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**Author(s):** David Schanzer, Joe Eyerman

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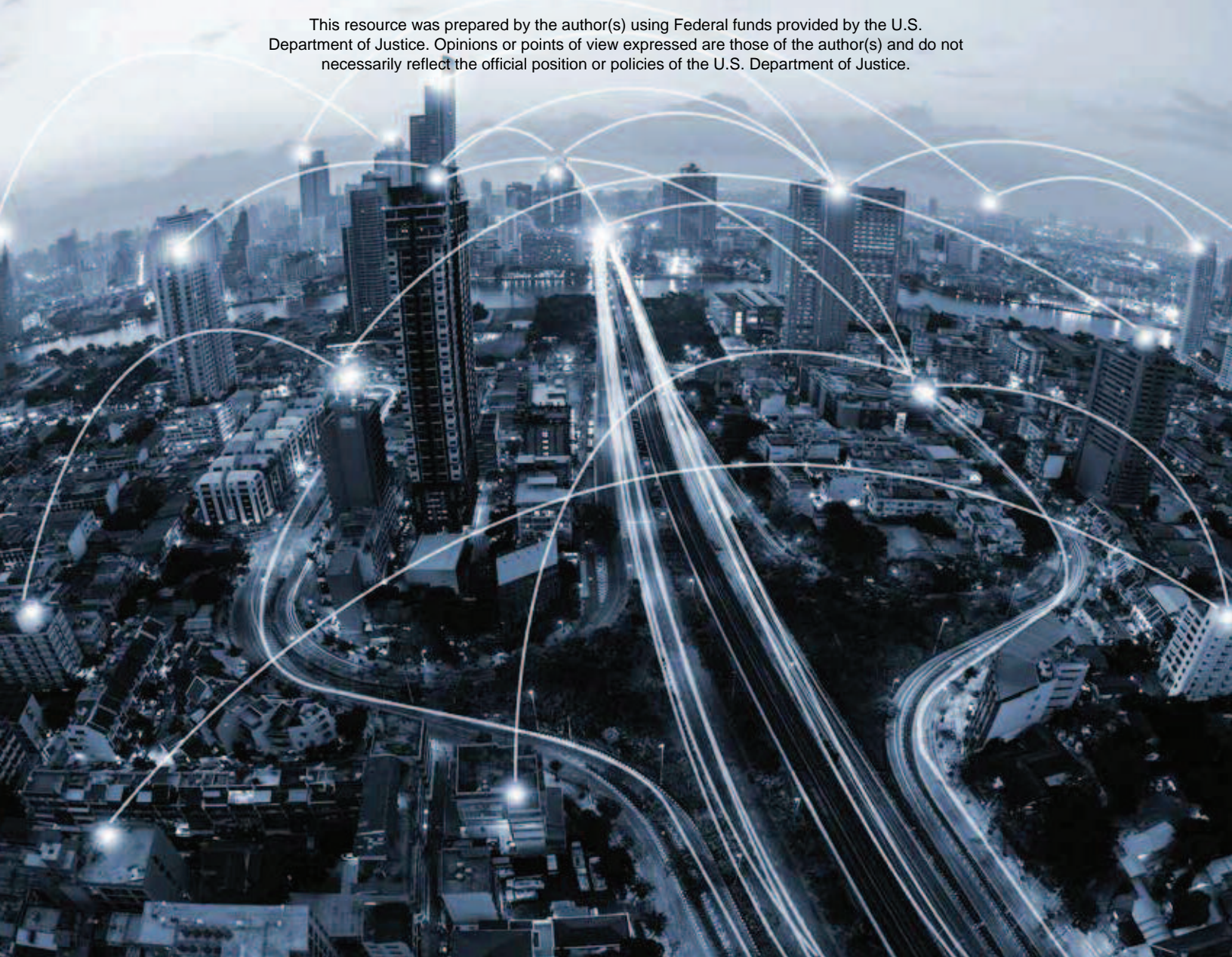
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# ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

## *A Review of the Obama Administration's CVE Initiative*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

David Schanzer, Duke University • Joe Eyeran, RTI International

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# ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITIES TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM

*A Review of the Obama  
Administration's CVE Initiative*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to a series of high-profile homegrown terrorist attacks, in August 2011 the Obama Administration launched a multi-faceted initiative to prevent violent extremism. This program, what we call the “Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Initiative,” supplemented established counterterrorism practices with a set of activities designed to engage communities in the process of diminishing the appeal and effectiveness of violent extremist ideologies. The CVE Initiative developed gradually over the next five and a half years but was promptly terminated after the Trump Administration took office in January 2017.

