

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE LACK OF A CVE STRATEGY IN THE USA?

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Over the last few years the United States has been one of the most enthusiastic proponents of the introduction of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) activities worldwide. It has spearheaded countless global initiatives, from a high-profile global summit hosted by the White House in February 2015 to the formation of permanent CVE-focused initiatives like the Abu Dhabi-based Hedayah. It has also been providing substantial financial support to counter-radicalisation programmes implemented in countries throughout the world through various State Department or USAID-funded initiatives.

Yet, this CVE enthusiasm abroad has not been matched domestically. Efforts on this front, in fact, have been timid, underfunded and haphazard. Technically the United States possesses a domestic counter-radicalisation strategy. In August 2011, in fact, the White House issued a paper, entitled *Empowering local partners to prevent violent extremism in the United States*, which was later followed by various programmatic papers providing further details.¹ Yet none of these documents outline initiatives that are even remotely as ambitious and far-reaching as those long implemented in many European countries.

With a few limited exceptions, most initiatives are in fact limited to funding research on the radicalisation process and engaging the American Muslim communities (laudable activities, to be sure). The few initiatives aimed at deradicalisation and disengagement take place only in a handful of geographical areas and are generally underfunded. Counter-narrative initiatives aimed at a domestic audience pale in terms of resources when compared to those funded overseas.

Arguably nine concurring reasons have caused the reluctance on the part of American authorities to devise anything more ambitious. They are:

1) The delay in the emergence of a domestic jihadist threat

American-based jihadist sympathisers possessing quintessential homegrown characteristics had been detected before September 11th 2001 and in relatively larger numbers after it (Vidino, 2009; Rosenau and Daly, 2010). Yet the widely held assumption among American

1. Available online at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf

policy-makers and counter-terrorism professionals was that radicalisation did not affect American Muslims except in sporadic cases. Tellingly, for many years following 9/11, in American political parlance the term “homegrown terrorism” was reserved solely for anti-government militias, white supremacists and eco-terrorist groups such as the Earth Liberation Front. Jihadists, even if American-born and possessing quintessential homegrown characteristics, were excluded from this category. This perception started to change around 2010, in the wake of various attacks by and arrests of homegrown jihadists. And it has definitely been internalised with the domestic Islamic State-related mobilisation, which has been unprecedented in numbers and quintessentially homegrown in nature (Vidino and Hughes, 2015). Yet this delayed perception has been a key factor in determining the late development of a US CVE strategy.

2) Belief that American Muslims’ good integration serves as an antidote to radicalisation

During the 2000s it was widely argued in American counterterrorism circles that home-grown terrorism of jihadist inspiration was a uniquely European problem, a direct consequence of Europe’s failed integration policies. Radicalisation, argued this narrative, is the inevitable by-product of the unemployment, social segregation, poor education and widespread discrimination plaguing European Muslim communities. Despite some notable exceptions, American Muslims, on the other hand, tend to enjoy economic and educational achievements that put them in the top tier of American society.²

To some degree these assumptions have been shattered, as few still believe that American Muslims are “immune” to radicalisation. Yet the perception that radicalisation is largely caused by social ills to which most American Muslims are not subject is widely held in many quarters, and has caused both a delay in the development of CVE programmes and, later, a timid approach to CVE.

3) Faith in “hard” counterterrorism tactics

Although only rarely applying the military and extrajudicial tools they have used overseas, since 9/11 American authorities have adopted a remarkably aggressive posture towards individuals and clusters associated with terrorism of jihadist inspiration operating on American soil.³ The 2001 Patriot Act granted them extensive surveillance powers and significantly decreased the separation between investigators and intelligence agencies. Moreover, authorities have often employed the so-called Al Capone law enforcement technique, arresting suspected terrorists for immigration, financial or other non-terrorism-related offenses in order to neutralise them when they did not possess enough evidence to convict them for terrorism.⁴

Most controversially, they have increasingly resorted to using *agents provocateurs*. Operating under the assumption that certain individuals espousing jihadist ideology are likely to eventually carry out acts of violence, US counterterrorism officials have sometimes resorted to triggering the passage from the radicalisation phase to action themselves. Therefore, since 9/11, the FBI has approached known radicals, many of which were unaffiliated wannabes, with *agents provocateurs*. Under the strict direction of authorities such individuals approach their targets, lead them to believe they belong to Al-Qaeda or, lately, the Islamic State, and encourage them to either plan attacks or provide material support to terrorist organisations.

2. According to a Pew Research Center study, the average American Muslim household’s income is equal to, if not higher, than the average American’s. See Pew 2007: 24–25. <http://www.pewresearch.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/>.

3. Cases like those of Ali al-Marri, a Qatari national arrested in Peoria in the wake of 9/11, and Jose Padilla, a US citizen linked to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who were detained without charges for years in a military prison before being tried in the civilian court system have been exceptions. The vast majority of terrorism suspects apprehended within the United States since 9/11 have been granted due process rights.

4. The term, commonly used by American law enforcement practitioners, owes its origin to the fact that infamous 1920s Chicago mobster Al Capone was never convicted for his well known criminal activities, of which authorities never possessed enough evidence to stand in court, but, rather, simply for tax evasion.

