



Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in the United States: An Assessment of Domestic and International Efforts

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Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE, is a relatively new but expanding framework of practices for US “soft power” engagement with radicalization and extremism. Generally, it is focused on empowering a wide array of actors—from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to community leaders, domestically and internationally—to help dissuade individuals from being drawn to extremist groups. The CVE efforts are considered as a complement, or precursor, to counterterrorism efforts by military or intelligence apparatuses.

CVE initiatives by the United States are intended to identify and mitigate extremist threats throughout the radicalization process, while counterterrorism is intended to prevent someone who is already radicalized from committing an act of violence. The United States has long prioritized “hard power” counterterrorism efforts managed by military and intelligence institutions. Following the attacks of September 11, President George W. Bush instituted the so-called “War on Terror” campaign, comprised of enhanced interrogation techniques, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the creation of “black sites” (such as CIA secret prisons), and drone strikes against relatively legible threats. However, in the later years of the Bush administration, there was a shift from a “Global War on Terror” to a “global struggle against violent extremism,” reflecting an understanding that military solutions would not be enough to combat extremist ideology. As extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS showed no signs of dissolving, Washington began developing comprehensive domestic and international “soft power” CVE programs under President Barack Obama to manage extremist threats where counterterrorism efforts had been largely unsuccessful. Due to the increasingly decentralized scope of terrorist networks and the subsequent difficulty of identifying and tracking radicalization, CVE has increasingly become viewed as an essential complement to more traditional counterterrorism methods.

The United States currently runs both domestic and international CVE efforts. It began formally to develop domestic CVE programs in 2011 with the first White House Strategy Document on CVE, and subsequently created several pilot programs in US cities. In February 2015, the international CVE program was officially born with President Barack Obama hosting a summit of governmental and non-governmental organization leaders from around the world to mobilize a more comprehensive global effort to counter violent extremism. President Obama reaffirmed the core components of CVE: building awareness, countering extremist narratives, and emphasizing community-led intervention. The summit also marked the expansion of US CVE efforts to include over nine federal departments, local government institutions, and non-governmental

actors of varying backgrounds. The following year, the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) released their first joint strategy plan on countering violent extremism abroad, incorporating the goals of the 2015 White House CVE summit.

CVE has been lauded as a worthy endeavor, as it seeks to serve as an alternative to military and intelligence activities. Although support at the federal level for building trust, dialogue, and capacity among communities is theoretically positive, some issues with CVE programming and policies have made scholars, community leaders, and government officials skeptical and frustrated with the scope of CVE programs thus far. The vague definitions of CVE, the lack of clear metrics for success, the risk of stigmatizing vulnerable populations, and misguided assumptions that economic development will reduce extremism are some of the most pressing concerns that should be addressed as the United States continues to expand CVE programming.

Domestic CVE Efforts: Discriminatory in Nature

The domestic CVE program is run through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Components include the Office of Community Partnerships, created in 2015 to manage relations between local communities and federal agencies; the CVE Task Force, an interagency task force created in 2016 and hosted by DHS and the Department of Justice with additional representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Counterterrorism Center, and other departments; and the CVE Grant Program, created in 2016. The CVE Grant Program, the most significant component of the domestic CVE strategy, aims to provide state, local, and community groups with the funding to build prevention programs that address the root causes of violence and radicalization in at-risk communities.

The establishment of the CVE Grant Program and CVE Strategy Plan has been met with criticism by scholars, NGOs, and government officials. One of the core issues is that despite the nuanced language used in CVE documents, the program is clearly built to target Muslim communities. While CVE purports to address radicalization in communities “most frequently affected by violent extremist messaging,” it does not explain how it will determine which communities are at risk. However, the language used is clearly geared toward thwarting “Islamist” extremism and countering ISIS’s ability to radicalize and recruit in the United States. Additionally, the three CVE pilot programs instituted so far in the United States have been in Minneapolis, Boston, and Los Angeles, in predominately Muslim communities. Although government agencies such as DHS, government officials, and scholars are increasingly worried about the threat of right-wing extremism, there is no evidence that CVE will address extremism that is not tied to “Islamist” extremism or focused in Muslim communities. Expressing concern, a coalition of NGOs, from the NAACP to Amnesty International, sent a letter to government officials in 2015 criticizing CVE’s targeting of Muslim communities. They noted that CVE

programs have branded Muslim communities as “inherently suspicious and requiring increased scrutiny,” despite that since 9/11, far more people have been killed by violence in the United States from right-wing groups than in violent attacks by American Muslims. Exclusively gearing CVE efforts toward Muslim communities also neglects the diversity of radicalization trends, which cut across all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, geographic, national, and religious lines.

