emerges about the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences, it is clear that many of them were initially influenced by what some have called “non-violent extremists,” and they then took those radical beliefs to the next level by embracing violence. ... Some organizations that seek to present themselves as a gateway to the Muslim community are showered with public money despite doing little to combat extremism. As others have observed, this is like turning to a right-wing fascist party to fight a violent white supremacist movement.²⁵

In 2015, British Prime Minister David Cameron launched a program to tackle both violent and non-violent extremism. The government now accepted that terrorism was a symptom; and that the underlying problem of Islamist ideology was just as dangerous. Cameron stated:

You don't have to believe in barbaric violence to be drawn to the ideology. No-one becomes a terrorist from a standing start. It starts with a process of radicalisation. When you look in detail at the backgrounds of those convicted of terrorist offences, it is clear that many of them were first influenced by what some would call non-violent extremists. It may begin with hearing about the so-called Jewish conspiracy and then develop into hostility to the West and fundamental liberal values, before finally becoming a cultish attachment to death. Put another way, the extremist world view is the gateway, and violence is the ultimate destination.²⁶

After seeking the advice of anti-Islamist researchers and moderate Muslim activists, and dealing with a rapidly growing number of British Muslims running off to join foreign terrorist groups, the British government finally came to understand a number of key points, about Islam, Islamism and jihad, that must inform any future counter-extremism initiative in America. Islamist extremism is still an enormous problem in the U.K., but at least the government is not (at least, not as much as it once did) actively enabling the extremists to the detriment of historically moderate Muslim communities.

America's CVE Program

First conceived in 2011, the Obama administration's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program promised to “support and help empower American communities and their local partners

²⁴ *Prevent Strategy*, HM Government, June 2011. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf

²⁵ “PM's speech at Munich Security Conference,” Prime Minister's Office, February 5, 2011. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference>

²⁶ “Extremism: PM speech,” Prime Minister's Office, July 20, 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/extremism-pm-speech>

in their grassroots efforts to prevent violent extremism.”²⁷ In 2016, the White House made some revisions to its CVE strategy following the launch of pilot CVE programs in Boston, Minneapolis and Los Angeles. Without any mention of Islam or Islamism, the “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States” stated that the government’s overall goal was to “prevent violent extremists and their supporters from inspiring, radicalizing, financing, or recruiting individuals or groups in the United States to commit acts of violence.” The key components of this plan were:

- 1) enhancing engagement with and support to local communities;
- 2) building government and law enforcement expertise for preventing violent extremism;
- 3) countering violent extremist propaganda while promoting our ideals.²⁸



Source: GAO analysis of information from the White House, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS); FBI (adapted photographs); Art Explosion (clip art). | GAO-17-300

However, despite the wealth of mistakes made by European counter-extremism programs - available to study and avoid - the Obama administration chose to repeat the very same blunders. In 2015, the White House hosted a three-day summit on CVE in D.C. Writing about the conference in the *Los Angeles Times*, President Obama reiterated that the “focus” of CVE “will be on empowering local communities.”²⁹ But CVE did not serve to “empower” moderate Muslims. Instead, those invited included a number of prominent Islamist leaders, such as officials from the Islamic Society of Boston (ISB) and the Islamic Center of New England (ICNE).

These institutions deserve a closer look. The ISB was established by a group of Islamists that included the al-Qaeda financier Abdulrahman Alamoudi, who was jailed in 2004 for his role in a plot to assassinate the Saudi crown prince. The mosque's trustees have included prominent Islamist operatives, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the spiritual leader of the global Muslim

²⁷ “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” The White House, August 2011.

²⁸ *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, The White House, October 2016.

²⁹ Barack Obama, “Our fight against violent extremism,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 17, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-oe-obama-terrorism-conference-20150218-story.html>

Brotherhood.³⁰ Today, the ISB regularly invites extremist clerics to address its congregations, such as the Deobandi preacher Hussain Kamani, who advocates sex slavery and describes American society as “filth.”³¹ The ICNE has also run events with these clerics. Its former imam was Muhammad Hafiz Masood, whose brother Hafiz Saeed is the head of the Pakistani terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba and the mastermind behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks. When Masood returned to Pakistan several years ago, he became a spokesman for one his brother’s terrorist groups.³² Other ICNE officials include local Islamist activist Abdulbadi Abousamra, father of the prominent ISIS propaganda official Ahmad Abousamra.³³ Were these institutions really suitable contributors to the design of the government’s countering extremism program?

In 2016, despite widespread criticism of the CVE pilot programs, Congress approved \$10 million for CVE grants to “community partners.” As Obama was leaving office, the Department of Homeland Security awarded \$393,800 to the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), an organization with a long history of ties to extremism. MPAC’s founder, Maher Hathout, has expressed support for the Lebanese Shia terrorist group Hezbollah, and its events often include extremist preachers. Its 2016 convention, for example, featured an imam named Jihad Saafir, who preaches that the punishment for adultery is death by stoning.³⁴

Another \$800,000 of taxpayers’ money was awarded to Bayan Claremont, an Islamic graduate school in California, whose faculty includes some of the most prominent Islamist clerics in the country. Abdul Nasir Jangda, for example, is a Texas-based cleric who trained at a Pakistani Deobandi seminary that the Pakistani government has accused of supporting terrorism. According to detailed notes published by his students, Jangda defends the use of female sex slaves and advocates the killing of apostates.³⁵

A significant part of the government’s CVE work has been concerned with judging the efficacy of existing CVE programs. Under the Obama administration, this work produced a number of “guiding principles.” One DHS document from 2016 concludes that, “Violent extremists have many motivations and are not limited to any single population, region, or ideology.”³⁶ The Obama administration’s failure to even mention the threat in question – Islamism – or the religion from which it is drawn – Islam – made it manifestly impossible to design a program that can specifically identify and challenge those Islamist networks responsible for the radicalization of American Muslims.