These tactics, employed with similar enthusiasm by both the Bush and the Obama administrations, have been extensively criticised by many who argue they infringe on civil liberties and create tensions with Muslim communities (Markon 2010). Yet their effectiveness, at least in terms of incarcerating targets, is undisputable. A deep belief in the effectiveness of these measures has led many in the US counterterrorism community to argue that other “softer” measures are not necessary.

4) Massive bureaucratic structure

The size of the country and of its bureaucratic apparatus, with the overlap of federal, state and local jurisdictions, creates an additional obstacle to the implementation of a comprehensive counter-radicalisation strategy. Coordinating the activities of the over 17,000 law enforcement agencies working on terrorism-related matters throughout the country is an understandably daunting task (Bjelopera and Randol, 2000). Various agencies, such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), have over time taken key roles in shaping a domestic CVE strategy. But inter- and infra-agency rivalries, bureaucratic issues and the sheer size of the country have made that task particularly hard.

5) Separation of church and state

Deep political, cultural and constitutional issues have also played an important role in determining the American reluctance to experiment with domestic counter-radicalisation. The constitutionally sanctioned principle of separation of church and state is arguably one of the main ones. The concept, in fact, is so revered and politically sensitive that US authorities tend to be extremely reluctant to engage in any activity that could give the impression they are blurring that line.

While many counter-radicalisation activities have nothing to do with religion, it is inevitable that in programmes dealing with jihadist extremism in some cases issues related to Islam would appear. Some European programmes focus almost entirely on religion and would therefore be difficult to replicate as government-funded projects in the United States. But American authorities tend to be wary of being seen as politically engaging in or financially supporting any kind of programme that deals with religion, even in a more indirect way.

6) First Amendment issues

A similar constitutional and political damp on American authorities' enthusiasm for counter-radicalisation initiatives is the country's sacrosanct tradition of respect for freedom of speech. America has traditionally provided a degree of protection to all kinds of extreme discourse that is unparalleled in virtually all European countries. This tradition is not just enshrined in the constitution but deeply entrenched in the American political psyche and supported by all sides of the political spectrum. Consequently, American authorities tend to be reluctant to engage in counter-radicalisation activities that can be perceived as limiting free speech.

7) Little political/public pressure

In most cases, European counter-radicalisation programmes were established after a catalyst event – generally a successful or failed attack carried out by homegrown jihadist militants. None of these dynamics seem to have taken place in the United States. Over the last few years

several attacks with quintessential homegrown characteristics have been carried out or attempted in the United States. Hundreds of American militants have been arrested on American soil or reported fighting with various jihadist groups overseas. Yet none of these events has triggered a widespread perception among the American public and policymaking community that homegrown jihadism is a major problem that requires actions other than a traditional law enforcement approach.

8) Political opposition

The debate over the introduction of CVE measures has often been a highly polarised one. Various critics, both in and outside of Congress, have frequently argued that CVE measures unfairly target the Muslim community and/or are ruses designed to spy on it. Similarly, many have argued that right-wing extremism represents a comparable, if not bigger, threat to the US and that CVE measures should also target that form of militancy. This heated debate, which often leads to political grandstanding, has been one of the main brakes on the development of a domestic CVE strategy.

9) Reluctance to tackle ideology

While all these factors are unquestionably important, it is arguable that none of them is as important in determining the shyness of the US government in developing extensive counter-radicalisation programmes as its reluctance to enter the field of ideology. The Obama and, in its last years, Bush administrations have largely avoided dealing with the ideological underpinnings of radicalisation, particularly on the domestic front. While there is no question that various elements within the US government fully acknowledge the role jihadist ideology plays in the process, there is no government-wide consensus on the matter. Since a comprehensive counter-radicalisation programme entails tackling the ideological element as one of the main components, albeit not the only one, of radicalisation, this indecision leads to the inability to draft extensive programmes like those implemented in Europe.

Recent developments

During the last years of the Obama administration and due largely to the rise of the Islamic State on the global scene, authorities witnessed a rise in the number of American Muslims attracted to jihadist ideology. This development has led authorities to shed some of their previous hesitations about delving into domestic CVE and develop various initiatives. While still not amounting to the level of commitment seen in many European countries, these efforts represent a clear break from the past.⁵

One CVE approach that has recently attracted the interest of US authorities is targeted interventions. While some of its field offices had been occasionally carrying out some mild forms of interventions below the radar, the FBI formally entered the field in April 2016 through the creation of so-called Shared Responsibility Committees (SRC). SRCs were meant to get communities more involved in CVE and help “potential violent extremists” disengage (FBI, 2016). SRCs were to be “multi-disciplinary groups voluntarily formed in local communities” at the request of the communities themselves and “sometimes with the encouragement of

5. The author wishes to thank Program on Extremism Research Fellow Katerina Papatheodorou for her help on this section of the paper.

the FBI.” The bureau would have referred at-risk individuals to SRCs and communities would have built a personalised intervention programme to address the issue (FBI, 2016).