This report presents a review of the Obama Administration’s CVE Initiative. The conclusions are based on research conducted from 2014-16 consisting of: a nationwide survey of US Attorneys about their CVE activities\*, interviews of key stakeholders at the various federal agencies that comprised the CVE Initiative, interviews of federal law enforcement officials in local U.S. Attorneys’ Offices and FBI Field Offices, and focus groups of Muslim Americans about their views of federal CVE efforts and related issues.

Based on this research, we reached three main conclusions. First, the CVE Initiative properly attempted to address the compelling need of developing a program to prevent homegrown violent extremism and was beginning to build momentum toward that goal prior to its termination. Second, despite the necessity of adopting a preventative approach, the Obama Administration faced multiple structural and societal barriers that undercut the CVE Initiative’s chances for success. And finally, the CVE Initiative was flawed in key respects which undermined its effectiveness and ability to sustain itself through the transition to a new Administration. Policy recommendations flowing from our findings are provided for policymakers who seek to build a violence extremism prevention program in the future at the federal level (although many of these lessons learned could apply to other levels of government as well).

### THE BENEFITS OF A PREVENTATIVE APPROACH

Preventing acts of homegrown violent extremism continues to be a high national security priority. The two primary sources of violent extremism inside the U.S. since 9/11 have been 1) individuals inspired by the ideology espoused by al Qaeda, ISIS, and likeminded groups and 2) individuals inspired by white supremacy. Regardless of the (comparatively small) amount of violence these individuals cause compared to the overall rate of violent crime in America, media coverage, political discourse, and public attitudes suggest that these crimes are considered to be especially damaging to American society. However, these crimes are especially difficult for law enforcement officials to preempt. Almost all homegrown violent extremists lack connectivity to international terrorist groups and they often leave few clues of their intentions prior to engaging in violence. Their presence inside the U.S. entitles them to rights to obtain firearms and civil liberties protections that limit law enforcement’s ability to conduct surveillance. Consequently, it makes sense for the federal government to attempt to develop a set of policies to reduce the number of individuals attracted to violent extremism and dissuade them from engaging in violence.

While the Obama Administration’s CVE Initiative was flawed in many respects, its efforts to engage communities in violent extremism prevention were well intentioned and had many positive impacts. First, these programs strengthened lines of

\* A report containing the questions, results, and analysis of the survey has been previously published. See D. Schanzer & J. Eyerman, “United States Attorneys’ Community Outreach and Engagement Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism: Results From a Nationwide Survey,” December 2016.

communication between communities and federal agencies – which is a building block for all forms of crime prevention. Second, the CVE Initiative stimulated strategic thinking about ways to prevent violent extremism. Creative approaches to education, community building, and, most importantly, intervention for youth at-risk were developed because of the CVE Initiative. Finally, the CVE Initiative provided a forum for addressing many problems experienced by Muslim Americans in the post-9/11 era. In light of the challenging circumstances Muslim Americans have faced during this period, providing them a voice inside federal security agencies was warranted and beneficial.

## **BARRIERS FACED BY THE CVE INITIATIVE**

Although developing a preventative approach to homegrown violent extremism was in the national interest, the Obama Administration's CVE Initiative faced multiple, severe challenges. The Initiative attempted to build trust between communities whose members were at risk of recruitment to violent extremism, but these efforts were taking place in an environment in which deep societal anti-Muslim sentiment was breeding cynicism and mistrust within the Muslim-American community on many fronts. First, many Muslim Americans believed that federal counterterrorism policies were unfair and unlawful. They furthermore objected to CVE being directed virtually exclusively at Muslims even though substantial violence was being perpetrated by white supremacists and other non-Muslim violent extremists. Indeed, many Muslim Americans overtly opposed the CVE Initiative because they perceived it to be interwoven with surveillance and other counterterrorism policies, which they already believed to be discriminatory. Any future effort to develop a community-based preventative effort through government outreach and engagement will need to consider and address these environmental factors more effectively than did the Obama CVE Initiative.

