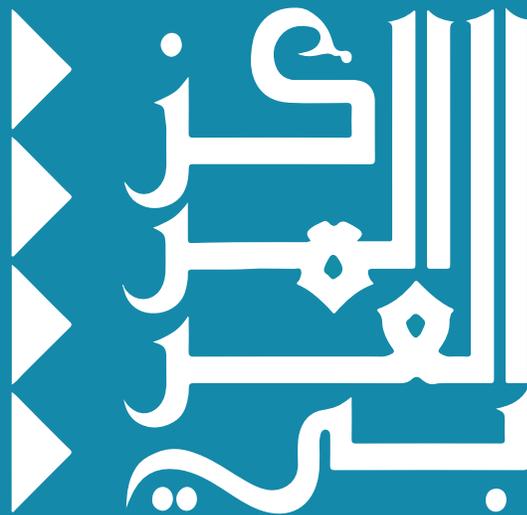


Congressional Update: Week Ending August 11, 2017

Marcus Montgomery

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Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

Congress is out of session for the month of August and, during the recess, lawmakers have time to hold town hall meetings with their constituents. However, there are substantially fewer town hall meetings being held this month than is customary, particularly for Republicans. Discontent with elected officials is sky-high among constituents and they are mobilized to let their representatives know. Whether for fear of criticism or safety, many members of Congress seem to have decided to face voters less frequently.

There is some interesting news from the State Department this week. David Satterfield—an experienced diplomat who has worked in a number of Arab countries—was picked to serve as Acting Assistant Secretary for Middle East Affairs. He will replace Stuart Jones beginning in September.

Congress does not return for legislative business until September 5, so this week ACW will provide a briefing on the talk of the town this week: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).

Countering Violent Extremism: A Brief Introduction

CVE is both an academic exercise and a government-sanctioned program. As a theory, it has been around for nearly a decade since policymakers first became worried about “homegrown” terrorists. It is a strategy that is meant to identify and prevent the radicalization of at-risk populations whose members might otherwise use violent measures to further their particular goals. The idea, as controversial as it has been, was formally adopted as a national security program under the Obama Administration in 2015.

CVE is highly controversial because interest groups, such as proponents of civil liberties and the American Muslim population, view it as a surveillance tool for the government. Former President Barack Obama’s CVE Task Force was established within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and uses traditional law enforcement tactics to fulfill its mission. For this reason, many eye the program with suspicion, arguing that it provides legitimacy for unwarranted surveillance and that it stigmatizes entire groups of people, particularly the American Muslim community and Muslims more generally.

Last month the founding director of the Office of Community Partnerships at DHS and head of the CVE Task Force, George Selim, announced his resignation in the wake of President Donald Trump’s decision to strip the body of its funding by 2018. With a number of questions looming about the future of CVE in the United States, nongovernmental groups in Washington spent the week issuing recommendations for tackling the problem of radicalization.

Effectively Countering Extremism: A Comprehensive Grassroots Approach. On August 7, the Newseum in Washington, DC hosted an event through its Religious Freedom Center to discuss CVE.

The center partnered with the TAM Group, an organization that bills itself as a “highly trained and diverse group of experts on radicalization, Islamic theology, human development, social services, prison chaplaincy and community organizing.” The daylong conference included three panel discussions that assessed differing aspects of the campaign against radicalization. The opening—and most policy-specific—panel included the TAM Group’s Kareem Abdus-Salaam; Dr. Anthony Abdul Haqq Baker, a prominent British Muslim activist and scholar; Jeffrey Carroll, assistant chief of the Washington Metropolitan Police Department; and Dr. Tahir Wyatt, the first and only American to be appointed to teach at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

The panelists discussed a host of issues pertaining to the radicalization process before moving on to policy recommendations. Dr. Baker, who has experience in CVE programs in the United Kingdom, urged US policymakers to embrace the British model. First and foremost, he argued, the United States must refrain from allowing law enforcement agencies to develop and operate CVE strategies. As it stands, many Muslims in the United States are suspicious of cooperating in a CVE program and building partnerships with law enforcement units for fear of being targeted as terrorists themselves. Additionally, Dr. Baker added that law enforcement agencies should stop placing mosques under surveillance. Not only does this alienate nonviolent worshippers but it is ineffectual because, he explained, radicalization rarely actually takes place in the mosque.

