

Section II: Approaches for Countering Violent Extremism at Home and Abroad

Introduction

As you read in the previous section, the trends in transnational terrorist threats are sobering – the threat from ISIS has made radicalization to extreme violence a truly global phenomenon, differently and more broadly than threats from Al Qaeda and related groups.

One might be tempted to think, “These trends are making it harder for us to *win*.” An apt analogy is that “countering terrorism” as exemplified by military and law enforcement action is like an average person playing one-on-one basketball against LeBron James, only the rules are that no matter how many points the average person scores, the only way to win is for the average person to block every shot LeBron attempts. In other words, it doesn’t matter how many shots we make, or how many of the other team’s we block, since the game lasts forever and each shot we fail to block is a victory for our foe. In the coming chapter, you will read myriad ways in which the international community has recognized that the struggle against terrorism is not only a question of blocking shots, but of changing the rules of the game.

Counterterrorism tools have typically been applied applied to investigate, prosecute, and imprison individuals that have been radicalized and are acting with terroristic intent or to capture or kill them on the battlefield. However, in many ways, fighting terrorists in this manner requires mechanisms – such as surveillance, military action, etc. – that also act as recruitment tools for terrorists who propagandize those efforts as evidence of a Western war with Islam, or of the deep divisions between local Muslim communities in the West and their non-Muslim community members. For every terrorist we arrest or take off the battlefield, their co-conspirators may use our action to recruit and radicalize more. In short, in the struggle against violent extremism, we cannot arrest and kill our way to victory, or, as President Obama has said it, “We cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root; and in the absence of a strategy that reduces the wellspring of extremism, a perpetual war... will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways... [we need a] strategy [that] involves addressing the underlying grievances and conflicts that feed extremism.”¹ Success requires developing more comprehensive efforts aimed preventing a new generation of recruits to violent extremist causes.

This recognition has led to the prioritization of a relatively new model, the prevention model of post 9/11 terrorism, known to many as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Whereas “counterterrorism” implies countering an individual who, in the eyes of the law, has already taken steps toward committing a terrorist act or joining a terrorist group, this discipline counters the ideological recruitment, focusing on the root causes of many terrorist motivations, and working to prevent those causes, or provide “off-ramps” for individuals who may have taken steps toward embracing ideologically motivated

¹Remarks by the President at the National Defense University. National Defense University, Fort McNair. May 23, 2013.

violence. There are already multiple definitions of CVE,² typically noting that CVE is a collection of non-coercive, non-kinetic, and, most importantly, voluntary activities to prevent and intervene in the process of radicalization to violence.

There is no one path for an individual to take in becoming radicalized. From what we know about people who have joined terrorist organizations, it is clear that there is some combination of ideological, psychological, and community-based factors that leads them in that direction. Those factors could take the form of “push” factors, such as government oppression or a systematic dearth of livelihoods, or “pull” factors, the elements about violent extremism that attract someone to it, such as a feeling of brotherhood, or even a salary.

Those factors may be countered through a range of activities on the spectrum of preventing terrorism by countering the root causes of motivation:

- Prevention, which consists of assessing the push and pull factors and addressing their root causes, such as efforts to integrate disenfranchised communities into broader societies or create opportunities for hope among those who have lost it;
- Intervention and disengagement, which involves working with an individual whose behavior may suggest an interest in violent extremism and providing an “off-ramp” through mental health or religious counseling or alternative means of self-expression; and
- Rehabilitation and reintegration, which, similar to intervention, entails working with individuals who have paid their debt to society and seek to reform from previous violent extremist behavior and be reintegrated into society.

In practice, these efforts might range from countering the recruitment narratives of terrorist organizations, to creating opportunities for livelihoods or engagement with disenfranchised communities and individuals, or increased access to mental health and

² See, e.g., (1) White House Fact Sheet on Countering Violent Extremism (February 18, 2015): “CVE encompasses the preventative aspects of counterterrorism as well as interventions to undermine the attraction of extremist movements and ideologies that seek to promote violence. CVE efforts address the root causes of extremism through community engagement, including the following programs: Building awareness—including briefings on the drivers and indicators of radicalization and recruitment to violence; Countering extremist narratives—directly addressing and countering violent extremist recruitment narratives, such as encouraging civil society-led counter narratives online; and Emphasizing Community Led Intervention—empowering community efforts to disrupt the radicalization process before an individual engages in criminal activity. (2) United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178: “...Encourages Member States to engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative that can incite terrorist acts, address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism, including by empowering youth, families, women, religious, cultural and education leaders, and all other concerned groups of civil society and adopt tailored approaches to countering recruitment to this kind of violent extremism and promoting social inclusion and cohesion...” (3) Club de Madrid Statement on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (October 28, 2015): “Countering and/or Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE and/or CVE) are umbrella terms which cover non- coercive, non-kinetic policies and programs designed to prevent radicalization into violent extremism and promote the reintegration of radicalized individuals. In practice, C/PVE programs and initiatives typically aim at: Addressing grievances and/or the perception of grievances; Countering extremist narratives and ideologies; Empowering communities and strengthening their resilience. Rehabilitating former violent extremists, or those on the brink of joining.

social service resources. And successful outcomes are typically most effectively achieved through empowering local communities to create intra-community dialogue, build trust, and offer alternatives.