## **KEY FLAWS IN THE CVE INITIATIVE**

The systemic barriers to CVE would have been difficult to overcome with even a perfectly conceived and executed program. Unfortunately, the Obama Administration's CVE Initiative was flawed in many respects.

The program's fundamental error was failing to clearly define its goals. For some, the purpose of the CVE Initiative was to enlist community assistance in identifying specific individuals at risk of engaging in acts of violent extremism; to others the main purpose was to build resiliency to extremism within communities whose members were vulnerable to recruitment by extremist organizations; to others, it had other purposes. This lack of clear definition stunted coherent policy development and allowed the CVE Initiative to be defined by its opponents in a manner that served their purposes, rather than the government's.

Communications missteps also hardened opposition to the CVE Initiative, especially among Muslim-Americans. A key error was rolling out a major expansion of CVE when concerns about the power and barbarism of ISIS was running rampant in the United States and around the world. Many Muslim Americans felt as if the timing and the content of this announcement, and the subsequent White House Summit on CVE, linked their community, in the eyes of many Americans, with the rise of ISIS and cast a cloak of suspicion over them.

Including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the nation's lead counterterrorism investigatory entity, as a lead agency in the CVE Initiative also deeply damaged the effort. Doing so failed to recognize the inherent conflict of interest of the FBI simultaneously investigating terrorism offenses and conducting community outreach and engagement. In addition, concerns about FBI counterterrorism tactics among Muslim Americans inhibited trust-building between the community and the federal government, which was a core objective of the Initiative. Moreover, some of the FBI personnel we interviewed were poor fits for community engagement work as we found that they dismissed Muslim Americans' concerns about FBI tactics and policy as unjustified complaining and were skeptical about the willingness of Muslims Americans to provide assistance to law

enforcement. Furthermore, the FBI's policy prohibiting many forms of contact between the FBI and the Council on American Islamic Relations undercut the Bureau's ability to interact with an important part of the Muslim-American community and created an additional barrier to the development of trust. The FBI's three-year rotation policy for agents also weakened its ability to develop long-term relationships with local communities.

The CVE Initiative also suffered from its virtually exclusive focus on engagement with Muslim-American communities. The failure of the Initiative to develop approaches for interacting with communities whose members were vulnerable to recruitment by white supremacists or other extremists, severely undermined support for the program in portions of the Muslim-American community. They viewed the unidimensional focus of the Initiative as discriminatory and believed that it bolstered the false stereotype that Muslim Americans were more susceptible to violent extremism than other Americans.

Finally, the CVE Initiative was poorly-structured and severely under-resourced. When it began, it had no budget, no administrative structure, no lead agency, and no authorization or appropriation from the Congress. These flaws were gradually remedied over the life of the program, but they hindered the program's ability to gain buy-in from participants and sufficient bureaucratic heft to sustain itself.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the bulk of this report identifies difficulties the Obama Administration's CVE effort faced, we do not believe that efforts to prevent the emergence and spread of violent extremism in the United States should be abandoned. Preventing ideological violence is a very difficult challenge that needs to evolve and adapt as additional knowledge is gathered and new approaches are tested. In our view, the CVE Initiative launched in 2011 was a "proof of concept" that developed slowly and was beginning to gain traction by early 2017 when the Trump Administration took over. It was not possible at that time to determine whether CVE "worked," and it is unfortunate that the entire line of effort was terminated.