³⁰ *The Case Against the ISB*, Americans for Peace and Tolerance, April 2016. <http://www.peaceandtolerance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/04/Case-Against-the-ISB.pdf>

³¹ Sam Westrop, “Training Tomorrow’s Extremists,” *Daily Caller*, November 22, 2017. <https://www.meforum.org/islamist-watch/51075/training-tomorrow-extremists>

³² Richard Leiby, “Pakistani brothers reflect their country’s contradictions,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2012.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pakistani-brothers-reflect-their-countrys-contradictions/2012/10/28/f29af3ea-1c52-11e2-8817-41b9a7aaabc7_story.html

³³ Brooke Singman, “Moderate imam reveals how radicals won battle for soul of Boston mosques,” *Fox News*, July 26, 2015.

<https://www.foxnews.com/us/moderate-imam-reveals-how-radicals-won-battle-for-soul-of-boston-mosques>

³⁴ David Swindle, “MPAC Shows its Extremist Colors,” *Islamist Watch*, December 9, 2016. <https://www.meforum.org/islamist-watch/51236/mpac-shows-its-extremist-colors>

³⁵ “Training Tomorrow’s Extremists,” *Middle East Forum*, November 22, 2016. <https://www.meforum.org/islamist-watch/articles/2016/training-tomorrow-s-extremists>

³⁶ *Department of Homeland Security Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, October 28, 2016. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/16_1028_S1_CVE_strategy_0.pdf

Another DHS “guiding principle” states: “Local community partners are most effective at safeguarding individuals in the United States against violent extremist radicalization and recruitment to violence.” But non-violent Islamists are, by definition, non-violent. If these “local community partners” do not incite violence, but do in fact incite hate, then how will they serve as a “safeguard” against radicalization? The entire CVE program under the Obama administration was designed around implementation of counter-extremism work by “community partners.” Government, it was argued, should serve in a support role. At no point, however, did anyone pause to work out who these partners should be.

The failure to mention Islam in the design of CVE efforts also led the government to ignore the myriad of groups and sects that actually make up American Islam. DHS’s decision to provide “counselling to prevent radicalization to violence” is a good illustration of the delusion of CVE architects. A single “counselling” program presumes the existence of set of principles that would repudiate all jihadist thought and conform to all non-jihadist Muslim ideals.

How could “deprogramming” efforts possibly work unless the government recognizes, for instance, that a “local community partner” from the Barelvi sect would be little help in providing religious “messaging” to stem the flow of terror recruits from the Deobandi sect – a movement with a long history of violent theological enmity towards Barelvis. Similarly, what use would someone from a Shaf’i Sufi background be in “deradicalizing” a Hanbali-jihadist if they do not even share the same school of jurisprudence, let alone the same politics? Quite simply, the government, like most of the CVE industry, was clueless about the reality of Islam and Islamism in America.

America First

On the campaign trail in 2016, presidential candidate Donald Trump promised to establish a “Commission on Radical Islam” and to empower “reformist” Muslim voices. He declared that defeating Islamism requires a battle against its underlying ideas: “We must also speak out forcefully against a hateful ideology that provides the breeding ground for violence and terrorism to grow.”³⁷

But no ideological effort has so far emerged under his administration. No Commission on Radical Islam has been established.

Initially, the prospects of an effective anti-Islamist effort under a Trump administration appeared promising. In the first few months of the Trump presidency, the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) deeply flawed CVE program was suddenly and dramatically the subject of a partial shut-down, with several grants cancelled or returned, and associated DHS activities defunded. Except for some overseas programs managed by the State Department, the federal government had apparently abandoned CVE.

³⁷ “Donald Trump addresses Radical Islamic Terrorism,” *The Hill*, August 15, 2016. <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/presidential-campaign/291498-full-transcript-donald-trump-addresses-radical>

Over a year later in October 2018, the Trump administration published its ‘National Strategy for Counter-Terrorism.’ It lacked the realism many expected -- critics noted the “striking normalcy” and remarked that it could easily have been produced by a Hillary Clinton administration.³⁸ Alongside the usual promises to defeat terrorism using the military, law enforcement and security services, the administration noted:

[T]his strategy prioritizes a broader range of non-military capabilities, such as our ability to prevent and intervene in terrorist recruitment, minimize the appeal of terrorist propaganda online, and build societal resilience to terrorism. This includes leveraging the skills and resources of civil society and non-traditional partners to diminish terrorists’ efforts to radicalize and recruit people in the United States.³⁹

The strategy did differ greatly from the Obama administration’s approach in one way: it named Islamist ideology as the underlying cause of Islamist violence. This is a radical departure from the views of those CVE advocates so warmly welcomed into the Department for Homeland Security and the White House by the previous administration. The Trump strategy states forcefully:

