

Approaches for Countering Violent Extremism at Home and Abroad

By
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As the struggle against violent extremism continues 15 years after 9/11, practitioners of counterterrorism note that law enforcement and military approaches alone cannot break the cycle of violence, and new threats emerge as existing threats are defeated. This article provides an overview of post-9/11 efforts related to countering violent extremism (CVE), or the prevention, intervention, and rehabilitative efforts to provide a noncoercive, nonkinetic pathway toward preventing recruitment and radicalization to extreme violence. Specifically, this article explores the spread of the ISIS ideology and the Obama administration's CVE efforts, and provides an overview of subsequent articles in this series that expand on particular CVE approaches.

Keywords: terrorism; countering violent extremism; CVE; psychology of terrorism; counterterrorism

The previous section of this volume revealed that trends in transnational terrorist threats are sobering—the threat from ISIL (also known as ISIS or Islamic State) 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

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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 does not 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 following articles, 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 to investigate, prosecute, and imprison individuals who have been radicalized and are acting with terrorist 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, and so on—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 coconspirators 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, “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” (Obama 2013). Success requires developing comprehensive efforts aimed at 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, CVE 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 violence. There are already multiple definitions of CVE, typically noting that CVE is a collection of noncoercive, non-kinetic, and, most importantly, voluntary activities to prevent and intervene in the process of radicalization to violence (see, e.g., White House 2015a, 2015b; United Nations Security Council 2014).¹

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 (see e.g., Schmid 2013). 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 to 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, entail 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, to increased access to mental health and social service resources. And successful outcomes are typically most effectively achieved through empowering local communities to create intracommunity 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 (Pew 2015), the few who have turned to extremism are a minuscule percentage; moreover, some of ISIL’s recruits only converted to Islam 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 does not label others who commit acts of violence out of extremist religious conviction as, for example, Christian or Jewish extremists?

Therefore, 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. That said, you will note in the Introduction

to this volume of *The ANNALS* that the editors use the term “violent Islamist extremism” and explain their rationale for using the term. While I understand their effort to add clarity and focus in academic discussions, the public dialogue may not appreciate the fully accurate distinction they are putting forward.

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 a community-based approach. In the 2011 *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (The White House 2011) 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 that felt marginalized, or experienced a real or perceived discriminatory impact from 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 to help reduce the likelihood of radicalization. Unfortunately, these overall efforts still paled in comparison to other issue areas our government prioritizes. In 2015, regarding overseas approaches to terrorism specifically, only 6 percent of funding related to terrorism goes to our diplomatic and development communities (Belasco 2014), and under 8 percent of that funding is used for prevention activities (Romaniuk 2015). 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 (White House 2015a). 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 (White House 2015b). So far, that heightened look at the issue has galvanized further efforts and freed up some funding (White House 2015b; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2016b), but much more has yet to be done (Rosand 2016).

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 Zachary Chesser, a Virginia native who has plead guilty to supporting Somali terrorists and crimes of violence. He was a typical suburban Virginia youth; growing up, he was a good student and a soccer fan. He radicalized between 2008 and 2010, integrating online sources of extremism with in-person relationships and the exchange of formal letters.²

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 (Dodd 2014). ISIL's deft use of Internet propaganda, together with that content's wide availability, has 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 (Jensen, James, and Tinsley 2016). 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 (Vidino and Hughes 2015). 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 short window of time, seemingly entirely through online sources (Sullivan 2014).

In September 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 released an audio message calling 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" (Bayoumy 2014).

Since then, we have had "ISIL-inspired" attacks worldwide, including in San Bernardino, California; Garland, Texas; and Chattanooga, Tennessee. 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 Bernardino 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 and is, in fact, contracting in Syria and Iraq. As of this writing, the Coalition to Counter ISIL has destroyed more than 26,000 targets (U.S. Department of Defense 2016), killed 45,000 ISIL members (Wong 2016), and reclaimed 45 percent of ISIL territory in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria (Michaels 2016). Affected nations are sharing intelligence and information as never before, such as a 400 percent increase in INTERPOL watch-listing of foreign terrorist fighters in a two-year period (White House 2016). And individual countries are

beginning to be serious about CVE at the local level, such as Vilvoorde, Belgium, and Aarhus, Denmark, taking new approaches of integration and understanding to engage at-risk individuals (e.g., Rosin 2016; Cendrowicz 2015). 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 U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has set up a new office (Johnson 2015) reporting directly to the Secretary and the White House has created an interagency "task force" led by DHS to coordinate and synchronize interagency CVE efforts across a range of programs and priority initiatives (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2016a). We have also expanded government partnerships with Silicon Valley (Kang and Apuzzo 2016). We have sought a strong commitment from social media companies to help prevent the manipulation of their services for recruitment and radicalization, such as Alphabet (formerly Google) support for Google ad-based countermessaging (Greenberg 2016). Abroad, we are also funding more programs (Epstein, Lawson, and Tiersky 2016) and working closely with foreign partners to help them stand up similar prevention efforts, such as through establishing a Strong Cities Network for municipal leaders to coordinate local approaches on a global scale (Temple-Raston 2016). 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 not only to expand our efforts but to ensure our policies and our politics support the prevention of radicalization, not exacerbate it.

In the following articles, you will read a range of viewpoints and experiences from top experts in the CVE field. In the first article, Jessica Stern—a research professor at Boston University, who is part of an interdisciplinary team based at Boston's Children's Hospital that has been studying attitudes among Somali refugee youth in the United States and Canada—explains what drives individuals to extremist violence and sets the scene for how we might counter it.

In the next three articles, John Cohen, Hedieh Mirahmadi, and Katie Moffet and Tony Sgro 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. John Cohen is a distinguished professor of professional practice in criminal justice at Rutgers University. He also served as the acting Undersecretary for Intelligence and Analysis and the Counter-Terrorism Coordinator in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Hedieh Mirahmadi is founder and a board member of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE) and a world-renowned expert in CVE; she is a consultant to several federal departments and local law enforcement agencies in the United States. Tony Sgro is the founder and CEO of EdVenture

Partners, which created and manages the P2P: Challenging Extremism program—an initiative that counters violent extremism through youth engagement. Katie Moffett is Content Marketing Manager for EdVenture Partners, where she develops the firm's overall content strategy and brand development. She leads the marketing efforts for the P2P: Challenging Extremism program.

Karen Greenberg is a noted expert on national security, terrorism, and civil liberties and director of the Center on National Security at Fordham University School of Law. In her article, Greenberg looks at Internet recruitment and the challenges in countering it.

The articles by Judy Korn and Maqsood Kruse offer a chance at comparison; Korn and Kruse explore how European and Muslim World partners are building their CVE efforts. Korn is a longtime leader against extremism who has worked with radicalized individuals; she is also the founder of the Violence Prevention Network in Germany. Kruse has served as the executive director of Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, since it was established in December 2012.

The next generation of recruits to groups such as ISIL can be minimized. The next several examples from our experts help to guide understanding of these issues 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.

Notes

1. See also Club de Madrid (2015).
2. George Washington University. 2012. Court documents, *United States of America v. Zachary Adam Chesser*. Washington, DC.

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