When we first began looking at practices such as these, there was some debate as to what we should call the overarching concept. Immediately after 9/11, anger fueled blame, which sometimes led to profiling based on ethnicity or religion. As initial efforts to “win hearts and minds” were considered, they were sometimes referred to as efforts to “counter Islamic extremism” or “counter violent Islamic extremism.” These were misnomers, and it is important that we recognize the implications of that inaccuracy. Today, we often see expressions of rage that sometimes use religion as an explanation or excuse. Yet compared to the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world,³ the few who have turned to extremism are, in effect, a rounding error; moreover, some of ISIL’s recruits only converted to Islam just to join ISIL and be part of a larger, and to them, appealing cause. To almost all Muslims these extremists do not represent the true faith and their interpretation of Islam is rejected. Why then should we use such terminology with respect to Islam when the U.S. government doesn’t label others who commit acts of violence out of extremist religious conviction as, for example, Christian or Jewish extremists. Moreover, the global community of nations, largely led by the United States, has decided to call this type of work “Countering Violent Extremism.” In so doing, we are all recognizing that linking a religion to the extremism inaccurately implies a broader responsibility and that our justice systems are based on objective standards – meaning it is the action of violence that is the problem, not an extreme ideological viewpoint. While this debate may continue, it is important to remember that words matter, that words can create divisions and isolate those whom we wish to divert from extremism, ultimately undermining our efforts to end recruitment and reduce violence.

Following the attacks on 9/11, it took the U.S. government some time to put these concepts into practice, but slowly we have begun to stand them up. Since then, we have adapted to more of a community-based approach. In the 2011 *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* and its corresponding implementation plan, the U.S. government outlined an approach to CVE that would push the activities of preventing radicalization out of the government’s hands and into those of local community partners. Building on lessons learned from public health, gang prevention, and community trust-building efforts, the government conveyed the need to engage communities which felt marginalized, or experienced a real or perceived discriminatory impact of post 9/11 law and policy. Internationally, we created the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (now renamed the Global Engagement Center) to counter the message of groups like Al Qaeda, and later ISIL, and help foreign partners to do so as well. We also increased foreign assistance to foreign partner governments and civil society which may have influence in their communities that would reduce the likelihood of radicalization. Unfortunately, these overall efforts still paled in comparison to other issue areas our government prioritizes; in overseas approaches to terrorism specifically, only six percent of funding related to terrorism goes to our diplomatic and development communities,⁴ and

³ Pew Research Center. “Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world.” December 7, 2015.

⁴ The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11. Congressional Research

under eight percent of that funding is used for prevention activities.⁵ Domestically, the ratio is similar.

More hopefully however, in 2015 the policy community's approach to CVE dramatically shifted, at least in terms of its priority. Following the tragic attacks in Paris against staff of the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, and a related attack at a grocery market, and building on a year of engagement with local authorities within the United States, President Obama convened both local and global leaders for a CVE Summit in February of that year.⁶

The Summit and follow-on events around the world showcased approaches to preventing extremist violence at the highest levels, and conveyed the need that we do more on the side of prevention.⁷ So far, that heightened look at the issue has galvanized further efforts, and freed up some funding – but much more has yet to be done.

Preventing the next generation of recruits to terrorism has become more important than ever. A generation ago, individuals may have been radicalized by members of their local communities over the course of several years; now, while that still takes place, it is far more common to self-radicalize online. One example of the older model in transition is the case of Zachary Chesser. He was a typical suburban Virginia youth, growing up as a good student and a soccer fan, who radicalized between 2008 and 2010, integrating online sources of extremism with in-person relationships and the exchange of formal letters.⁸

By contrast more recently, we now see individuals like the two men who departed London to fight with ISIL in Syria no less than two weeks after purchasing *Islam for Dummies* so they could learn the basic information about their purported cause.⁹ ISIL's deft use of internet propaganda, together with that content's wide availability, have broadened the population of potentially vulnerable individuals, and shortened the timespan of their recruitment. According to researchers at the University of Maryland, radicalization of foreign fighters from the United States in 2002 took an average of 16.3 months, compared to 9.8 months in 2015. George Washington University (GW) researchers note that the role of the internet in particular has facilitated "grooming from afar," with recruiters able to disguise their true nature behind the veil of online identities and use of online resources to target those most vulnerable, regardless of location.¹⁰ As the GW report outlines, ISIL supporters in America are an "incredibly heterogeneous group" that is spread out across the country and is younger than recruits to previous violent extremist causes. One example is that of Mohamed Hamza Khan, who was arrested in 2014 at age 19 and whose road to radicalization took place in a relatively small window of time, seemingly entirely through online sources.¹¹

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⁵ Global Center on Cooperative Security. "Does CVE Work?: Lessons Learned from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism." September 2015.