To defeat radical Islamist terrorism, we must also speak out forcefully against a hateful ideology that provides the breeding ground for violence and terrorism. We will expose the destructive, totalitarian nature of the ideology that fuels violent radical Islamist movements, such as ISIS and al-Qa’ida. We will reveal the way violent radical Islamist terrorists have killed, exploited, and betrayed Muslim communities, including women and children.⁴⁰

However, the architects of this strategy do not go further than this. The documents blames the internet for radicalization (a claim for which, like so much of the CVE industry, there is little empirical evidence), and vaguely calls for “partnerships”:

Through engagement, public communications, and diplomacy, we will strengthen and connect our partners in civil society who are eager to expand their limited terrorism prevention efforts. We will raise awareness of radicalization and recruitment dynamics, highlight successful prevention and intervention approaches domestically and overseas, and empower local partners through outreach, training, and international exchanges. We will also promote grassroots efforts to identify and address radicalization to insulate civilian populations from terrorist influence.⁴¹

³⁸ James Stavridis, “Trump’s National Security Strategy Is Shockingly Normal,” *Bloomberg*, December 18, 2017. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2017-12-18/trump-s-national-security-strategy-is-shockingly-normal>

³⁹ *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*, White House, October 2018. Page 2. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf>

⁴⁰ *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, White House, Page 2

⁴¹ *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, White House, Page 21-22

Moreover, the initial welcome references to ideology are later qualified as part of a plan only to “combat violent extremist ideology,” and not the underlying nonviolent elements. The rest of the strategy is as nebulous as the counter-extremism strategy it succeeded.

In the following years, the federal government published a number of papers that touched on the subject of radicalization. In June 2018, the Department of Justice produced a study titled “Risk Factors and Indicators Associated With Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States.” While the focus remained on violent extremism, the “risk factors” identified welcomingly included a slightly broader description: “a deep commitment to an extremist ideology.” However, this was placed alongside such ostensible radicalization factors as “being single,” “having trouble in romantic relationships,” among others.⁴²

Trump’s TVTP Program

Some of the ambiguity over the government’s position was cleared up in September 2019, when the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) published its “Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence,” to accompany the establishment of a new DHS entity – the Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention. Despite previous concern expressed in the media that the Trump administration would not challenge the dangers of violent white supremacists, the DHS document specifically names white supremacist violence as a key threat facing America, alongside that of ISIS and Al Qaeda.

The DHS framework also introduces a new term to the “DHS lexicon” – the concept of “targeted violence,” which the paper describes as not just terrorist incidents, but also attacks that are “otherwise lacking a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation, but that are of such severity and magnitude as to suggest an intent to inflict a degree of mass injury, destruction, or death commensurate with known terrorist tactics.”⁴³ One such example of “targeted violence” cited by DHS was the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, in which 58 were murdered, and 869 injured.

Rather than considering the domestic problem of sporadic senseless violence separately from the issue of international Islamism, its century of ideological development, wars, genocides, terror networks, financial infrastructure, foreign state sponsors, and diverse array of movements, ideologues and tactics, DHS merely advises that these threats “increasingly intersect with one another, and there is likewise some alignment in the tools that can be used to counter them. ... [T]his Strategy addresses the problems, and the tools that can be wielded to address them, together.”⁴⁴

It is thus unsurprising that, as with previous government documents, the DHS paper seeks to ignore the question of ideology when it relates to the question of Islamism. Despite

⁴² Allison G. Smith, *Risk Factors and Indicators Associated With Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us*, National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, June 2018. Page 7.

⁴³ *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, Department of Homeland Security, September 2019, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf. Page 4.

⁴⁴ *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, DHS. Page 4.

noting that, “Domestic terrorism and homegrown violent extremism are inherently tied to ideas and ideologies,” the paper warns that government is unable to address the question of underlying ideologies because it risks “stigmatizing populations, infringing on constitutional rights, or attempting to police what Americans should think.”

Consequently, no definition or explanation of Islamism appears anywhere in the text, other than passing references to the “radical Islamists” of ISIS and other international terror groups. And yet, the very same DHS report obligingly delves, albeit somewhat lightly, into the ideology of domestic white supremacist violent extremists, citing some of the movements’ underpinning hatreds against Jews, Muslims and other minorities, and discussing the writings of Anders Breivik and various other murderous supremacists.⁴⁵

In March 2020, DHS announced a new CVE program, this time named “Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention” (TVTP). \$10 million was made available for “state, local, tribal, and private sector” applicants. The government’s “Notice of Funding Opportunity” once again makes it clear that racism and anti-Semitism are the driving factors behind white supremacist violence, while it once again fails to mention any driver of Islamism, such as a century of theocratic writings and the aspirations for a global Islamic state embraced by both its violent and nonviolent proponents. As before, this new program continues only to consider violent extremists; and in the case of Islamism, it considers only those violent extremists who are part of a foreign terrorist organization or who hope to advance the aims of a foreign terrorist organization.⁴⁶

Domestic Islamism has continued to flourish under a Trump administration. The administration has not just failed to fulfil Trump’s promises on the campaign trail, but the federal government continues to work with a number of prominent lawful Islamist organizations tied to extremism and terror. In fact, according to government data examined by the Middle East Forum, between 2017 and 2018, the amount of taxpayers’ money given to organizations either influenced or controlled by Islamist activists more than tripled from previous years – from \$4 million to \$13.5 million.⁴⁷

With TVTP, all the Trump administration has done, on the entire question of domestic Islamism, is revive the deeply flawed CVE program of the past, and add a shiny new name. That the Trump administration has rejected the Obama administration’s preposterous decision to avoid ever mentioning Islam or Islamism – a policy criticized even by parts of the Left – is of course welcome. But the new CVE/TVTP program is as weak and illogical as its antecedents. The administration must now go further and loudly declare - as with its denunciation of white supremacy - that underlying Islamist ideology (and its grip over too many American Muslim communities) presents a grave danger to the long-term security of the United States.

