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Countering Violent Extremism and American Muslims

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Program on  
Extremism

## **Program on Extremism**

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## **About the Author**

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*The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Program on Extremism or the George Washington University.*

## **Abstract**

The United States (US) government has repeatedly indicated that the cooperation of the American Muslim community is crucial to the success of its Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy. Yet CVE efforts have triggered mixed reactions among American Muslims. The paper seeks to analyze some of the debates and dynamics taking place among American Muslims in relation to CVE.

## **“Countering Violent Extremism”**

Since the Obama administration unveiled Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) as a new paradigm for fighting terrorism in 2011, countries and civil society groups around the world have increasingly embraced the concept. In many countries, CVE has gained a great deal of traction. In fact, at the point of publication, a host of CVE events are taking place across the world. However, there is very little agreement on what the term actually means, much less how it is to be operationalized.<sup>1</sup> The contested nature of CVE only complicates the internal debate on CVE among American Muslims—many of whom have a negative view of the approach.

## **The American Muslim Landscape**

It is important to recognize that American Muslims as a whole do not constitute a singular community; rather they exist as a plurality of communities bounded by faith, yet sub-divided along a number of societal cleavages. Like any other faith-based minority, American Muslims are oriented around localities, personalities, religious centers, national origins, sectarian persuasions, ideological affinities, political associations, and socio-economic experiences. Complex combinations of these factors produce a variety of different attitudes on any number of issues. Thus, short of an extensive national survey it is impossible to fully appreciate the range of opinions among American Muslims, especially on a contentious topic like CVE.

In an effort to better understand American Muslim attitudes toward CVE, an ongoing study conducted by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and the Responses to Terrorism (START) adopted the “*engagers*” and “*disengagers*” dichotomy.<sup>2</sup> The former are defined as those who embrace CVE as an imperative in which American Muslims must be involved, while the latter identifies those who feel CVE does not achieve its stated aims but instead harms American Muslims as a whole. In the absence of hard data on American Muslim opinions on CVE, this classification is useful for framing the broad contours of the debate. However, both sides have sufficient internal diversity. Therefore a deeper dive into the discourse among these communities is necessary to really get a sense of the vigorous debate underway.

Comprehending the configuration of American Muslim communities is a prerequisite for appreciating the variety of views on CVE. In reality, what we know of American Muslim attitudes on the subject are the views and observations of the elites, both national level organizations and unaffiliated individuals (intellectuals, religious leaders, social and political activists, etc.) who have gained a significant following across the nation. The influence of these elites within American Muslim communities greatly varies from area to area. There are many otherwise autonomous communities that have a nominal relationship with national groups (for example, Islamic Society of North America [ISNA], Council on American-Islamic Relations [CAIR], Islamic Circle of North America [ICNA], Muslim American Society [MAS], and Muslim Public Affairs Council [MPAC]). That said, in the age of social media these communities are not as insulated as they were during the 1990s from the trickle down of the

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Ghattas, “Talking Loud and Saying Nothing,” *Foreign Policy*, August 4, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> “Understanding Communities’ Attitudes towards CVE,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START], February 2015.

national-level discourse of Muslim opinion makers. Intellectual influences, however, do not supplant local experiences, which continue to play a major role in shaping opinions within these localized communities. Most Muslim communities in a given locale are linked to at least one mosque led by an imam and an organizing committee. Just as it is challenging to ascertain the nature of the relationship between local communities and national organizations, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which local imams or notable figures enjoy support across the country.

It is also critical to bear in mind that these local communities actively consume a range of opinions on CVE from a variety of national Muslim actors driven by their specific perspectives and/or organizational imperatives. In addition, national leaders seeking to consolidate an American Muslim identity are competing with overseas religious and political actors who also wield considerable influence over many local immigrant communities. At times there is overlap, especially when particular overseas actors also enjoy the respect of some of the national leaders. However, the national and international players often pull local Muslim communities in different directions. These overseas Muslim influences, a function of mostly critical views of American foreign policy toward their countries, tend to further reinforce and even enhance pre-existing American Muslim reservations toward CVE.<sup>3</sup>

Due to the complexity of the American Muslim landscape—both in respect to structure and the manner in which ideas flow through the various communities—ascertaining the full spread of opinions requires examining the numerous discussions emanating from a wide range of institutions and personalities. Given that CVE is a fairly recent development, a number of American Muslim players have just begun to engage with the concept. As a result, this conversation has just begun to take shape and will undoubtedly undergo a great deal of change in the future. This is also true in respect to American Muslim responses to the nascent strategy to protect the homeland from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham’s (ISIS) attempts to lure people toward its cause. It is therefore too early to organize the disparate American Muslim attitudes toward CVE in coherent categories. The best that can be done at this early stage is an examination of the host of elite voices speaking out on this issue so as to map out the variety among the views.