Dr. Wyatt echoed Dr. Baker’s sentiments. Instead of mosques, those who become radicalized do so in secluded groups within the community itself. With the breadth of diversification on the Internet, Wyatt argued, radicalization increasingly takes place online. Dr. Wyatt also urged policymakers in the United States to end what he sees as the counterproductive nature of law enforcement-administered CVE. Instead, he said, the Muslim community should be provided with training and resources to prevent radicalization or to identify potentially radicalized individuals and de-radicalize them.

Defending the Homeland: The Future of US CVE Policy. On August 8, The Heritage Foundation held an event concerning the future of US policy on CVE. Two speakers presented their ideas during the discussion: Muhammad Fraser-Rahim, the executive director for North America at Quilliam International; and Seamus Hughes, the deputy director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University.

Much like the preceding discussion, Hughes spoke extensively on the need for CVE to be administered through actors other than law enforcement agencies. But, if CVE continues to be operated through law enforcement groups, then there must be sufficient training to prepare officers to engage with the community on a humanistic level, not simply as members of the criminal justice system. He emphasized that individuals are always within reach before becoming fully radicalized; therefore, CVE

programs must facilitate one-on-one engagement to identify these individuals and de-radicalize them when possible. Additionally, Hughes said the prevention aspect of CVE requires more funding and personnel to truly be effective.

Fraser-Rahim was adamant that the CVE program was not fully effective due to what he dubbed “one dimensional viewpoints” –an approach that is strictly operated in the context of counterterrorism programs or law enforcement. He also touched on an issue that is right at the heart of the CVE program’s controversial nature, particularly under the Trump Administration: the hyper-focus on Islamism as the main culprit for violent extremism. Fraser-Rahim said that such an approach does not address the full issue and alienates members of the Muslim community, citing statistics indicating that more deaths occurred in the United States last year as a result of right-wing extremism (e.g., anti-government groups) than Islamist extremism. Both panelists urged the new administration to stop focusing on changing the name of the policy – from CVE to “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism” – and to start providing the program with the resources it needs to build trust and foster social cohesion and inclusion for at-risk communities of all kinds.

Expanding the Role of Youth in Building Peace and Security. On the same day, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) hosted an event to discuss the lessons that can be learned from efforts to support the world’s youth as a force against violent conflict and extremism. USIP, along with organizations that focus on security and development like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Search for Common Ground, and YouthPower Learning, has experience working with youth in conflict areas like Iraq and Syria. Speakers from each of the aforementioned organizations, and Nigerian youth leader Imrana Buba, were slated to assess what resources and new ideas can be contributed to the global campaign against violent conflict and extremism.

USIP’s Aubrey Cox started the discussion with a summary of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2250, which outlines the five pillars of youth engagement. Since the resolution was adopted, Cox said, there have been a number of national governments that moved to build working partnerships with youth organizations and implement the pillars of the resolution. The pillars include youth participation, protection, and partnerships, preventing violence and extremism, and disengaging from armed conflict and reintegration into society.

Rachel Walsh Taza of Search for Common Ground issued an assessment of youth organizations around the globe. Taza indicated that, on average, youth-led organizations are finding success in mitigating conflict and halting terrorist recruitment. This is even more impressive when one considers the significant operational constraints many of these groups face due to the lack of resources. For

policymakers, Taza suggested identifying some of the stronger, more capable groups and investing in their efforts so that their positive influence in conflict areas can grow.

Jenn Heeg of YouthPower Learning presented useful working examples of CVE programs around the world. These programs tend to focus on one or more of the following factors: preventing violence from erupting, facilitating disengagement from violent groups, producing and amplifying narratives that counter those of extremists, and establishing meaningful partnerships with governments and other communities. While Heeg presented some impressive examples, she highlighted two Arab conflict zones that are particularly interesting. First, youth in Somalia have had success in a campaign to disengage their fellow youth from the terrorist group al-Shabaab. Second, USIP in Iraq has facilitated a youth-produced reality show (“Salaam Shabaab”) that has proven effective at crafting narratives that counter the extremist views of groups like ISIL and broadcasting those narratives around the country.

Taza concluded the discussion with policy recommendations—both for the US government and the central governments abroad—for countering violent extremism among the youth. First, governments should make certain that youth are represented and given agency over their lives. Second, officials should make efforts to facilitate collaborative efforts across points of division (e.g., ethnoreligious or racial divisions). Finally, governments and community leaders should observe and integrate individuals with different viewpoints; even youth who have engaged in violence should be heard and integrated.