⁴⁵ *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, DHS. Page 5.

⁴⁶ “Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO): Fiscal Year 2020 Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program,” Department of Homeland Security, April 2020.

⁴⁷ Sam Westrop, “American Islamism Flourishes under Trump,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2020. <https://www.meforum.org/60019/american-islamism-flourishes-under-trump>

Rethinking Counter-Extremism

1) Naming the Threat

President Trump has repeatedly warned the American people about the threat of “radical Islam.” This was a welcome change. Under the Obama administration, officials made a deliberate decision not to mention Islam at all when discussing terrorism. The refusal to discuss Islam and acknowledge the threat of Islamism led to some unpleasant consequences.

Most obviously, it has crippled attempts to combat radicalization. But it has also allowed lawful Islamists to claim they have nothing in common with “violent extremists,” and so the Islamist network in America developed unopposed, while moderate and reformist Muslims remained sidelined. Moreover, it legitimized the nonsensical claims of the CVE industry that there is no link between ideology and ideological violence, a delusion that helped Islamism to prosper.

Once the role of nonviolent Islamism in extremism and radicalization is specifically, publicly acknowledged, those networks responsible for an increasingly radicalized generation of Western Muslims can be identified and challenged.

2) The Conveyor Belt

Non-violent Islamists have learned to exploit the West. They use liberal and democratic rhetoric in their pursuit of fundamentally illiberal and anti-democratic goals. Behind closed doors, non-violent extremists support the same ideals as violent extremists; they just disagree over methods. Many Western Islamist movements may not directly advocate violence, but their clerics and activists offer a worldview from which violence may emerge and in which violence can always be justified.

As senior London counter-extremism official Unmesh Desai has stated: “Non-violent extremism encompasses those who condemn terrorist attacks in this country but are happy to justify suicide attacks against British troops in the Middle East. These views poison the minds of young people for whom the next logical step is to translate their anger into violence. ‘Non-violent’ and ‘violent’ extremism are different sides of the same coin, and both have to be fought together.”⁴⁸

European governments have found that terrorist recruits often emerge from areas in which Islamist groups have imposed their grip over Muslim communities. This is particular true in Britain, where Islamic State recruits have repeatedly come from towns such as Dewsbury, where the Muslim community is dominated by the hardline Deobandi sect; or Tower Hamlets in East London, where the Islamist movement Jamaat-e-Islami have long controlled the mosques, schools and community centers.

⁴⁸ Unmesh Desai, “No, you cannot treat violent and non-violent extremism separately,” *The Guardian*, June 14, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/14/violent-extremism-tackled-london>

In America, these same networks are active and control hundreds of mosques, charities and communities centers. Over the past decades, dozens of prominent leaders and activists involved with non-violent Islamist groups have been involved in terrorist plots and terror financing. A few examples include:

- The convicted terrorist Abdulrahman Alamoudi was once a prominent leader of several Muslim Brotherhood organizations in America portrayed by the media as leading representative voices of American Muslims. But in 2004, Alamoudi pled guilty in a U.S. court to conspiring with the Libyan regime to assassinate Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. He was later named by the U.S. Treasury as a key Al Qaeda operative,⁴⁹ active in the same years he was meeting with Al Gore, Bill Clinton, George Bush and other prominent national political figures.
- The Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, Virginia, has led by a succession of extremist clerics. During the 1990s, its imams included Mohammed al-Hanooti, who called on his congregation "to be ready for the jihad" and stated that "the curse of Allah will become true on the Jews". In 2001, the imam was Anwar al-Awlaki, who later become one of Al Qaeda's most senior leaders, before his death in a drone strike.⁵⁰
- Twelve congregants, supporters, officials and donors of the Islamic Society of Boston – a mosque founded by prominent operatives of the Muslim Brotherhood, including its spiritual leader Yusuf Al-Qaradawi – have been imprisoned, deported, killed or are on the run in connection with terrorism offenses.⁵¹
- Convicted terrorist Aafia Siddiqui worked closely with Abdullah Faruq, the radical cleric in charge of Boston's Mosque for the Praising of Allah, to carry out proselytization work before she became a leading Al Qaeda operative.⁵²
- Half a dozen officials of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a group that grew out of the Hamas network in the United States, have been charged or linked by prosecutors to terrorism plots.⁵³
- In 2010, five youth members of the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) – a branch of the violent South Asian Islamist movement Jamaat-e-Islami and one of the largest Muslim community institutions in the U.S. – were convicted in Pakistan of working with Al Qaeda to plot terrorist attacks.⁵⁴ Other terrorists have attended mosques or studied under clerics that are part of ICNA's network.⁵⁵ Islamic State supporter Erick Jamal Hendricks, jailed in 2019 for fifteen years, is a former ICNA "youth coordinator."⁵⁶