There is extensive evidence that our society, and others around the globe, are polarizing on political, ideological, and other grounds. If this trend continues, the need for strategies to undercut violent extremism will become ever more apparent. Federal policymakers who wish to revisit this topic in the future should adopt the core principles for violent extremism prevention programing and consider taking the specific actions listed below:

### Core Principles

- Programs to prevent violent extremism will fail unless they apply to all communities targeted by extremists and all forms of extremism.
- The federal government should promote, but not lead, efforts to prevent violent extremism.
- Violent extremism prevention programs should be developed with the input of state and local government agencies and community organizations to ensure there is buy-in and participation by those needed to execute the programs.
- Prevention programs should be limited in scope and carefully constructed to ensure they do not create or reinforce stereotypes
- All entities involved in violent extremism prevention programs should explicitly state that providing counterterrorism intelligence to law enforcement or identifying individuals for potential criminal investigations are not the purposes of the program.
- Federal security and law enforcement agencies should engage with local communities to build trust and improve public

services, but these activities must be independent from violent extremism prevention programs.

- To repair the breach of trust between federal law enforcement agencies and some Muslim-American communities, these agencies should enhance their outreach and engagement with Muslim-American communities and take affirmative steps to improve the relationship.
- Federal violent extremism prevention programs should be adequately staffed and funded.

## Specific Actions

### The Federal Government's Role in Violent Extremism Prevention Programs

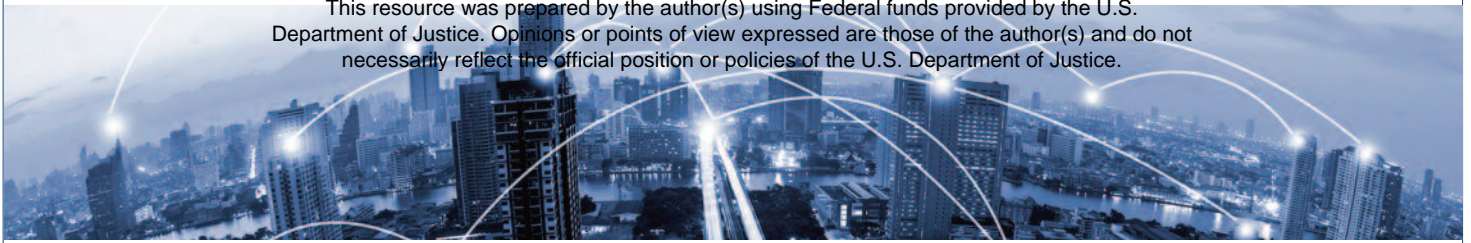
- The federal government should not lead violent extremism prevention programs, but rather should promote the development and growth of such programs nationally through its convening power, research, technical assistance, and, most importantly, funding.
- The federal government should implement violent extremism prevention programs primarily through grants to local governments and non-governmental organizations focused on at-risk youth, crime and delinquency prevention, youth mental health, and community education.
- Lead federal security officials like the United States Attorneys and FBI Special Agents in Charge should not be involved with these efforts
- Congress should provide at least \$50 million in violent extremism prevention grants (the final Obama Administration budget request).
- Congress should also provide regular oversight and require the federal agency supervising the program to develop metrics and conduct regular, independent program evaluations.

### Goals of Local Violent Extremism Programs

- Communities should be empowered to identify the educational, and community building activities that they believe will provide a bulwark against violent extremist ideologies.
- Programs should be directed primarily at youth and young adults, including programs that are designed and operated by young adults.
- Violent extremism prevention programs should emphasize the creation of locally based interventions to address mental health or other issues connected with youths at risk of engaging in violent extremism.
- One-half of federal funding should be allocated to programs that address violent extremism based on ideologies other than those advanced by al Qaeda, ISIS, and likeminded groups.

### Outreach and Engagement by Federal Law Enforcement Agencies

- Federal security and law enforcement agencies should build trust with communities targeted by violent extremists because trust-building activities will advance their missions.
- There should be no explicit or implicit quid pro quo between trust-building activities and specific forms of law enforcement cooperation by community leaders or members.