⁶ The White House. FACT SHEET: The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism. February 18, 2015.

⁷ See, e.g. The White House. Leaders' Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism. September 29, 2015; Global Center on Cooperative Security. CVE Summit Process Senior Officials' Check-in Meeting. July 29, 2015; U.S. Department of State. European Conference on Countering Violent Extremism." June 5, 2015.

⁸ Court documents, United States of America v. Zachary Adam Chesser.

⁹ *The Guardian*. "Two British men admit to linking up with extremist group in Syria." July 8, 2014.

¹⁰ Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes. "ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa." George Washington University. December 2015.

In September of 2014, ISIL conveyed a message to the world that was unusual for a terrorist organization. Beyond conveying their views of ISIL's prowess on the international stage, ISIL's spokesman called for individuals from around the world to join the so-called Caliphate, or – in a break from typical statements by terrorist organizations – to kill Westerners in their home countries. “[S]ingle out the disbelieving American, Frenchman, or any of their allies,” the spokesman urged. “Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him... If you are unable to do so, then burn his home, car, or business. Or destroy his crops. If you are unable to do so, then spit in his face.”

Since then, we have had “ISIL-inspired” attacks worldwide, including in San Bernardino, CA; Garland, TX; and Chattanooga, TN. In this new era, terrorism is no longer perpetrated only by career terrorists secretly plotting “spectacular attacks” from safe havens. We now have to fear terrorist threats from anyone, anywhere, in any way. While attacks from untrained lone actors tend to be unsuccessful or result in fewer casualties than carefully-plotted attacks, Paris and San Bernadino and Brussels provide little solace. While Western countries – particularly America – tend to have strong law enforcement and counterterrorism capabilities, attacks still occur. Nonetheless, our approach is evolving. ISIL is no longer expanding, is, in fact contracting in Syria and Iraq. Affected nations are sharing intelligence and information as never before. And individual countries are beginning to be serious about countering violent extremism at the local level. In light of the truly globalized nature of radicalization and recruitment to ISIL's cause – the imperative for a truly whole-of-society and global approach has never been more paramount.

Today, the United States, and our partners and allies abroad, have significantly stepped up efforts. Notably, at home, we have begun to broaden our efforts beyond engagement between government and communities, and have begun to fund programs to address the root causes of potential disenfranchisement. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has set up an office¹² reporting directly to the Secretary to focus the Department's efforts, and the White House has created an interagency “task force” led by DHS.¹³ We have also expanded government partnerships with Silicon Valley, seeking a strong commitment from social media companies to help prevent the manipulation of their services for recruitment and radicalization. Abroad, we are also funding more programs and working closely with foreign partners to help them stand up similar prevention efforts. But even as we do so, some of those efforts are undermined by the proliferation of domestic extremist messages, blaming Muslims for terrorism, spreading Islamophobia in a way that could very well make the problem worse. It will be critical in the coming years to not only expand our efforts, but ensure our policies and our politics support the prevention of radicalization, not exacerbate it.

¹¹ *Washington Post*. “Three American teens, recruited online, are caught trying to join the Islamic State.” December 8, 2014.

¹² Department of Homeland Security. Statement by Secretary Jeh C. Johnson on DHS's New Office for Community Partnerships. September 28, 2015.

¹³ Department of Homeland Security. Countering Violent Extremism Task Force. January 8, 2016.

In the coming chapters you will read a range of viewpoints and experiences from top experts in the CVE field. In Chapter 1, you will read Jessica Stern's overview of what drives individuals to extremist violence, setting the scene for how we might counter it. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, John Cohen, Hedieh Mirahmadi, and Tony Sgro and Katie Moffet will present a comprehensive overview of how the United States has wrestled with these challenges in the various levels of government, in local communities and in educational institutions, and how we can learn from what has been done here in America. In Chapter 5 Karen Greenberg will look at internet recruitment and the challenges in countering it. Chapters 6 and 7 will offer a chance at comparison; Judy Korn and Maqsoud Kruse will explore how European and Muslim World partners are building their CVE efforts.

The next generation of recruits to groups like ISIL can be minimized. The next several examples that our experts have prepared will help guide understanding of these issues in more depth and offer suggestions for the future. As dismal as threat assessments may sound, There is cause for optimism that we are moving in a positive direction, identifying better approaches to preventing radicalization and empowering communities to take greater responsibility for building solutions.