⁴⁹ "Treasury Designates MIRA for Support to Al Qaida," U.S. Department of the Treasury, July 14, 2005. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js2632.aspx>

⁵⁰ "Dar Al-Hijrah Official's Deception on Awlaki," *IPT News*, November 18, 2009. <https://www.investigativeproject.org/1521/dar-al-hijrah-officials-deception-on-awlaki>

⁵¹ Sam Westrop, "From Baghdad to Boston," *The Nation (Pakistan)*, June 15, 2016. <https://nation.com.pk/15-Jun-2016/from-baghdad-to-boston-the-moderate-muslims-need-to-be-given-a-prominent-space-to-counter-the>

⁵² Katherine Ozment, "Who's Afraid of Aafia Siddiqui?" *Boston Magazine*, May 15, 2006. <https://www.bostonmagazine.com/2006/05/15/whos-afraid-of-aafia-siddiqui/>

⁵³ *The Suspect Ties of CAIR Officials, Fundraisers and Trainers*, Investigative Project on Terrorism, <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/111.pdf>

⁵⁴ "Americans arrested in Pakistan had bright futures," CNN, December 11, 2009. <https://www.cnn.com/2009/US/12/11/pakistan.americans.profiles/index.html>

⁵⁵ "New York Terrorist's Mosque Has Ties To Fundamentalist Islamic Umbrella Group," *Daily Caller*, September 20, 2016. <https://dailycaller.com/2016/09/20/new-york-terrorists-mosque-has-ties-to-fundamentalist-islamic-umbrella-group/>

⁵⁶ Ryan Mauro, "ISIS Suspect Linked to 'Moderate U.S. Islamist Org., Mosque,'" *Clarion Project*, August 23, 2016. <https://clarionproject.org/isis-suspect-linked-moderate-islamist-organization-mosque/>

- Prominent Islamist humanitarian aid charities continue to partner with terrorist organizations and terror-financing organizations. For instance, Helping Hand for Relief and Development (HHRD), a Jamaat-e-Islami institution, partnered in 2017 with a designated terrorist organization in Pakistan tied to the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which was responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, in which 160 people were murdered, including Americans.⁵⁷

Lawful (or “non-violent”) Islamism is not and must never be regarded as a bulwark against jihadism. In 2015, the British government’s inquiry into the activities and influence of the Muslim Brotherhood concluded that it was indeed an extremist movement and that:

“[Muslim Brotherhood] engagement with Government has at times been facilitated by what appeared to be a common agenda against Al-Qaida and militant Salafism. But this engagement did not take account of Muslim Brotherhood support for a proscribed terrorist group and its views about terrorism which, in reality, were quite different from our own.”⁵⁸

As countless CVE documents have made clear, under the current system, CVE is not part of law enforcement investigations. Active terrorist plots are not within CVE’s purview. It is confusing, then, that counter-extremism programs have only sought to de-radicalize Islamists after they had embraced the idea of violence, and not before. Any future counter-extremism program must also challenge the lawful Islamism that underpins Islamist violence. It is the cause that must be tackled; not just the symptom.

3) Understanding Muslim Representation

In the West, Muslims are often treated by policymakers as a single homogeneous bloc with a single representative voice. The reality is the very opposite. The dozens of competing Sunni religious sects and movements that constitute most of Western Islam, however, have distinctly little say in how their own views are represented. For Sunni Muslims living in Western democracies, the lack of a clerical hierarchy within Sunni Islam produces a natural vacuum for political representation. And as inherently political movements, it is the unrepresentative Islamist groups that are best prepared to fill that void. Traditional moderate Muslim groups, lacking media savvy and political know-how, simply cannot compete.

Meanwhile, government funding of Islamist groups – especially through counter-extremism programs – serves to legitimize Islamist control over Muslim communities and sideline genuine moderates.

There is no American Muslim community; but there are many communities. Thus, there is no single group, or collection of groups, that can serve as a government partner for counter-extremism programs and somehow represent the gamut of Western Islam. It is only by

⁵⁷ Cliff Smith and Sam Westrop, “When South Asian and American radicals collide, Congress takes notice,” *Washington Examiner*, November 20, 2019. <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/when-south-asian-and-american-radicals-collide-congress-takes-notice>

⁵⁸ *Muslim Brotherhood Review: Main Findings*, House of Commons, December 17, 2015.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486932/Muslim_Brotherhood_Review_Main_Findings.pdf

delineating Western Islam into its competing movements and sects – both good and bad – that allies can be found and extremists can be challenged.

Any Muslim partner chosen for government counter-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts will not be representative of all Muslims. But, in contrast with the Obama administration’s approach, it makes much more sense to choose an unrepresentative reformist as a partner, than to work with an unrepresentative Islamist. Ultimately, moderate Islam can be encouraged, but it cannot be imposed.

4) Attacking the Root

Many counter-extremism programs have sought to provide a theological “counter-narrative” to the teachings of Salafi-Jihadism. But as we now know, the theological, cultural and political diversity of Islam means that no assortment of clerics or groups can provide a common theology in opposition to extremism. Nor, in fact, should government be in the business of dictating or funding what ‘true Islam’ actually is.

