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Promoting Online Voices for Countering Violent Extremism

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Al-Qa'ida and its adherents have sought to promote their vision of militant jihad through an increasing propaganda campaign on the Internet. They have used chatrooms and message boards to create and foster communities of radical interest.[1] They have published radical e-magazines and thousands of extremist YouTube videos.[2] Some have also embarked on campaigns using Twitter and Facebook.[3] This content increasingly targets Western audiences, seeks to argue that the West is at war against Islam, offers religious and ideological justifications for violence, and exhorts followers to take up the cause and act.

It is true that this campaign has produced an extremely low yield of recruits in the United States and that vast majorities of American Muslims hold no sympathies for al-Qa'ida's distorted vision, but even the rarest success can have disastrous consequences.[4]

Individuals join the jihadist cause for a variety of reasons, including the belief that the jihadist cause represents a thrilling call to action, the social bonds of friends and peer groups that galvanize the will to act, a misinformed view of scriptural tenets, and a desire to defend against a perceived war against Islam. Extremist narratives on the Internet seek to exploit all of these factors.[5]

Consequently, the August 2011 White House strategy for countering violent extremism (CVE) has taken a focus on countering extremist narratives on the Internet.[6] The White House recognizes that some of the most effective, potent, and credible messages against al-Qa'ida and other Muslim extremist groups will rise from within the American Muslim community. These individuals have far greater credibility among key constituents and are able to address thorny and complex issues of religious ideology. They can promote calls for religious tolerance and counter perceptions that the West is at war with Islam. Such voices can also undercut the view that militant jihad is an exciting and worthwhile endeavor and provide positive role models for constructive political debate. Importantly, with the boundless nature of the Internet, these voices not only influence Americans at home but can provide an effective counternarrative abroad.[7]

The White House strategy seeks to encourage and empower credible, authentic, and constructive online Muslim voices who will in turn play a leading role in helping to counter al-Qa'ida's

Key Findings

- American Muslims are increasingly using the Web and social media to help counter violent extremism. Discussions with a number of Muslim leaders active in social media suggest that it is possible to expand such efforts even further, and doing so is a major objective of the August 2011 White House strategy to counter violent extremism.
- While Muslim Americans play an active role in countering extremism, several factors may work to undermine higher-level engagement, including: low radicalization rates among American Muslims, negative perceptions of U.S. counterterrorism policies, a limited reservoir of leadership capacity and CVE funding (which prevents effective outreach), and being viewed as sell-outs to those most sympathetic to jihadi causes.
- In some cases, the First Amendment may limit U.S. government attempts to fund CVE programs of an ideological bent, but this restriction could ultimately benefit CVE discourse as it frees Muslim groups of the taint of government funding and prevents the government from having to "choose sides" in intra-Muslim discourse and debate.
- Both the U.S. State Department and the "think-do tank" Google Ideas have initiated insightful programs that seek to build capacity and otherwise promote credible Muslim voices.
- Recommendations include desecuritizing efforts to counter violent extremism, addressing sources of mistrust within the Muslim community, focusing engagements and CVE education on social media influencers, building leadership and social media capacity in the Muslim community, enhancing private sector funding and engagement, and finding avenues to enhance government funding.

attempts to recruit home-grown Americans. Consequently, the purpose of the current study is to understand how the U.S. government, as well as civic institutions, can help promote and empower this cadre of credible Muslim voices on the Web and in social media. As with the White House strategy, the goal is that such voices will help undercut support for terrorism, reduce the likelihood that young Americans will heed the call to violent jihad, and disrupt recruitment to violent militant groups. We should note that credible voices do not require fame or high esteem, but those considering the path of jihad will be far more likely to listen to those sharing some semblance of faith and tradition.

We have conducted interviews with 31 academic experts, government analysts, and American Muslim and civic and religious leaders, including those who have taken to blogs and the social media airwaves. We have also conducted a review of relevant published literature. The goal is to understand barriers that may limit the motivation, effective reach, and influence of such voices; understand lessons learned in promoting online voices that counter extremism; and identify recommendations that will be pertinent to both the U.S. government and the private and nonprofit sector.

Key Issues and Challenges in Empowering Constructive Muslim Voices

American Muslims have played an important role in helping to counter extremism and support for al-Qa'ida, and we begin this section with a brief survey of their CVE efforts. To better understand how the number and reach of these voices can be increased, we then identify key barriers that may limit online engagement. Finally, we review prominent examples of social media capacity-building.

Existing CVE in the United States

Existing CVE efforts in the United States incorporate a variety of approaches that take place both in person and online. This section is intended primarily to address the online efforts and the potential capacity of social media efforts to expand them. However, an overview of offline efforts provides additional insight regarding the spectrum of CVE work and helps to inform the extent of possibilities for social media-focused efforts.

