

ISSUE BRIEF

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Revisiting Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism: Leadership Needed

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Several months ago, President Obama announced that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would provide work authorization and protection from deportation to as many as 5 million unlawful immigrants. In government, senior leadership focuses on two or three issues at a time at most. The Obama Administration's immigration action, given its massive scope and controversial nature, will inevitably detract from other initiatives and result in the harmful redirection of attention and resources away from pressing homeland security issues. In order to implement the President's sweeping order, Secretary Jeh Johnson and other leaders at DHS will simply not have the time, money, manpower, or trust of Congress to make important reforms to other areas that are of critical importance, especially countering the radicalization of individuals in the U.S. It falls to Congress to correct these misplaced priorities.

While steps have been taken to counter radicalization in the U.S., more remains to be done. The U.S. needs to rethink its strategy in this area and provide more leadership and resources to this effort without usurping the central role that state, local, and civil society partners must play. Such a strategy also requires that the U.S. name the problem it faces.

Countering Violent Extremism

A proactive approach to preventing terrorist attacks includes taking greater steps to stop individuals from radicalizing in the first place. Called "countering violent extremism," or CVE, such efforts are where the focus of state and local officials is most needed. Local officials who know their communities and who regularly engage with community members and leaders are in the best position to realize when individuals are radicalizing and to take steps to intervene. Of course, should individuals initiate criminal or terrorist activities, local officials are also well positioned to make an arrest before the public is harmed. DHS, as the organization charged with collaborating with local law enforcement and engaging with the private sector, is well positioned to support CVE efforts.

In August 2011, the White House released "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," which laid out the principles and goals of a new CVE strategy.¹ Wisely, this strategy identified local law enforcement and community organizations as key to stopping radicalization. In December 2011, the White House followed up with its plan to implement that strategy,² assigning responsibilities to a variety of federal agencies, with DHS leading or partnering with others to reach most objectives but also assigning many tasks to the FBI and the Department of Justice (DOJ).³

Former CVE officials have stated that the strategy has not been well implemented and lacks meaningful support from relevant agencies.⁴ This is certainly true within the FBI, where the more "social and preventative role" of CVE does not mesh well with the FBI's law enforcement and emerging intelligence

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missions.⁵ Even in DHS, which has established a CVE working group,⁶ minimal focus seems to have been paid to CVE, as the fiscal year 2016 congressional budget justification for DHS only mentions CVE efforts a handful of times in nearly 4,000 pages.⁷ The Congressional Research Service also found that the lack of a lead agency reduces the efficiency and effectiveness of CVE efforts and makes it difficult to assess how many resources are actually dedicated to CVE.⁸

Over three years have passed since this implementation plan was released, and the world has grown more dangerous. With the rise of the brutal and social media-savvy ISIS inspiring and radicalizing individuals around the world, a review of U.S. CVE strategy is in order. Given that DHS was assigned the most responsibility in the CVE implementation plan and that it is best situated to work with federal, state, local, and private-sector partners, DHS should become the official lead agency and be given more authority and responsibility.⁹ A mere statement on paper or conference is not enough;¹⁰ the U.S. should seek to identify its strategy's shortcomings and put real resources and leadership behind its CVE efforts.

While CVE efforts should be directed at all sorts of radical ideologies, it is important that the U.S. be able to name the primary threat it faces: radical Islamist ideologies.¹¹ This should not be done to alienate and blame all Muslims but to recognize and properly deal with the tiny fraction of Muslims whose extreme Islamist beliefs drive them to threaten Western nations and principles. Importantly, so long as groups like ISIS continue to commit high-profile acts of cruelty, they will inspire others. Defeating terrorism abroad is key to reducing it at home.¹²

CVE 2.0

It is time to review the U.S. CVE strategy and empower DHS to lead CVE efforts in support of state, local, and civil society partners. Specifically, Congress should:

- **Designate an office in DHS to coordinate CVE efforts.** CVE efforts are spread across all levels of government and society. DHS is uniquely situated to lead the federal government's efforts to empower local partners. Currently, DHS's CVE working group coordinates efforts across DHS

1. The White House, "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," August 3, 2011, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf (accessed April 16, 2015).
2. The White House, "Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," December 8, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2015).
3. Bruce Hoffman, Edwin Meese III, and Timothy J. Roemer, "The FBI: Protecting the Homeland in the 21st Century," 9/11 Review Commission, March 2015, <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/protecting-the-homeland-in-the-21st-century> (accessed April 16, 2015).
4. Michael Crowley, "No Answer for Homegrown Terrorism," *Politico*, January 8, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/01/homegrown-terrorism-obama-administration-114100.html> (accessed April 16, 2015).
5. Hoffman, Meese, and Roemer, "The FBI: Protecting the Homeland in the 21st Century," pp. 96.
6. Department of Homeland Security, "Countering Violent Extremism," April 2, 2015, <http://www.dhs.gov/topic/countering-violent-extremism> (accessed April 16, 2015).
7. Department of Homeland Security, "Congressional Budget Justification FY 2016," February 2, 2015, http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DHS_FY2016_Congressional_Budget_Justification_15_0325.pdf (accessed April 16, 2015).
8. Jerome P. Bjelopera, "Countering Violent Extremism in the United States," Congressional Research Service, February 19, 2014, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/R42553.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2015).
9. Hoffman, Meese, and Roemer, "The FBI: Protecting the Homeland in the 21st Century," p. 96.
10. Dave Boyer, "Obama to Host Summit on 'Violent Extremism,'" *The Washington Times*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/feb/16/obama-host-summit-violent-extremism/> (accessed April 16, 2015).
11. Thomas L. Friedman, "Say It Like It Is," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/21/opinion/thomas-friedman-say-it-like-it-is.html?_r=0 (accessed April 16, 2015), and Helle Dale, "Obama's 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' Not a Strategy Against Terrorism," *The Daily Signal*, February 3, 2015, <http://dailysignal.com/2015/02/03/obamas-dont-worry-happy-not-strategy-terrorism/>.
12. David Inserra and Peter Brookes, "64th Islamist Terrorist Plot Since 9/11 Shows the U.S. Must Combat Radical Islamist Threat," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4372, April 1, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/04/64th-islamist-terrorist-plot-since-911-shows-the-us-must-combat-radical-islamist-threat>.

components, but a more substantial office will be necessary to manage this broader task. There is no perfect component in which to house this new office, but the Office of Intelligence and Analysis is probably best suited for the task.

- **Revise U.S. CVE strategy.** Establishing a new CVE office in DHS will require that the strategic implantation plan be revised to remove some leadership responsibility from the FBI, DOJ, and others and give it to DHS. However, other organizations still have important contributions to make as partners with DHS in the CVE effort. The new strategy should build on past accomplishments and work to fix shortcomings.
- **Support state, local, and civil society partners.** With all of the reorganization recommended above, Congress and the Administration should not lose sight of the fact that all of the federal government's efforts must be focused on empowering local partners. The federal government is not the tip of the spear for CVE efforts; it exists to support local partners who are in the best position to recognize and counter radicalization in their own communities.

- **Develop a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy.** Since domestic radicalization and terrorism is often inspired by events overseas, battling violent Islamist extremism abroad is critical to addressing the challenge of terrorism in the U.S. To this end, Congress should ensure that the Administration has a comprehensive strategy for addressing violent Islamist extremism both at home and abroad.

Elevating CVE

With rising concerns over terrorism here in the U.S., it is critical that the federal government take additional steps to empower state, local, and private-sector partners to counter violent extremism. In order to better support these partners, Congress should make DHS responsible for federal CVE efforts.

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