Instead, the most important task of any counter-extremism program is not to teach a counter-narrative but to diminish and delegitimize the Islamist networks that incite young Muslims to hate. Only after the efforts of extremists are weakened can moderate and reformist Muslim groups find a footing, and genuine counter-narratives can organically emerge. A successful counter-extremism program should primarily work to examine, recommend and help implement means of crippling the activities of Islamist movements, while taking care not to restrict the liberties of American citizens.

5) The Futility of “Deprogramming”

Former Al Qaeda operative Aimen Dean argues that deradicalization simply doesn’t work, noting that the “efforts are riddled with naivety.” As a former jihadist himself, Dean points out that violent Islamists can only be no longer considered a threat if they have “come completely clean, co-operated fully and done damage to their previous cause.” Former jihadists are only reformed if they have “sung like a canary and provided damaging intelligence on the networks that recruited them.”

CVE programs, of course, do nothing of the sort, and in fact most actively eschew any law enforcement involvement. Under most deradicalization programs, to complete the course subjects must simply fulfil particular bureaucratic criteria.

In Minnesota, for example, a trial deradicalization program addresses radicalization through a “team approach using mentors, counselors, a number of other types of social services and a holistic approach.” To complete the program, explains its founding official, “We have measures along the way through the course of supervision. ... Did they complete treatment? Are they in full compliance with the conditions of supervision? Have they had violations that resulted in

them being sanctioned or returned for an additional term of incarceration and then coming out again to complete supervision?”⁵⁹

The psychologist behind the U.K.’s own chief deradicalization program has admitted that it is impossible to know if someone “has totally changed or has been cured.”⁶⁰ And yet, critically, claimed measures of success for Minnesota’s CVE program, for example, are gauged not even by whether a violent Islamist is believed to have completely repudiated his or her radical beliefs, but simply whether CVE industry officials record the individual as having completed the course.

Similar meaningless metrics for success are used in CVE programs all around the world. Thus, despite many deradicalization programs claiming a success rate of more than 90% (according to “self-evaluation”), a report commissioned by the British Home Office (and, crucially, produced by figures outside the CVE industry) found, in fact, that an astonishing 95% of government-funded programs were “ineffective.” A number of suggested reasons were offered, including the fact the program officials often refused to discuss the question of ideology.⁶¹

There are of course countless examples of graduates of these deradicalization programs going on to join terrorist organizations or commit terrorist acts. One graduate of the Minnesota program went on to “orchestrate a radicalization process for young people at a local Muslim school.”⁶² In France, a 17 year old girl underwent “deradicalization treatment,” only to attempt to travel Syria to join ISIS.⁶³ In London, Usman Khan murdered two people at an “offender rehabilitation conference” near London Bridge, after completing two deradicalization programs.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Khairi Saadallah, the perpetrator of deadly knife attack in Reading, England, was “assessed” by the British CVE program and found to pose “no danger.”

How many other CVE graduates will go on to commit murder?

Saudi Arabia boasts declares that “only” 20% of its deradicalization program graduates (praised as one of the most effective in the world) return to terrorism. And yet, as even CVE academic John Horgan notes, in his study of former terrorists, that “the disengaged terrorist may not be ‘deradicalized’ or repentant at all. Often physical disengagement may not result in any concomitant change or reduction in ideological support.”⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Ivy Kaplan, “An inside look at the first US domestic deradicalization program,” *The Defense Post*, February 12, 2019. <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/02/12/us-minnesota-deradicalization-program-inside-look/>

⁶⁰ Dominic Casciani, “Top psychologist: No certainty terror offenders can be ‘cured’,” *BBC News*, January 2, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50967100>

⁶¹ Fiona Hamilton, “Most programmes to stop radicalisation are failing,” *The Times*, June 6, 2018. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/most-programmes-to-stop-radicalisation-are-failing-0bwh9pbtd?wgu=270525_54264_15938380005688_b010577fa8

⁶² Brandon Stahl, “Launched after Minnesota court cases, first U.S. deradicalization program shows promise,” *Star Tribune*, February 19, 2019. <https://www.startribune.com/country-s-first-deradicalization-program-shows-promise/506069262/>

⁶³ Nicholas Vinocur, “Where is the French plan to halt radicalization?” *Politico*, April 1, 2016. <https://www.politico.eu/article/french-struggle-with-homegrown-terror-jihadism-terrorism-deradicalization-brussels-attacks/>

⁶⁴ Helen Lewis, “Why Extremists Need Therapy,” *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/02/britain-london-terrorism-deradicalization/606376/>

⁶⁵ John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, New York: Routledge, 2009

Deradicalization is expensive, ineffective, and impossible to measure. The chief reason such programs have endured is because much of the CVE industry has insisted upon it, perhaps because it is the only practical activity they can think of, in lieu of implementing measures to confront ideology.

The point here is that government may embark on such ventures if officials truly wish; but without challenging Islamist ideology itself, both before and after individuals embrace Islamism, such work will ultimately be futile.

6) The Fragile YouTuber

There is a widely accepted assertion, promoted by much of the CVE industry, that radicalization is mostly an online process, preying on unstable individuals suffering under the weight of various economic or social pressures. As with so much of the CVE industry, little evidence is actually offered for such claims.