### **Struggling with CVE**

Regardless of where they may stand on CVE, American Muslims often see themselves as the most important stakeholders in this initiative. American Muslims generally feel as though they are facing threats from both sides of what can be referred to as the US-Jihadist conflict. Jihadists are perverting their faith through increasingly gruesome acts of violence, which itself creates a massive discursive challenge from within. In the process, groups like ISIS and al Qaeda are creating the circumstances whereby American Muslims risk being seen as a fifth column by their fellow citizens and elements within their own government.<sup>4</sup> Many American Muslims believe

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<sup>3</sup> “Global Opinion of Obama Slips, International Policies Faulted,” *Pew Research Center*, June 13, 2012, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/13/chapter-1-views-of-the-u-s-and-american-foreign-policy-4/>. See also Rami G. Khouri, “Beware the Hoax of Countering Violent Extremism,” *Al-Jazeera America*, September 29, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Rabia Chaudry, “Countering Violent Extremism Still an Uphill Battle: ‘I have yet to encounter a single CVE program that involves any community other than Muslims,’” *Observer*, April 14, 2015.

that the combination of the actions of their co-religionists involved in violent extremism and the resulting CVE campaign represent a lethal mix that threatens their communal interests.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the average American Muslim does not feel Islamist radicalization is as big a problem in the US as the government claims or the media reports. The reasons behind such an attitude in many cases are benign. Like any community with a large segment of immigrants, many (if not most) American Muslims are heavily preoccupied with the demands of daily life. Such attitudes are also shaped by the view that there exists deep bias against Islam and Muslims among Americans and Westerners. This view is strengthened by statistics evidencing that, despite the exaggeration of the threat posed by Islamist extremism in Western media, white supremacists and other right-wing groups have engaged in far more acts of terrorism on US soil than Muslims.<sup>5</sup>

Among Muslim elites, there are those who genuinely feel that CVE is problematic at best. However, there are many other elites who are eager to embrace and even assume a leading position in this effort, but are fearful of how they will be perceived within the broader communities they seek to represent. Therefore, the decision to oppose CVE is informed in part by political considerations.<sup>6</sup> A careful inspection of some American Muslim elites' criticism reveals that they do not reject CVE per se, but rather are trying to navigate between pressure from below (their constituents) and above (developments in policymaking circles). In short, Muslim leaders—both individuals and organizations—feel that they are caught between the need to assuage two different sets of majorities: on one hand the bulk of their own communities, and the majority of the American public, concerned about threats from radical Islamism, on the other.

The fact that different groups are competing for influence and funding further contributes to the politicization of CVE within the American Muslim community. Often, a particular group will assume a more hardline position against CVE in an attempt to appear as a better alternative to competitors who have embraced the concept. The group opposing CVE seeks to position itself as the champion of community rights against a process that is quite unpopular among a large number of American Muslim elites.

Many American Muslims who protest that CVE is focused almost solely on Muslim violent extremists do not necessarily shun it. These actors realize that the stakes are too high for them to simply criticize rather than participate in the CVE process, and that it is in their core interest to be able to shape the government's new strategy against jihadism. In fact, the same reasons that lead many American Muslim elites to oppose CVE also steer them toward working with the government. After all, they cannot be absent from the platforms where their religion is under the microscope. While these elites have no control over ISIS's actions, they can certainly work with their government to ensure that the domestic situation does not go from bad to worse. Additionally, these elite individuals and organizations believe that if they participate in CVE efforts they can both mitigate risks associated with the initiative and create further opportunities for a greater voice in a host of policy issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Sahar Aziz, "Lone Wolf Terrorism & Anti-Minority Legislation," *IndraStar*, September 22, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Brief on countering violent extremism with recommendations for U.S. Government," Council on American-Islamic Relations [CAIR], February 2015.

Precisely because American Muslim elites want their communities to own local CVE initiatives, we must address the question of who from these communities should be involved in these efforts. While there is a great deal of cooperation among American Muslim communities, there is also considerable competition. Much of this competition has to do with partisan politics. At the same time, the intra-communal debate on how to deal with CVE is shaped by ideological differences. A key example is the difference between the stances of CAIR and MPAC: while CAIR has expressed strong reservations against about the government's CVE strategy,<sup>7</sup> MPAC is for strong cooperation between the government and American Muslim communities.<sup>8</sup>

Even as these organizations disagree, their behavior is shaped by the position of the 'other.' MPAC's decision to be a signatory to the Brennan Center for Justice's negative statement on CVE suggests that the organization did not want to be seen as uncritically engaging the government on the issue.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, while CAIR opposes the Obama administration's CVE strategy, it does not want to leave space for groups like MPAC to dominate on an issue of such importance to the American Muslim community. As a result, CAIR went to great lengths to craft a series of statements that, while highly critical of Washington's CVE policy, leave the door open for future engagement by offering a number of recommendations for addressing American Muslim concerns. By taking up a position that aligns with a large segment of the US Muslim population, CAIR hoped to carve out a major stake in the CVE debate, even though MPAC may currently be benefiting from CAIR's decision to engage.