### ***Department of Justice***

- United States Attorneys should continue outreach and engagement activities with a wide range of communities.
- Outreach and engagement activities should emphasize how the Department of Justice can serve the needs of the community.
- Congress should appropriate staffing funding to United States Attorneys' Offices to support community outreach and engagement activities.
- Discussions with communities should cover a wide range of potential threats, not exclusively counterterrorism.
- United States Attorneys should continue their efforts to build trust and strong relationships with Muslim-American communities.
- Issues of special concern to the Muslim-American community – such as hate crimes, discrimination, and immigration enforcement – are fertile areas for dialogue and education.
- Counterterrorism should be raised with Muslim-Americans only in the context of community involvement in a wide range of crime prevention efforts.
- In order to build more trust in all federal law enforcement, United States Attorneys should discuss with Muslim-American communities their role in supervising electronic surveillance by the FBI and determining whether a criminal referral from the FBI will be prosecuted.
- United States Attorneys should discuss with Muslim-American communities official Department of Justice policies regarding the use of informants in criminal investigations and preventing entrapment.
- The Executive Office of United States Attorneys should develop training modules for new U.S. Attorneys and other Department of Justice employees on outreach and engagement practices.
- The Department of Justice should develop clear guidelines for determining when acts of violence motivated by religious animus will be charged as a federal hate crime and discuss this topic with Muslim-American organizations and communities.
- Decisions regarding whether to bring federal hate crime charges against a perpetrator of violence against Muslim Americans should be made deliberatively, and Muslim-American communities should be provided the same opportunity for consultation on such issues as other communities.

### ***Federal Bureau of Investigation***

- In the field of counterterrorism, the FBI should continue to do what it does best, use the full range of its investigatory powers to preempt and deter acts of terrorism in the United States.
- Consistent with the Meese Commission report, however, the FBI should not be involved in violent extremism prevention programming.
- Special Agents in Charge should conduct outreach and engagement with a wide range of communities in their jurisdiction, including, but not exclusive to, Muslim-American communities.
- The goal of such outreach should be to encourage communities to support law enforcement efforts in their communities and contact the FBI if they have concerns about public safety.
- FBI Headquarters should develop presentations for SAC's to use to explain FBI policies regarding surveillance, use of informants, and entrapment to Muslim- American communities and train SAC's on best practices in community engagement.



- Line FBI special agents, however, should not conduct community outreach and engagement due to conflicts of interest with their investigatory activities.
- Line FBI agents, of course, should continue developing useful law enforcement contacts in all communities and encourage community leaders and members to provide information to the FBI about potential criminal activity. But at all times, such agents should make clear that they are acting as criminal investigators.
- When appropriate, the FBI should refer individuals of concern to community-based intervention programs, but the FBI should not organize, fund, and operate these intervention programs.
- The FBI should continue and expand its Citizens Academy and recruit a diverse set of community members to participate, including Muslim Americans.
- The FBI should consider rescinding its ban on interaction with CAIR in light of its questionable utility and the damage it causes to community relations with Muslim Americans.

### ***Department of Homeland Security***

- Outreach and engagement with Muslim-American communities via the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties should continue.
- Officials from other key elements of the Department of Homeland Security, such as the TSA and CBP, should regularly attend these outreach and engagement events.
- Outreach and engagement with Muslim Americans should address a broad range of issues and not focus exclusively on counterterrorism. Consequently, DHS should discontinue use of the Community Awareness Briefing (which addresses only terrorism), but rather integrate terrorism awareness materials into educational materials that discuss a broad range of issues and threats.
- The Community Resilience Exercise that brings together Muslim community members and law enforcement officials to discuss terrorism prevention is a beneficial activity, so long as similar exercises are conducted with a broad range of other communities as well.
- Lead local officials from the Transportation Security Agency and Customs and Border Protection should also conduct outreach and community engagement independent of CRCL with Muslim-American and other communities to address community concerns about travel and immigration.

### **Federal Government Actions to Build Trust with Muslim-American Communities**

- The president should visit a mosque.
- Elected officials should attend Muslim-American civic events and be pictured with Muslim Americans.
- The president and other elected officials should speak out when bigoted actions and statements are directed against Muslim Americans.
- Muslim Americans should be appointed to high level federal government positions.
- Federal security agencies should take affirmative steps to recruit Muslim Americans.
- Communications from the White House or federal agencies following violent extremist incidents by Muslim Americans should mention statements by Muslim American organizations condemning such violence.