Offline CVE in the United States

Offline CVE typically occurs via personal interactions with local imams, conferences, or workshops put forth by foundations, Muslim community groups, interfaith efforts, and—of course—everyday interactions with family and friends. On a personal level, local imams provide daily support and counseling to their communities. One imam we spoke with has an open-door policy for his congregation and has successfully counseled three individuals away from thoughts of militant jihad. One such individual now says his "jihad is to feed the homeless."[8]

More broadly, national organizations such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) hold youth conferences that address the "myths and realities" of radicalization and provide young Muslims with a forum to openly discuss grievances or their perceived role in American society.[9] Interfaith efforts include work done by the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE) Foundation, an organization aimed at developing an understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, to bring youth from different faiths together for dialogue and cooperative community volunteering and to "humanize other communities that have been demonized."[10] For example, they run a program called "Youth Against Hunger" that brings young people together from different faiths to make sandwiches and distribute them to homeless shelters. They also host pancake breakfasts with Christian pastors and Muslim leaders to talk about what it means to break bread together.[11]

Similar initiatives are localized in other communities: Within the Boston area, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization brings together members of the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities.[12] For example, bridging the gap between the virtual and the tangible are awareness trainings on Internet safety for Muslim communities. Organizations partner with local mosques to host workshops directed primarily at parents, designed to cover the "spectrum of dangers" on the Internet that includes not only radical extremism but also pornography and cyberbullying.[13] These events are beneficial for getting the broader community interested in what is viewed as an exceptionally low-probability issue.

Online Countermessaging

The most direct form of online CVE is based on countering the messaging of extremist groups, typically via online hate forums, social media networks, or independent websites.[14] Such efforts are chiefly intended for partially radicalized "fence-sitters"—those who are sympathetic to the extremist narrative and somewhat engaged in the online radical community, but not yet motivated to act in their own violent jihad. To be active in this kind of countermessaging, an individual requires theological expertise and skills in persuasive arguments: The goal is to "use the power of scripture" to delegitimize the radical narrative.[15]

One small and anonymous Muslim organization creates online profiles to engage in extremist-oriented chatrooms and provide more positive counternarratives. They also operate unattributed Twitter accounts that criticize extremist arguments.[16] The success of these efforts is measured by the amount of attention they receive from the community being targeted; a good account may even be "followed" on Twitter by known radicals.

Other social media–based messaging utilizes video content to discredit the extremist narrative. The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), for example, produces original video content that is then distributed via YouTube. This *e-dawah*, or online outreach, includes a series of programs, including "Injustice Cannot Defeat Injustice," a short video showing several popular American imams condemning violence in the name of Islam.[17]

Finally, some groups and individuals have established websites that directly confront arguments for militant jihad. One example is

a site called "The J Word" run by conservative cleric Yasir Qadhi.[18] Another website, "Fatwa on Terrorism," is an online platform for the distribution of a fatwa condemning terrorism written by a Pakistani imam.[19] The website offers translations of the text and publicizes relevant articles and events. These websites are one-way distributors of content and offer no opportunity for interaction; users may view or download information but cannot respond to it.

Online Resources for the American Muslim

A less direct kind of online CVE occurs via a number of popular Muslim websites catering more broadly to the mainstream Muslim population.

These websites, which include "virtual mosques" such as Suhaibwebb.com as well as blogs such as the Muslim Channel on Patheos.com, are not focused on issues of counterradicalization; rather, content related to CVE is integrated into a body of material addressing relevant issues for Muslims in America. This cultural relevance allows such websites to vastly outstrip more direct CVE efforts in popularity: While the aforementioned MPAC video has upward of 30,000 hits on YouTube,[20] Suhaibwebb.com pulls in approximately 70,000 hits daily.[21] Another popular site is Muslimmatters.org, run by Salafi cleric Yasir Qadhi, which publishes daily articles covering topics ranging from the political to the quotidian.[22] The site has been effective in employing social media to increase exposure; posts are publicized via a Facebook page that has more than 50,000 "likes" and an active body of commenters.

While the majority of content on these sites does not directly address issues of jihad, some articles deal with relevant CVE topics such as Internet safety or jihad of the self (*jihad al-nafs*).[23] Furthermore, following the Muslim protests elicited by the anti-Muslim film "Innocence of Muslims" in September 2012, Muslimmatters.org was very active in Facebook posts calling for tolerance and forbearance. Posted messages included an article entitled "5 Examples of Supreme Muslim Tolerance," a message publicizing the peaceful Muslim protests in Casablanca, and various scriptural messages urging restraint.[24]

Other sites, such as eShaykh.com, offer a more interactive user experience that addresses the same issues of faith in daily life. The site, an initiative of the Islamic Supreme Council of America, offers users the opportunity to submit questions of faith to a group of Islamic scholars for consideration and response. Among the thousands of questions on the site are queries related to doctrine, technology and Islam, and association with people of other faiths.