A related flaw in CVE programming is that it targets Muslim communities with the misguided assumption that there are observable indicators to identify radicalization. A DHS-supported academic study of pathways to terrorism concluded that “there is no one path, no ‘trajectory profile’ to political radicalization. Rather there are many different paths. Some of these paths do not include radical ideas or activism on the way to radical action, so the radicalization progression cannot be understood as an invariable set of steps or stages from sympathy to radicalism.” Nevertheless, the government’s CVE Strategy Plan asserts that research shows parents, neighbors, peers, and community leaders as best positioned to notice an individual’s radicalization, emphasizing the need to educate bystanders on “observable” signs of radicalization. This widely discredited premise, known as “radicalization theory,” presupposes that violent extremists move through identifiable stages of radicalization. Though DHS, the agency that heads CVE, commissioned the study that disproves this theory, it remains at the core of CVE programming. As scholars have noted, the trend toward radicalization is deeply personal, and there is little evidence to support DHS’s claim that there are often bystanders who notice radicalization and fail to report it. Most often, in the case of so-called “lone-wolf” terror attacks, an individual’s radicalization comes as a shock to family and friends. As noted in a report by the Brookings Institution, “the majority of Muslims who carry out or plot terrorist attacks are not active in their communities, and almost none have been openly radicalized in social settings ... most are radicalized online and in small cloistered groups, with limited contact with the wider community.”

Furthermore, CVE’s discriminatory targeting of Muslim communities and the assumption that these communities can identify radicalization is damaging to Muslim communities. Many prominent NGOs that represent Muslim communities and civil liberties organizations have voiced concerns about the consequences of CVE, noting that “what we’ve seen suggests CVE may task community members with monitoring each other and reporting to law enforcement the beliefs and activities of law-biding Americans. To many, that’s known as spying. It’s hardly conducive to supporting communities and creating a space for differing viewpoints, and it stymies First Amendment-protected beliefs and activity.” Indeed, CVE programs under a national security paradigm reinforce the sentiment in Muslim communities that they are a threat, increase fear of surveillance, and erode spaces for public life and political engagement. Additionally, rather than combatting extremism, these discriminatory policies could reinforce government grievances and grant legitimacy to extremist ideology. Government approaches that are seen to be discriminatory, such as the increase of policing and surveillance, can add to the

root causes of radicalization for someone who is at-risk, reinforcing the us-vs.-them mentality and generating feelings of marginalization.

In terms of alternative approaches to CVE, some analysts have suggested spending the money on countering alienation and marginalization—some of the factors that drive people toward extremist movements. The empowerment of Muslim communities could be achieved through enhancing social services, providing better refugee resettlement services, and improving education initiatives—all of which could be done separately from a security paradigm. One of the domestic CVE initiatives promises social services and youth mentorship for Muslim communities, many of which would benefit from these programs, but such programs must not be tied to policing. A fact that is often overlooked is that violent extremism disproportionately affects Muslims, who are frequently the victims of violence and discrimination; this ought to be considered seriously when trying to create trust and build partnerships with a community increasingly faced with discrimination. President-elect Donald Trump has inflamed Islamophobia throughout his campaign, and the fears and worries that the Muslim community faces should not be compounded by increased surveillance and policing.

International CVE Efforts: A Misguided Approach

“Soft power” counterterrorism in an international context has long been an aspect of foreign policy, manifesting in many forms including intelligence gathering, foreign aid, the training of “moderate” imams, or working to strengthen the rule of law. However, it has only recently become institutionalized as CVE, with the State Department and USAID now serving as the primary departments responsible for CVE programming. In 2016, they produced a “proactive international strategy” with a focus on understanding “root causes” of radicalization, expanding international partnerships to research extremism, assisting governments in creating effective policies to counter radicalization, and employing foreign assistance such as development tools to help reduce social, political, and economic factors that contribute to violent extremism.

International CVE initiatives are increasingly tied to economic development, despite the lack of evidence for a causal relationship between poverty and radicalization. In September 2014, President Obama addressed the UN General Assembly, stating, “...we will expand our programs to support entrepreneurship and civil society, education and youth—because, ultimately, these investments are the best antidote to violence.” While supporting international development should be a core component of US foreign policy, there is no correlation between socioeconomic status and violent extremism. Additionally, promoting international development for US security purposes has been shown to undermine the effectiveness of development efforts, while also increasing risks to aid workers.

Research shows that group-based injustice is the single most persistent driver of radicalization, which should be addressed through human rights and democracy promotion. Rather than linking economic development with CVE efforts abroad, the United States would be better served by driving efforts to reduce the prevalence of group-based injustice and marginalization in communities. The United States should not be the face of these efforts, however; rather, it should support regional partners to uphold standards of human rights and buttress good governance initiatives and state-building efforts.

A related issue with CVE initiatives internationally is that Washington pursues contradictory foreign policies in many countries where it tries to implement programs to strengthen human rights or the rule of law while supporting dictators and strongmen. For example, the United States provides countries like Jordan and Egypt with billions of dollars in foreign assistance for military spending, while only allocating small fractions of assistance for good governance mechanisms or democracy promotion. If the United States is to commit to international CVE efforts, overarching US foreign policy priorities should be aligned in the same direction, or else they risk being counterproductive.

