

**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 and 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 have been the vehicle by which European countries address the successful recruitment of their citizens 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 United States.

Nonetheless, the federal government appears to be ignoring the empirical evidence that demonstrates 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.

Troublingly, the contemporary U.S. CVE strategy employed by the federal government is modeled off 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 and, therefore, the government’s agenda.

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 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to establish an Office of CVE with a new Assistant Secretary. Subsequently, the beginning of 2016 saw the roll out of DHS’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 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 “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 is a violent extremist according to vague criteria.

Before President Obama left office, DHS announced the government agencies and non-profit organizations that were to receive federal grants to carry out CVE programming. Since the announcement, and since the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, reports have surfaced that allege the administration desires a re-branding of “CVE” to “CIE,” or Countering Islamic Extremism, validating concerns that the program profiles and targets American Muslims. Many of the community organizations that were awarded CVE grants have returned or refused to accept the funds.

### 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 are further stigmatizing Arab American and American Muslim communities. The “radicalization theory” suggests 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,” furthering the idea there are distinguishable signs to look for when identifying a potential extremist. Implementation of these assumptions hinges on engaging local partners and community members, including teachers, healthcare workers, and social service providers, to “increase the resilience of communities to...radicalization to violence.” Academics and policymakers have long discredited these assumptions, yet current CVE programs disregard these conclusions.

CVE efforts primarily concentrate on 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 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. In fact, a CVE report by the ACLU argues that “The government has failed repeatedly to respond to concerns about the effectiveness of the programs and the threats they pose to Americans’ privacy and civil rights, and instead kept all but the broadest outlines of CVE programs secret.”

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. Reports from the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security have demonstrated the known cases of domestic plots “[do] not suggest large-scale growth in violent extremism.”

### 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 implement greater oversight mechanisms for the government’s CVE program; and
  - o Provide an overview of any negative impacts such programs 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.