In addition to operating websites, individual imams have also employed social media to develop broad networks of followers, enabling them to engage with a large community beyond their own geographical sphere. These "rock star" imams possess both generational awareness and religious credibility that allow them to amass thousands of followers on social networking sites.[25] Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, a founder of Zaytuna College in California, is one such leader: His Twitter account has more than 28,000 followers, and his active Facebook page has more than 70,000 "likes."[26]

Much like imams offline, the virtually connected imams need to act as "personal counselors" as well as spiritual advisors when followers reach out to them directly via social media. The popularity of these individuals comes in part because of their ability to connect with the younger audience and address "what it means to be a Muslim in America."[27] By making themselves available to the broad population of Internet users, they provide youth with a resource to obtain relevant answers to the issues that affect them in their daily lives.

Challenges Confronting Online CVE Activism

Based on conversations with Muslim social media experts and CVE stakeholders, it appears that several barriers limit the level of Muslim CVE engagement online—and they likely also apply to offline CVE efforts.

Perceptions that Radicalization Is Not a Problem

Some believe that violent radicalization is not a problem significant enough to address. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 64 percent of American Muslims said support for extremism among Muslims in the United States is very low.[28] This is understandable on several levels. First, as RAND scholar Brian Jenkins has demonstrated, the 192 Muslims in the United States arrested on terrorism charges between Sept. 11, 2001, and the end of 2011 represent only a tiny fraction of an estimated 3 million American Muslims.[29] Furthermore, many individuals who radicalize do so apart from active Muslim communities and congregations.[30] As Muslim playwright and social media activist Wajahat Ali notes, "The majority [of Muslim Americans] do not hang out with these violent extremists. . . . If you ask most American Muslims what you are doing to stop extremism, they will say they don't know this guy."[31] Another interlocutor who seeks to promote Muslim engagement in CVE issues likewise noted that because the threat seems so small, "it's hard to convince people that this should be a priority within communities."[32]

Alienation and Lack of Trust

The U.S. approach to counterterrorism is a frequently cited complaint in Muslim communities. Many oppose the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and were opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq. Domestically, more than half of American Muslims report that government antiterrorism policies single out American Muslims with increased surveillance and monitoring.[33] Special areas of concern are the use of informants and sting operations, which some fear help facilitate the radicalization of those they intend to target.[34] For example, in 2010, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) infiltrated the Islamic Center of Irvine, California.[35] In an effort to uncover sympathies for al-Qa'ida, the informant talked up violent jihad so much that congregants grew frightened and obtained a restraining order against him. Much controversy and negative media coverage have been generated out of the New York Police Department (NYPD)'s creation of an intelligence division that monitored popular cafes, Muslim college stu-

dents, and even key Muslim partners in the city's CVE efforts.[36] Although the NYPD's actions have been defended as legal and prudent, the controversy has been cited by some in the Muslim community as a major concern.[37]

Perceptions of a growing level of anti-Muslim rhetoric in mainstream American society is also an issue. A Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reports survey results suggesting that nearly 40 percent of Americans hold an unfavorable view of Islam.[38] These negative views have appeared to manifest themselves in varying ways and have been conveyed by an increasing array of rancorous voices.[39] There were broad and public protests to the development of a Muslim community center adjacent to Ground Zero in New York City. Three states have already passed legislation banning Sharia law, and such legislation is under consideration in 21 other states. There was also the strange furor associated with the reality show "All American Muslim" on The Learning Channel, which depicted the ordinary lives of five Muslim American families. Following an online campaign in which the Florida Family Association charged that the show was propaganda for Muslims, numerous corporate sponsors, including Kayak and Lowes, pulled advertising that in turn led to the show's cancellation.[40]

> "New media is the language of a new generation . . . and technology is changing how we interact, share information and share news. I can put up a YouTube post that goes global and a friend in Indonesia can like it and put it on his blog. . . . I always thought new media is a tool and a tool can be beneficial or worse depending who uses it. Our enemies, violent extremists, are speaking this language to propagate their message but also for recruitment. Al-Qa'ida has created thousands of YouTube videos that are well produced. We've seen Bin Laden in his cave and he videorecords a message, posts it and it goes global. The way they have recruited the lone radical is primarily using new media, chat groups, email messages, boards and such. So the question is, how do we use it for good? This is the million-dollar question."
>
> *—Wajahat Ali*
> *Muslim playwright, activist*

There may also be a perception that both media and the government unfairly focus on the risks posed by Muslim terrorism while giving less credence to threats posed by other U.S.-based extremist groups, including right-wing extremists such as white supremacy groups, skinheads, and antigovernment militias. According to an interim report by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism, right-wing extremists killed 168 individuals in 144 lethal attacks between 1990 and 2010, excluding the Oklahoma City bombing.[41] This contrasts with 23 individuals killed in less than 25 Muslim-perpetrated attacks, excluding the 2,977 killed on September 11, 2001.[42] Further, the number of right-wing hate groups has risen by 69 percent since 2000 and now totals 1,018.[43] Despite these threats, media attention on this issue seems scant. Further, House Homeland Security Committee hearings on domestic terrorist threats focus almost solely on Muslim radicalization.