CVE is not the first issue on which American Muslims have disagreed with one another. But, given its magnitude, the CVE debate has a good chance of impacting the wider question of who should represent American Muslims at the national level. The debate may very well turn out to be a watershed development, reshaping intra-communal dynamics. Still in its nascent stages, the debate has already triggered intense internal discussions among American Muslims on how they should address CVE. Further, the disagreement is not just between the usual players, namely major organizations. We are also seeing young individual voices join the fray in an effort to find a middle ground between the "engagers" and "disengagers."<sup>10</sup> For the moment though, it appears that the principal contestants are the more established players from these two camps.

## **The CVE Debate**

A recent debate between MPAC chief, Salam al-Marayati, and American Muslim legal scholar and former advisor in the Office of Civil Liberties and Civil Rights at the Department of Homeland Security, Sahar Aziz, best encapsulates the perspectives of the two broad schools of thought.<sup>11</sup> Organized by the American Muslim publication *The Islamic Monthly* and moderated by Harvard law professor Noah Feldman, the lively exchange held in June 2015 offers critical

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<sup>7</sup> "CAIR Releases New Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Strategy Brief Before Congressional Hearing," CAIR, July 9, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> "Safe Spaces Initiative: Tools for Developing Healthy Communities," Muslim Public Affairs Council [MPAC], 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Brennan Center for Justice, e-mail to Representatives Michael McCaul and Bennie G. Thompson, July 10, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Junaid M. Afeef and Alejandro J. Beutel, "CVE Critics are Right, and CVE is Still Necessary," *Patheos*, July 27, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> "TIM 24 Hour Debate – CVE," *The Islamic Monthly*, June 27, 2015.

insights into the key differences between the principal competing American Muslim stances toward CVE.

The positions these two prominent figures have assumed are informed by their professional backgrounds. As an activist promoting Muslims interests in mainstream American public life, al-Marayati calls for American Muslim partnerships with government agencies vis-à-vis CVE efforts. In contrast, Aziz approaches the subject from a civil rights/civil liberties lens, and expresses deep reservations about the government's CVE strategy. According to Aziz, the current CVE strategy renders American Muslims vulnerable to violations of their constitutional rights.

These opposing views are also based on two different diagnoses of the problem. Acknowledging that the phenomenon of violent extremism has links to US foreign policy, al-Marayati believes that violent extremism poses a clear threat to the US, especially in respect to ISIS's ability to exploit weaknesses within the American Muslim community. In al-Marayati's view, effectively countering this threat necessitates public-private partnerships. Aziz, on the other hand, identifies violent extremism as the byproduct of Washington's foreign policy toward the Middle East, arguing that the domestic focus of CVE cannot address the threat of violent extremism. In a way, their disagreement represents a classic case of a left-of-center outlook versus the position that the best way to effect change is by acting within existing systems.

Further, these two positions are constructed on diametrically opposed assumptions about the capacity of American Muslim to influence government. Al-Marayati's holds that by engaging with government American Muslims can shape CVE such that the initiatives are in keeping with their communal interests and potentially assume a leading role in shaping CVE policies. Cognizant of the weaknesses in Washington's CVE policy, al-Marayati insists that American Muslims must still partner with the government, arguing that the problems with existing policies cannot be fixed from the outside. He holds that American Muslims can simultaneously engage with the government against ISIS and work to safeguard the civil rights of their communities. Further, al-Marayati argues that American Muslim organizations and mosques are in need of financial resources, and there is nothing wrong with securing these resources from the government because these funds come from public tax dollars.

Aziz, on the other hand, does not believe that Muslim communities have the wherewithal to hold the government accountable to pledges to not violate their civil liberties while engaging in CVE. In fact, she finds the suggestion that American Muslims must cooperate with the government on countering terrorism at a higher degree than any other community in order to secure their basic civil liberties unreasonable. Aziz deeply criticizes what she describes as the "racialization of counterterrorism," where violent acts committed by Muslims are seen as a communal problem.<sup>12</sup> She points out that the government does not propose joint CVE initiatives with white or Christian communities despite the fact that many of members of these communities have engaged in violent extremist behavior. Aziz contends that so long as violent acts are linked to the identity of the perpetrator, CVE efforts will remain geared toward getting Muslim leaders to spy on their own communities. Further, Aziz feels that CVE efforts should not be led by law

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<sup>12</sup> Sahar Aziz, "Policing Terrorists in the Community," *Harvard National Security Journal* 5, no. 1 (2014): 147-224.

enforcement agencies, as this approach has historically led to the securitization of Muslim communities.

