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Preventing Violent Extremism in US: Updating the Strategy

By Cameron Sumpter

Synopsis

The United States executive branch has released an updated version of its 2011 strategy to prevent violent extremism through community engagement. While additions offer promise, effective implementation will need to overcome persistent problems of stigmatisation and mistrust.

Commentary

WITH EYES fixated on the caustic drama of the United States Presidential debates, the White House last week quietly rolled out an updated national strategy to prevent violent extremism (PVE). The lack of fanfare surrounding the announcement was likely due to criticism aimed at the plan's 2011 predecessor, which sought to empower "local partners" to tackle the problem of radicalisation in the US.

Some have argued that "engagement" initiatives stigmatise and securitise Muslim communities and actually represent covert strategies for intelligence gathering. In contrast, others on the political right believe PVE is too politically correct and accommodating of potentially criminal behaviour. How much is new in the updated strategy and to what extent are criticisms of the PVE project still valid?

Five Years in the Making

The 2011 plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States was more a statement of the intended approach than an actual strategy. The 12-page document stressed that community strength and resilience was the best defence against violent extremism, and the federal government should act as facilitator and convenor for grassroots efforts.

Three “broad areas of action” were outlined: provision of support for communities; building expertise on processes of radicalisation; and countering extremist propaganda. Five years on and these ideas are now ready to be actualised.

The October 2016, Strategic Implementation Plan offers more specific direction, with a new interagency Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Task Force coordinating efforts and managing resources. Local multidisciplinary teams will create bespoke intervention programmes to suit individual needs, and former extremists will be encouraged to engage with prisoners to support rehabilitation efforts.

Trust and Be Trusted

The CVE Task Force was established in early 2016 and comprises a number of state institutions, including the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the National Counterterrorism Centre. Beyond integrating contributions from government stakeholders, the Task Force may allocate grants of between US\$20,000 and \$1.5 million to community-based projects, but this has already run into problems.

In late August 2016, a collective of 20 organisations, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), wrote to Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson stating they would not apply for funding as they believed government backing tarnished genuinely grass-roots projects and would “undermine the messengers” working to redirect wayward young people.

The US government recognised the importance of building trust with community groups in 2011, and the updated strategy puts further emphasis on this priority. The Implementation Plan specifically states that CVE initiatives are not conducted to collect information and claims that “Federal law enforcement agencies have safeguards in place to ensure there is an appropriate separation between community outreach and intelligence gathering”.

Some may not be convinced. It has been widely reported that the FBI has employed investigation methods described as entrapment, at times running sting operations in which they devise fake terrorism plots and provide suspects with weapons and targets. Another strategy is coercing people into spying on their friends.

The ongoing trial of a group of young Somali-American men accused of forming an Islamic State cell in Minneapolis features both of these FBI tactics. One observer told reporters outside the court: “Going back into the community, we’re not going to trust each other anymore ... White people always look at us as terrorists, now the FBI is making things even worse”.

Made to Fit But Hard to Find

Perhaps the most promising aspect of the Implementation Plan is the introduction of personally-tailored intervention programmes. Individuals become involved in violent extremism for a range of reasons and each case has more or less of a given ingredient. Teams involving non-governmental organisations, local law enforcement,

faith based representatives, and “behavioural and mental health professionals” will provide “off-ramps” for individuals believed to be on pathways to violence.

While addressing specific needs is important, there remain obstacles to this approach. So-called warning signs of radicalisation are notoriously difficult to spot and compelling community members to identify them can create damaging false positives and an atmosphere of mistrust. The UK’s Prevent strategy, which aims to identify individuals deemed “at-risk” of radicalisation and then channel them into social programmes, has come under heavy criticism for being discriminatory and counterproductive. A report released in October 2016 by the Open Society Foundation concluded that: “Being wrongly targeted under Prevent has led some Muslims to question their place in British society”.

If individuals are identified by law enforcement, they are likely to believe that intervention programmes are designed to build a criminal case against them. Initiatives in Australia have struggled with this point, as potential participants are often suspicious of the state’s intentions. Programmes should include limited input from police and stringent assurance that social workers are not obliged to share information with security agencies, unless it involves clearly criminal behaviour.

While their goals may be similar, the immediate interests and methods of social services and law enforcement are not complementary and finding a workable balance between them is crucial. The new White House plan does not adequately address this issue.

Actions Are Loud

The updated PVE Implementation Plan holds promise, but success will be predicated on the state’s ability to gain the trust of communities and grassroots organisations. A theme throughout the document is the need for government to take a hands-off approach by facilitating, funding, and coordinating behind the scenes, while empowering community groups to counter and prevent radicalisation on the ground.

In an ideal environment this would surely work well. But the fact that organisations have turned down state funding for PVE and communities affected by extremism are deeply mistrustful of the FBI suggests that relationships need to be mended before a government sponsored approach is taken seriously. Federal agencies will have to back up their rhetoric with actions that remedy their adversarial image and prove they are serious about effective collaboration with their so-called “local partners”.

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