Measuring Success

Both domestic and international CVE efforts are hindered by a nebulous organizational structure. Following the White House summit in 2015, CVE efforts expanded to include over nine federal departments and numerous other government agencies. While the CVE Task Force was created to provide better leadership, it is run by DHS and the Department of Justice, with the two agencies rotating responsibilities annually. Studies of private sector companies show that alternating leadership does little to advance innovation or more progressive strategies. In addition, academics and government officials have suggested combining domestic and international efforts, currently run through different federal departments under different strategy plans. A report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies suggests this new combined structure should be headed by a White House assistant to the president so as to provide clear direction and accountability for results.

While the CVE organizational structure is unclear, the program also lacks empirical metrics for success, something that has particularly frustrated government officials who are skeptical about providing funding to a program with obscure results. Since the CVE model seeks to prevent negative outcomes, such as violent extremism, it is difficult to formulate markers for success. A report by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) found that of the 43 published studies providing assessments of CVE programs, most reported descriptive results, with 24 providing data that could be categorized as correlational findings of program effectiveness. It stresses that CVE leadership should prioritize the

development of clear metrics for success across CVE initiatives, and proposes the development of a better framework to assess effectiveness in CVE studies.

In order to reshape CVE programming to address both of these concerns, many scholars have recommended applying public health strategies to the CVE framework. This public health approach is commonly divided into primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention addresses injury before it occurs, secondary prevention treats “pre-clinical” changes that occur before a disease manifests and progresses, and tertiary prevention is activated once a disease manifests, the goal being to reduce its impact on an individual’s life.

START applies this model to violent extremism. In this case, primary prevention could comprise community strategies to mitigate the risk of radicalization, secondary prevention might include strategies such as mentoring directed at individuals who may have characteristics that label them at-risk, and tertiary measures would be directed at individuals who may already have been radicalized, such as “intensive case management” cases that would not require the direct engagement of law enforcement. A similar report from Georgetown University’s Security Studies Review asserts that this model has been a proven and proactive strategy for the health sector which can be used to both clarify CVE efforts and evaluate methods used at each step of the radicalization process. However, the challenge remains in being able to identify and diagnose primary, secondary, and tertiary stages of radicalization so that suitable CVE measures are used.

Soft Power vs. Military Action

Analysts have noted that “soft power” CVE efforts across the board have been “ad hoc and undervalued compared to the military, law enforcement, and intelligence aspects of the fight” against terror. They suggest that the government should pledge one billion dollars annually to CVE efforts, giving the program the legitimacy to implement and replicate successful programs. At present, US expenditures for “soft power” initiatives such as CVE total only one-tenth of one percent of resources dedicated to military, law enforcement, and intelligence efforts to combat terrorism. The \$11.5 million per day the United States spends on its military presence in Iraq, for example, is more than DHS was given in a year to support grassroots CVE efforts, and twice as much as the State Department received in a year to support civil society-led CVE programs internationally.

This discrepancy highlights the disconnect between CVE and counterterrorism, with proponents of “soft power” CVE speaking critically about military initiatives such as drone strikes. Such military initiatives do nothing to advance the rule of law or human rights in weak states and conflict areas; on the contrary, they often have the opposite effect. Like domestic policing efforts, they tend to fuel feelings of grievance and frustration and to reinforce an us-vs.-them

mentality. Increased funding for CVE could send a message to foreign leaders that CVE efforts are a priority, rather than focusing on US foreign assistance tied to military aid.

CVE is an emerging approach; it has only begun to receive funding and legitimacy over the past several years. It offers alternatives to traditional counterterrorism measures, and its proactive goal to increase trust and partnership with communities is commendable. However, as a study by the Global Center on Cooperative Security [notes](#), CVE might be described as a “soft power” approach to terrorism, but “governments have not always used soft power softly.” Government officials, NGOs, and academics have offered a plethora of critiques and suggestions to reshape CVE into a more successful program, hoping to eliminate the many counterproductive measures and develop initiatives that benefit individuals, communities, and governments alike.

Conclusion: US Policy Recommendations for CVE

1. Domestic CVE programming should be non-discriminatory and should not specifically target Muslim communities.
2. Domestic CVE initiatives should not be conducted through a national security paradigm, but should aim to empower communities through enhancing social services and educational programs without a securitized component.
3. Human Rights and democracy promotion should be at the center of CVE policies.
4. Domestic and international CVE efforts should be consolidated into a unified program, with one comprehensive strategy document containing a solidified definition of CVE.
5. The CVE framework should adopt a public-health model to better measure success and provide a clear framework for programming.
6. CVE programs should incorporate the vast body of scientific research and findings regarding violent extremism into their planning and implementation.

**This report was prepared with extensive contributions from Research and Analysis Intern Sara Lobo.*