

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 in response to the recruitment 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 and support in 2015 after the two attacks in Paris and San Bernardino. CVE programs became the vehicle to address how citizens of European countries are being successfully recruited by ISIL to either join them on the battlefield or carry out acts of domestic terrorism in their home country. However, unlike in Europe and the Middle East where foreign fighters pose a significant domestic terrorism threat, the foreign fighter phenomenon and the threat of ISIL-inspired attacks (with or without ISIL’s direct involvement) do not pose the same threat in the U.S.

Nonetheless, the federal government appears to be ignoring the empirical evidence that demonstrates that domestic terrorism comes from many sources, including groups with violent anti-governmental, environmental, or racist agendas, as well as from 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 “increase the resilience of communities” to combat “radicalization to violence.” In order to do this, the CVE program suggests that community members should seek to identify “preoperational indicators” that a given individual may be exhibiting; these “preoperational 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 employed by the federal government is modeled off of a flawed and controversial program, “Prevent,” implemented in the United Kingdom (UK) in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The program functionally targets Muslims, and as a result, stigmatizes the British Muslim community. 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 marginalizes the British Muslim community, but also results in the violation of civil rights and liberties afforded to its members. Despite U.S. government assurances that CVE is not a duplication of the failed Prevent model, the difference between the two is that instead of the government running the programming, the American model has nongovernmental groups implementing CVE programming with government funding.

H.R. 2899, the Countering Violent Extremism Act of 2015, was adopted into the annual Omnibus expenditures bill and passed at the end of 2015. This allocated a new \$10 million budget to DHS to establish an Office of CVE with a new Assistant Secretary. Subsequently, the beginning of 2016 saw the roll out of the Department of Homeland Security's Interagency CVE Task Force, focusing on new community programs with "CVE stakeholders." These community programs have provoked criticism by attempting to transform community outreach to American Muslim communities into a security program. Still in the early stages, these new programs raise concerns over allocating resources to programs with such questionable effectiveness and legitimacy, as well as negative community consequences.

As part of of this expanded CVE agenda, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched a website targeting students. Originally scheduled for release on November 2, 2015, the FBI postponed the launch of its "Don't be a Puppet Campaign" until February 11, 2016 after outcry from various civil rights leaders against the website. The online portal uses interactive programs and videos to attempt to "educate" American youth about the threats of violent extremism in a manner that poorly distinguishes between beliefs and violence, and that encourages monitoring of youth communities. "Don't be a Puppet" is designed to be used in social studies classes, making teachers and peers responsible for determining who may be at risk of becoming a violent extremist according to the aforementioned vague criteria.

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 appear to 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 H.R. 2899, adopted into the annual Omnibus spending bill at the end of 2015. 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 are based on the assumption that these theories 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.

Moving Forward

- Demand Congress to engage in vigorous oversight and public reporting on current CVE programs by:
 - o Providing an overview of the current CVE program and its effectiveness;
 - o Providing an analysis of the methodology used to develop the current framework;
 - o Provide suggestions to put in place greater oversight mechanisms on the government's CVE program; and
 - o Provide an overview of any negative impacts that such a program would have on Arab American and/or American Muslim communities.
- Demand accountability measures from federal, state, and local governments to ensure that relationships between the government and communities, especially Arab American and American Muslim communities, are not exploited to pursue a divisive, controversial, and unproven counter-terrorism program.
- Urge members to oppose S.2418, the “Countering Online Recruitment of Violent Extremists Act of 2015” and S.2522, “A bill to amend the Homeland Security Act of 2002 to build partnerships to prevent violence by extremists.”