The Quilliam Foundation, a Muslim counter-extremism think tank, has concluded that "the vast majority of radicalized individuals come into contact with extremist ideology through offline socialization prior to being further indoctrinated online. In other words, the Internet does not radicalize in isolation of other factors and should not be targeted as the 'cause' of radicalization."⁶⁶

Lawful Islamist organizations, meanwhile, are often also willing to attribute support for jihadism to slick Islamic State and Al Qaeda online media, but it seems likely they do this to offer their own networks as trusted alternatives to the jihadists and to distract from the fact that their own non-violent ideology is part of the problem.

Islamists are Islamists because they believe in Islamism. Some may indeed be "fragile" and are thus extra-"vulnerable" to the recruitment efforts of terrorist groups; but others quite clearly and strongly carve their own path.

Noted French academic Bernard Rougier argues that the specious insistence that religious violence is the product of individual fragility is embraced because it privileges psychological or familial dimensions while avoiding any ideological analysis – freeing government and societies from the need to address the uncomfortable question of unintegrated Muslim communities.⁶⁷

Blaming the internet places the fault with the social media providers for not censoring online content; the immediate family for not watching their child or sibling more closely; and the state for not dealing with the racism or inequality that ostensibly drove this individual into the arms of jihadists. It ignores the role of the local cleric and community; it diverts attention from influence of the Islamist-run school, mosque, university student group, and study circle.

⁶⁶ "Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter it (Executive Summary)," Quilliam Foundation, May 13, 2014. <https://www.quilliaminternational.com/jihad-trending-a-comprehensive-analysis-of-online-extremism-and-how-to-counter-it-executive-summary/>

⁶⁷ Bernard Rougier, *Les Territoires conquis de l'islamisme*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2020.

Ignoring the role of lawful ideology within Muslim communities and blaming the Internet also gives politicians the opportunity to boast of quantitative results: blocking a record number of websites, shutting down this-many Facebook accounts or YouTube videos. And yet, when one terrorist Twitter account is closed, ten more spring up. Censoring the internet is an illiberal and Sisyphean task, and a distraction from the threat posed by homegrown extremists, who do their worst work offline.

Reforming Counter-Extremism

CVE programs do not challenge Islamism, but, more wistfully, encourage moderation through “alternative” teachings and the provision of social services. For an effort called “counter-extremism,” very little actual countering of extremism ever takes place.

It is impossible to gauge the efficacy of such initiatives – highlighting “shared values,” offering “alternative messaging,” or conducting “deprogramming” of Islamists committed to violence. And even if such efforts were somehow initially successful, we can be sure that without fighting back against the underlying ideology driving the radicalization itself, they will all ultimately be futile.

An effective counter-Islamism program must focus on one thing above all else: how to incapacitate Islamism, internationally and domestically. Internationally, this means hindering foreign Islamist regimes’ interference, shutting down Islamist finance networks and preventing Islamist ideologues and their followers from exploiting Western immigration systems. Domestically, this means studying Islamist ideology in all its forms; educating government and the public about the extent of Islamist influence and activity; and working out how government can undermine Islamist networks without infringing on the constitutional rights of citizens.

These steps give now-sidelined non-Islamist Muslims a chance to supplant the Islamist control over American Muslim communities. Remove the Islamist monopolies and a free market of Muslim ideas – including moderate and reformist strains – can flourish.

Commission on Radical Islam

The bulk of this work could be coordinated by the Commission on Radical Islam, a body that presidential candidate Donald Trump promised in 2016 to establish. At the time, Trump declared:

[O]ne of my first acts as President will be to establish a Commission on Radical Islam – which will include reformist voices in the Muslim community who will hopefully work with us. We want to build bridges and erase divisions.

The goal of the commission will be to identify and explain to the American public the core convictions and beliefs of Radical Islam, to identify the warning signs of radicalization, and to expose the networks in our society that support radicalization.

This commission will be used to develop new protocols for local police officers, federal investigators, and immigration screeners.

...

Finally, we will pursue aggressive criminal or immigration charges against anyone who lends material support to terrorism. Similar to the effort to take down

the mafia, this will be the understood mission of every federal investigator and prosecutor in the country.

To accomplish a goal, you must state a mission: the support networks for Radical Islam in this country will be stripped out and removed one by one.

Immigration officers will also have their powers restored: those who are guests in our country that are preaching hate will be asked to return home.⁶⁸

This declaration was bold. Its creation is necessary. In Europe, the British, French and German governments are beginning to realize the importance of implementing similar policies. And yet, four years later in the United States, no such Commission exists, and no such actions have been taken.

Regardless of which administration the American people next choose, it is vital that such plans are reintroduced, with some fine-tuning and a clear mandate laid out. A revised counter-Islamist effort, led by a newly-established Commission on Radical Islam (better named, in fact, the Commission on Islamism), must reject the notion that only violent Islamism is deserving of government attention, and instead regard lawful Islamists and jihadists as part of the same problem. Islamist ideology, and its consequent violence, can only be tackled if the government is aware of the specific ideological networks that advance, enable and fund Islamism in America.