The root causes of terrorism, Aziz asserts, are located in the Middle East and not the US. Therefore, she argues that Washington should not waste resources in the domestic policy realm, but instead craft a strategy to prevent violent extremism in the region. In fact, Aziz wants to see American Muslims involved in the foreign policy realm as opposed to helping law enforcement conduct surveillance on their own community.

It is in the respect where Aziz and al-Marayati's views tend to momentarily converge. Al-Marayati agrees with Aziz that American Muslims should not carry an undue burden of countering violent extremism. He also agrees that Washington should pay greater attention to the Middle East, where political reform could serve as the most effective means of defeating violent extremists. However, unlike Aziz, al-Marayati does not believe that it would be more productive for American Muslims to devote their energy to educating the American public about the factors behind the volatility that plagues the Middle East. Al-Marayati feels Aziz downplays the domestic threat ISIS poses to American Muslim communities, and sees her as focused singularly on US foreign policy as the cause of the violent extremist challenge.

Just as their stances on CVE differ, so to do al-Marayati and Aziz's proposed solutions to those issues plaguing American Muslims. While al-Marayati emphasizes the need to focus on domestic CVE policy, Aziz contends that energies should be focused overseas, as the locus of the problems are with foreign policy. The latter view resonates with many American Muslims who hold that because ISIS is a foreign problem and there have been very few cases of domestic terrorism carried out by Muslims, the government should not be reacting to the ISIS threat on the home front. In this sense, Aziz is calling for a complete rewriting of the government's CVE script.

### **The Net Effect**

This debate and the CAIR-MPAC dissonance are but two prominent examples highlighting the internal differences among American Muslims as they engage with the government's CVE strategy. Such is the level of distrust between the authorities and American Muslims that even those who are interested in engaging are afraid of appearing as "sell-outs." Though fewer in number, there are those who are willing to take this risk because they feel strongly that CVE is not an issue on which the community can afford to waver. Additionally, many are also tired of the under siege mentality and the "victim-minority-group, marginalization narrative."<sup>13</sup>

But even those eager to engage will admit that communities cannot or will not help if they feel targeted by the authorities via agent provocateurs, FBI sting operations, and surveillance/intelligence gathering missions. One key perception<sup>14</sup> across American Muslim

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<sup>13</sup> Tamara Audi, "U.S. Muslim Community Divided Over White House Outreach Plan: Law-enforcement Efforts to Prevent Radicalization Provoke both Support and Suspicion," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Amber Michel, "Countering Violent Extremism: Islamophobia, the DOJ and American Islamic Organizations," *Academia.edu*, N.d.

communities is that the way in which the government approaches CVE tends to reinforce societal Islamophobia, in turn aggravating the stigmatization of Muslim communities in an atmosphere where suspicion toward Muslims is widespread.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there is no shortage of American Muslims who feel intimidated by the government.<sup>16</sup> The fear of being labeled a terrorist sympathizer translates into a sense of resentment that the authorities only conduct outreach when they need help on terrorism-related cases. In this climate it is natural that CVE initiatives cause a great many to fear the blurring of the line between extremism and conservatism, whereby stricter observance of rituals and practices can be treated as signs of radicalization. Similarly, views on CVE are also informed by sectarian frictions (not just in the Sunni-Shia sense, but also at the intra-Sunni level), as who the government partners with can potentially compromise the strategy depending on sectarian dynamics in a given community. Additionally, the Islamist-secularist contention politicizes CVE efforts, especially when certain Muslims seek to promote the Muslim Brotherhood as a “moderate” alternative to jihadists.

American Muslim apprehensions toward CVE increase when they see reports criticizing government policies in the mainstream media. There is a tendency to latch on to these disagreements and the lack of clarity over the policies and goals of CVE initiatives in an effort to undermine the initiative as a whole.<sup>17</sup> The same is true when the issue is debated in an open-source forum from the perspective of civil rights and civil liberties, providing ammunition to community leaders and groups who view CVE as a hostile exercise.

Ultimately, American Muslim attitudes towards CVE are shaped by the debates both within their own individual community setting as well as the broader public discourse. These attitudes are in a state of hyper-flux, and it will be a long while before any semblance of a communal consensus emerges on the topic.

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<sup>15</sup> Sabrina Siddiqui, “Americans’ Attitudes Toward Muslims and Arabs are Getting Worse,” *The Huffington Post*, July 29, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Petra Bartosiewicz, “NYPD Surveillance of Muslims Has Created a Climate of Fear,” *The Nation*, March 18, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Murtaza Hussain, “Critics Say Bill to Turn Muslim Communities into ‘Mini-Surveillance States’,” *The Intercept*, July 15, 2015.