

## ARAB AMERICAN INSTITUTE

### COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

#### Background

In 2011, the White House released the “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States.” The plan was introduced as a domestic counter-terrorism strategy to counter the recruitment and radicalization efforts of organizations such as Al-Qaeda or the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This report became the foundation for the federal government’s Countering Violent Extremism programs, or CVE.

CVE gained increased attention following the attacks on the French satirical newspaper, Charlie Hebdo, which killed 11 and injured 11 others. The Paris attacks galvanized policymakers both in Europe and the United States to more actively address the growing threat posed by ISIL’s recruitment of foreign fighters, ISIL’s allure to disaffected peoples, and ISIL-inspired attacks like the one that terrorized Paris. CVE programs became the vehicle to do that. However, unlike in Europe and the Middle East where the stream of foreign fighters is the most significant domestic terrorism threat, the foreign fighter phenomenon and the threat of ISIL-inspired attacks (with or without ISIL’s direct involvement) does not pose the same threat in the U.S.

Nonetheless, the federal government appears to have fallen victim to tunnel vision and media hysteria, ignoring the empirical evidence that the majority of terrorist attacks are committed by non-Muslim inspired or identified criminals. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that domestic terrorism comes from many sources, including anti-government extremism, environmental extremism, racist violent extremism, and hate crimes, which are increasing at an alarming rate.

On February 18, 2015, the White House organized a three-day summit on CVE that brought together local, federal, and international leaders to examine actions the U.S. and its allies can implement to advance community-oriented approaches to countering violent extremism. During this summit, three domestic pilot CVE programs in Boston, Massachusetts; Los Angeles, California; and Minneapolis, Minnesota, were debuted. This was the first time that these three CVE programs were discussed before a national audience.

According to the White House “Strategic Implementation Plan,” CVE efforts in these three pilot programs hinge on empowering local partners and community members including teachers, healthcare workers, and social service providers, to prevent violent extremism. In order to do this, the current CVE program suggests that community members should seek to identify “indicators” that a given individual may be exhibiting; these “indicators” are a highly disputed set of behaviors the government believes a person in the process of being “radicalized” will exhibit. If these signs are apparent, then it is up to community members to intervene and prevent that individual from becoming a violent extremist. If this community-led intervention strategy fails, then law enforcement officials should be contacted.

Troublingly, the contemporary CVE strategy being employed by the federal government is modeled off of a flawed and controversial program, “Prevent,” that the United Kingdom (UK) has implemented since the immediate aftermath of 9/11. This counter-terrorism program solely targets Muslims and as a result stigmatizes the British Muslim community as suspect. Prevent encourages community members to profile and report individuals expressing “radical views” to the police and seeks to empower those that support the program’s mission. Ultimately, Prevent not only stigmatizes the British Muslim community, but also results in the violation of civil rights and liberties afforded to its members.

## The Problem

Not only do CVE programs - and the vast government resources devoted to them - address a problem that is proportionately small within the landscape of domestic terrorist threats, they are based on disproven theories of radicalization and they are further stigmatizing the Arab American and American Muslim communities.

While U.S. officials openly discuss the shortcomings of the UK's Prevent model and insist that U.S. CVE efforts do not employ similar methods, an examination of the pilot programs suggests otherwise.

In fact, CVE efforts concentrate solely on the Arab American and American Muslim communities. Those efforts include the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, the misleadingly named "Office for Community Partnerships" that was recently created within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to spearhead federal CVE efforts, and the proposed Congressional legislation to create a new office within DHS to focus solely on CVE. The pilot CVE programs in Minneapolis, Los Angeles and Boston demonstrate that CVE efforts profile the Arab American and American Muslim communities. History has shown that programs that profile Arab and Muslim communities, many of which were implemented in the wake of 9/11, are ineffective and further stigmatize and cast suspicion on these communities.

Furthermore, the current CVE framework is based on theories that have been repeatedly disproven. One such assumption is the "radicalization theory," which suggests that there is an identifiable path or blueprint that an individual follows on the road to becoming an extremist and ultimately committing an act of violence. Another assumption deals with the concept of "indicators." According to this assumption, there are distinguishable signs an individual exhibits that would suggest he or she is on a path to committing a violent crime. Academics and policymakers have long discredited these assumptions; yet, current CVE programs suggest that they are true.

While there may be a need for international CVE efforts, the CVE program in the United States is a flawed solution for a problem that does not exist in widespread form in the U.S. Reports from the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security have demonstrated that the known cases of domestic plots "[do] not suggest large-scale growth in violent extremism [.]"

## Moving Forward

- Enlist Congress to request a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the current CVE program. This report should:
  - Provide an overview of the current CVE program and its effectiveness;
  - Provide an analysis of the methodology used to develop the current framework;
  - Provide suggestions to put in place greater oversight mechanisms on the government's CVE program;
  - Provide an overview of any counter-productive impacts that such a program would have on Arab American and/or American Muslim communities.