



New Strategies for Countering Homegrown Violent Extremism

George Selim

Director for Community Partnerships, White House National Security Staff

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Good afternoon. I'd like to start by thanking The Washington Institute for putting together this important Policy Forum, and a special thank-you to both Matt Levitt and Hedieh Mirahmadi for asking me to participate today.

First, I'd like to lay a foundation for today's discussion. For those of you who have followed the evolution of the terrorist threat our nation has faced in the months and years since 9/11, you will notice that the title of today's panel, "Countering Violent Extremism," is a somewhat newer term, relatively speaking, and one that didn't exist in our national security lexicon on September 12, 2001. The tools and tactics the U.S. government has used to protect the homeland in the past twelve-plus years have evolved considerably, and today I look forward to talking about one of those tools and the process by which local communities like Montgomery County, Maryland, are implementing it.

From the outset of this conversation, it is important to keep in mind that the programs and policies for preventing violent extremism are not, and can never be, static. That is to say, they must evolve as the nature of threats in the homeland changes and evolves. Today, I share the panel with two people who have recognized the evolution of threats to their communities and have gone above and beyond to put in place measures to allow for violence intervention and prevention efforts at the intersection of faith communities and local government.

Let me start by sharing some important background on how the federal government views this issue and steps it has taken to address the threat of homegrown violent extremism:

In August 2011, the White House released the first ever strategy to prevent violent extremism in the United States. It is important to note that unlike other documents such as the National Security Strategy or National Counterterrorism Strategy, which are issued every several years, this is the first ever U.S. government strategy to address ideologically inspired radicalization to violence in the homeland. Our central goal in this effort is to prevent violent extremists and their supporters from inspiring, radicalizing, financing, or recruiting individuals or groups in the United States to commit acts of violence.

While our approach is flexible enough to address the various forms of violent extremism, the strategy does prioritize al-Qaeda and its affiliates and adherents as the preeminent terrorist threat to our country today. Since 9/11, these groups—and homegrown violent extremists inspired by them—have been responsible for numerous plots, attacks, and attempted attacks against the homeland.

The words we use matter, and clear definitions provide transparency and clarity to our policies and programs. Our U.S. government strategy for preventing violent extremism in the United States defines violent extremists as “individuals who support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further political goals.” The term “countering violent extremism” refers broadly to some of the “preventive” aspects of counterterrorism, which include: (1) broad engagement and trust building with communities targeted by violent extremist recruiting; (2) efforts focused on preventing terrorists from recruiting or inspiring others to act; and (3) improving the capacity of communities and law enforcement to identify individuals who pose a risk of carrying out acts of violence.

Shared Responsibilities

Security of the homeland is not the charge of a single department or agency, but the responsibility of all of us, from our largest city police force to smallest law enforcement jurisdiction, our biggest company to smallest independent business, from parents and teachers to county councils, and from the whole community to each individual within those communities. As President Obama said in a past State of the Union address, “[A]s extremists try to inspire acts of violence within our borders, we are responding with the strength of our communities, with respect for the rule of law, and with the conviction that American Muslims are a part of our American family.”

The efforts that Dr. Mirahmadi and Police Chief Thomas Manger have forged under the Faith Community Advisory Council of Montgomery County are indeed part of the whole-of-community response that government calls upon. Their efforts are part of the shared responsibility of protecting our communities from a range of threats, from illegal drugs to human trafficking to online predators to other illicit actions that often prey on immigrant or minority groups.

But where do these shared responsibilities start and stop?

The responsibility of federal officials on matters of homegrown violent extremism has become increasingly clear in the past several years, but as the process of radicalization to violence migrates to online spaces, a new and different set of tools is needed, and these tools must go beyond conventional law enforcement practices.

Young people in communities like Montgomery County, Maryland, can be affected and negatively influenced by the social media campaigns of groups like al-Shabab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), just as young people in North Africa or South Asia can be.

Beyond the legal framework that guides all federal investigations and prosecutions in the United States, the federal government has the shared responsibility and technical expertise to communicate the threat posed by violent extremists to state and local law enforcement, municipal government officials, and concerned communities nationally.

Preventing violent extremism in the homeland is based on a complex set of relationships, mostly at the state and local levels.

Programs at those levels provide the best opportunities to mitigate the radicalization process, with sensitivities for regional and local realities as well as the ability to address accompanying social and psychological issues.

The development and incubation of programs like the Montgomery County Intervention and Prevention of Violence Subcommittee will serve as a great example of both pluralism and local ingenuity. The progress of the Montgomery County effort will help guide federal government focus in a number of key regions nationally, and will allow us to leverage ongoing, albeit nascent, efforts in many cities and make substantial investments of time and effort in a few critical places. I hope that the success of the Montgomery County model will spur action in other cities in the D.C. metro area as well as in nearby regions.

Homegrown violent extremists motivated by al-Qaeda's distorted interpretation of Islam have not been able to carry out large-scale attacks on the homeland since 9/11, but their repeated attempts can nonetheless terrorize a nation. Terrorists prey on vulnerable individuals, on people who feel victimized and humiliated and find their identities by joining violent extremist movements. Our arsenal of tools against terrorism must continue to evolve and strengthen the resilience of communities that may be targeted by calls to violence from al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, and similarly aligned groups, and these tools should include formal roles for education officials, mental health professionals, and faith leaders.

Our panel today is a prototype for the shared responsibility on preventing violent extremism in the homeland. Communities—made up of parents, teachers, and concerned citizens alike—didn't ask for this added burden and shared responsibility, but, alas, a post-9/11 reality is that our best homeland security is equal parts public sector and private citizens.

Toward a More Comprehensive Approach

Since issuing our national policy on preventing violent extremism just over two years ago, our domestic interagency efforts have relied heavily on community policing strategies. While our public outreach programs are effective in many ways, this law-enforcement-centric approach has somewhat limited the federal government's ability to customize programs and innovate at the local level. These efforts need to be complemented with available options for intervention against the threat of radicalization to violence in the homeland through partnerships with community-based education officials, mental health professionals, and faith leaders.

Prevention must be paramount. Augmentation of existing federal, state, and local efforts nationally with more non-law-enforcement-oriented alternatives for individuals or segments of communities at risk of radicalization to violence could provide a far greater capacity to address individuals earlier and potentially more effectively. Law enforcement officials such as Chief Manger have recognized this, and could make use of these additional tools to address potential threats to public safety that do not necessarily yet justify a legal-based response.

Community-Based, Locally Focused Problem Solving

So, in conclusion:

We are fortunate that our experience with community-based problem solving, local partnerships, and community-oriented policing provides a basis for addressing violent extremism as part of a broader mandate of community safety. We will strengthen partnerships among local actors, civil society, the private sector, governments, law enforcement, and others to counter today's evolving threat.

Our guiding principle for today's conversation is that federal efforts must support local capabilities and programs, like in Montgomery County, to address problems of national concern.

I would like to again thank The Washington Institute and my fellow panelists for today's discussion, and I look forward to engaging with the audience during the question-and-answer session.

Thank you.