The commission's role should be to investigate the means by which it, or a subsequent body set up within DHS or another department, can:

1. survey American Islamist movements and publish a landmark study of all their components active across the United States;
2. explain the core convictions of these Islamist movements to government, law enforcement and the public;
3. study possible means for disrupting lawful Islamist movements' influence, activities and finances;
4. investigate the involvement of foreign Islamist regimes - such as Qatar, Turkey and Iran – over domestic Islamist networks;
5. study the teachings and curricula in Islamist-run private K-12 schools;
6. review the involvement of Islamists in chaplaincy programs (such as in prisons and the military);
7. work with the IRS to study the financial activities of Islamist charities in areas of the world where terrorist groups operate with impunity;
8. work with the IRS to clamp down on Islamist groups flagrantly breaking 501(c)3 and (c)4 regulations;
9. investigate the backgrounds of all known home-grown terrorists to determine their involvement with lawful Islamist movements before embracing violence, and publish the findings;

⁶⁸ "Full text: Donald Trump's speech on fighting terrorism," *Politico*, August 15, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-terrorism-speech-227025>

10. educate government and law enforcement officials about the makeup and influence of active Islamist networks;
11. provide information and regular briefings about Islamist movements and networks to other government agencies and departments;
12. encourage Muslim communities to report examples of Islamist extremism, referring submissions to law enforcement when necessary;
13. review state and local government partnerships and funding for Muslim institutions and alert relevant officials to any recipient with Islamist links
14. study Islamist exploitation of immigration rules, and recommend necessary immigration law changes;
15. develop new protocols for police officers, federal investigators, corrections officers, probation workers, and immigration screeners;
16. study the experiences of European countries on the question of Islamist extremism, and publish a report examining the lessons and consequences for counter-Islamism work in the United States.

Given the anticipated political opposition to such an endeavor, it is important to acknowledge that, implemented without thought, a number of these proposed tasks risk infringing on constitutional rights concerning freedom of religion and expression. Much revolves around thorny legal and ethical questions regarding if and how a government may take political or religious positions that promote one set of movements or hamper the efforts of another.

But just as over the last two centuries the U.S. government has found ways to fight the ideological underpinnings of Anarchism, Fascism and Marxism, now it must do the same to counteract the threat of Islamism. Fundamentally, Islamism is a political ideology – it must be possible to enforce existing law, and develop new regulations, so that at the very least government is able, unhampered, to: educate itself and the public about the realities of American Islamism, its makeup and its influence; weaken Islamist control over American Muslim institutions without depriving any individual or group (whether Islamist or not) of its right to any religious belief; and counteract foreign Islamist influence, especially from Qatar, Turkey and Iran, without inhibiting anyone’s freedom of expression.

Many of these sixteen tasks suggested above and the likely obstacles faced by the Commission require a means by which government can differentiate between Muslims and Islamists, in order to elevate one and push back the other, without specifically targeting particular organizations. One job of the Commission is to work out exactly *how* this could be done.

The following criteria may offer a useful starting point. A key obstacle in the fight against Islamism is government’s long-standing inability to differentiate between Muslims and Islamists. Thus, the Commission should implement rules instructing the U.S. government *not* to partner with, fund or endorse:

- people or organizations that condone or excuse attacks against civilians;
- people or organizations that advocate attacks against U.S. allies;
- people or organizations that condone or excuse designated terrorist organizations;
- organizations that U.S. allies have designated as terrorist groups;

- organizations that have incited violence against non-Muslims or minority Muslim sects, or have given platforms to speakers who do so;
- people or organizations that incite or justify hatred against Muslims who decide to leave their religion;
- organizations that fail to disclose all foreign funding;
- organizations that fail to publish lists of all local partners and funding recipients in areas of the world where terrorist groups operate with impunity;
- people or organizations that are funded by entities in foreign states accused by the U.S. of funding terrorism;
- people or organizations with ties to officials of foreign states accused by the U.S. of funding terrorism.

As previously noted, the idea of finding Muslim partners for the purpose of countering extremism is a good one. But it has previously failed because Islamist movements have exploited good intentions, posing as representatives of American Muslims, all while the CVE industry refused to accept the importance of ideology as a driver of ideological violence. Once we all accept that, given the ideological and theological diversity of Islam, no organization can serve as a representative voice of American Muslims, the search for “community partners” does not become a question of the size of these groups’ mandates, but rather the extent of their moderation.

Moderate and reformist Muslim partners identified by the proposed Commission will play a vital role in a new counter-extremism program – helping to build a coalition of anti-Islamist Muslim organizations and networks to challenge the powerful Islamist networks.

Conclusion

Islamism is the problem; moderate Muslims are a vital part of the solution. But, as discussed in detail, a fundamental change of mindset in government and law enforcement is required if the underlying Islamist ideas that drive radicalization and terror are to be thwarted, and anti-Islamist Muslims are to organize themselves effectively and challenge Islamist hegemony in their communities. A new Counter-Islamism program can provide that support - working to decimate existing Islamist networks - but only if measures are implemented carefully and thoughtfully, and government rejects the illogical narratives advocated by the parochial CVE industry.

The United States of America must define and proactively challenge the Islamist threat, adopting a forceful response to extremism; something that European governments have only recently begun to realize is absolutely necessary. Europe's failures to understand the enormity of the threat posed by Islamist ideology are a harbinger for the dangers of extremism and terror that America will experience in years to come, unless the federal government and Congress take steps now to cripple lawful Islamist movements – their programs of indoctrination, their finances and their grip over America's historically moderate Muslim communities.