The programme encountered severe criticism. Many civil rights activists saw SRCs as the FBI’s attempts to create a network of community-based informants. Such a network, they argued, would have infringed upon the civil rights of Muslim communities and created mistrust between community members (Hussain and McLaughlin, 2016). Similar concerns were expressed by various Congressmen, who highlighted the programme’s limited transparency (Committee on Homeland Security Democrats, 2016). Influenced by the negative feedback, the FBI eventually decided against launching SRCs.

Intervention programmes at the local level appear to have had better luck. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) has been operating the so-called RENEW (Recognizing Extremist Network Early Warnings) initiative, an early intervention programme that seeks to bring together law enforcement, Joint Terrorism Task Force officials, and mental health professionals (The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). While many of its dynamics have not been made public, the scheme appears to be similar to Channel and other European intervention programmes, allowing for a RENEW Coordinator to determine what kind of intervention (such as involvement of mental health professionals or social services) is most likely to interrupt an individual’s radicalisation trajectory.

Small deradicalisation initiatives have also been set up in other areas. Boston had been identified as a “pilot city” to work on deradicalisation at the 2015 White House Summit. Since then local and federal authorities, under the leadership of the US Attorney’s Office, have been working on devising interventions schemes. And, in what represents a first in the country, in 2016 a Minneapolis judge ordered a deradicalisation intervention for six young Somali-Americans convicted of attempting to join the Islamic State in Syria (Koerner, 2017).

In the last years of its mandate the Obama administration also seemed to reverse the trend that saw CVE efforts as plagued by a chronic dearth of funds. In December 2015, Congress passed the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act 2016, allocating \$10 million for CVE. In July 2016, the DHS announced a CVE Grant Program providing financial support to organisations working on one of the five focus areas identified by the department. FEMA, which is part of the DHS, was responsible for allocating the grants. The five focus areas were selected based on what current research on extremism “has shown are likely to be most effective” in addressing violent extremism (Department of Homeland Security, 2016). The five areas included: a. Developing resilience; b. Challenging the narrative; c. Training and engaging with community members; d. Managing intervention activities; and e. building capacity of community-led non-profit organisations active in CVE (Department of Homeland Security, 2016). The organisations selected to receive the funds were announced on January 13 2016, a week before President-elect Donald Trump’s inauguration (Department of Homeland Security, 2017).

It is difficult to forecast at this stage what the change in administration will mean for domestic (and, for that matter, international) CVE in America.

The Trump administration has been cryptic and vague on many policy issues, including CVE. What can be said at the moment about its future intentions can therefore be little more than speculation, educated guesses made by interpreting rumours and the attitudes of individuals involved in the administration. As of early June 2017, in fact, there has been no CVE-related official statement or decision.

Uncorroborated reports that surfaced in February indicated that the administration was planning an overhaul of the federal CVE strategy. They also suggested that CVE would have been renamed either Countering Islamic Extremism or Countering Radical Islamic Extremism. As the names indicated, the strategy was supposedly to focus solely on Islamist extremists – in that sense not different in substance from Obama’s strategy, albeit with more direct naming (Edwards et al., 2017). A much more muscular focus on Islamist ideology has also been hinted at by various individuals close to the administration who have been involved in terrorism-related matters.

These rumours spread at a time when the administration’s controversial decision to preclude individuals originating in several Muslim-majority countries from entering the country (what came to be known as the “Muslim ban”) was made public. These dynamics led at least four organisations that had been selected by the Obama-promoted CVE Grant Program to state that they were considering rejecting the funds if the administration reshaped CVE according to certain modalities (Nixon et al., 2017). Ka Joog, a Minnesota-based organisation that had been awarded \$500,000 under the programme announced that because of the new administration’s “policies which promote hate, fear, uncertainty” they were not accepting the money (Ka Joog). A similar decision was also reached by Bayan Claremont, an Islamic graduate school in California, which turned down an \$800,000 grant, the second-largest amount awarded (Bharath, 2017). In an official statement, the school announced that they would continue to work with the government when needed but “given the anti-Muslim actions of the current executive branch, we cannot in good conscience accept this grant (Bayan Claremont, 2017).”

Domestic CVE, which in the final years of the Obama administration seemed to have finally managed to be seen by many American policymakers and law enforcement agencies as useful, finds itself the victim of the current extremely polarised political climate. It is difficult to foresee, less than six months into the Trump administration, what will happen to CVE. It might be completely scrapped, as some within the Trump camp see it as a pointless and politically correct approach to a problem that needs other, more muscular solutions. Or it might be revamped, but possibly in ways that differ substantially from past iterations and likely stress ideological components with much more emphasis.

It is also likely that, in this chaotic environment, various actors (both within law enforcement and civil society) will develop their own initiatives that function at the local level. There are in fact indications that an increasing number of community groups and NGOs are engaging in the CVE space. Similarly, various police forces and even federal agencies have been quietly starting their own projects, running small initiatives that, while attracting (on purpose) little attention, have given some initial good results. This localised and low-key approach might be the direction of CVE at times of extreme confusion and polarisation in Washington DC.

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