Several commentators have argued that these issues risk alienating Muslim Americans and could limit their cooperation with law enforcement.[44] If true, they would also undermine community willingness to speak out more actively against violent extremism. Regardless, anti-Muslim attitudes and legislation have become a focal point of American Muslim civic activity and have diverted attention away from counterradicalization issues.

Some say that counterradicalization activities may expose them to greater attention from law enforcement. For example, Imam Abdullah Antepli of Duke University sees value in having legitimate Muslim scholars such as himself entering extremist chatrooms to provide an alternative message, but he fears he would be marked by the FBI for suspicious activity.[45] Another activist agrees, saying that "people are very hesitant to engage in this because they know they will be watched" by the FBI.[46] It has also been suggested that several prominent scholar-run websites refuse to publish their responses to questions about the legitimacy of jihad out of fear that they would get blacklisted by the government.[47]

The issue of trust and alienation may impede the motivation of other Muslims who might address radicalization more forcefully on social media. For any issue to be worthy of someone's soapbox, it must be something that elicits excitement and zeal, a cause worth fighting for. Where one perceives the threat to be exaggerated or feels undermined by the state and broader society, that zeal is easily lost. Wajahat Ali reports that mistrust of the government has a "chilling effect" and creates a trust deficit with American Muslim communities. He asserts that, "This is affecting how we can effectively counter violent extremism at local levels and using social media. That is where we are at right now. That is an underlying problem that needs to be addressed."[48] Imam Abdullah Antepli agrees: "There is a general sense of intimidation. [Muslims] don't feel encouraged by the U.S. to combat Islamic extremism or the perverted version of 'jihad'."[49]

Poor Leadership Capacity

Most Muslim community religious institutions such as mosques lack both the time and capacity for social media outreach. Mosques in the United States frequently lack imams and a paid staff, and many that do have imams hire them from overseas.[50] These imams at times have limited command of English, are frequently slow to connect with young parishioners, and do not immediately understand and use sophisticated social media tools.[51] As Rabia Chaudry, president of the Safe Nation Collab-

orative, noted, "For web presence you need people on [mosque] boards who know that that is important. I tell them, 'you can use Facebook for fundraising,' but they don't like it."[52]

These limitations also apply to Muslim civil society leadership. Brie Loskota and Nadia Roumani argue that there is a "dearth of civil society and public leaders who are both rooted in their Islamic faith and able to address issues of relevance to their own communities and the broader public." Many of those that do exist are "burning out" due to high workloads and a lack of resources.[53] The same is said of Muslim chaplains who serve on a burgeoning number of college campuses.[54] These individuals are enormously influential; they are trained and credible Islamic scholars, directly serve young cadres of Muslims, promote a positive vision of Islam to the broader student body, and directly benefit from a vibrant and multicultural community.[55] However, as Muslim scholar Haroon Moghul notes:

> Most of these men and women are so overworked and directing time and attention to students that they don't have Twitter accounts, can't put sermons online and they can't link up with platforms to media in most effective way possible. That is not what they are trained to do.[56]

Limited Funding for Muslim CVE Programs

The challenge of funding impedes counterradicalization activities. MPAC has sought to hold an imam summit to discuss CVE issues and other things, but a lack of money is a major barrier.[57] Likewise, WORDE Foundation has applied for funding to train Muslim leaders in social media practices—but until it comes, their level of outreach is limited.[58] Funding also remains the core limitation for the Muslim-run organization that runs counterextremist Twitter accounts and promotes counternarratives in extremist chatrooms. Funding is especially important for this organization as its success demands "consistency" of engagement.[59]

The U.S. government might be one resource for funding community and online CVE efforts, but First Amendment restrictions on laws respecting an establishment of religion pose a limiting factor. Some CVE battles center on the appropriate beliefs of Islam to include the meaning of jihad and the responsibilities of Muslims living in a non-Muslim state. These and many others are theological matters where the state is largely restricted from directly taking sides. However, this is much more of a blessing than a curse: Nearly every individual interviewed for this study argued that government sponsorship of Muslim voices could undermine legitimacy. As one scholar put it, "At this point in time, the American government is simply viewed as the kiss of death. If the American government gets involved, then the constituency you want to reach, they will never, ever listen to that person again."[60] This is one of the key lessons learned from the Prevent program in Britain. Following the July 7, 2005, attacks in London, the British government sought to directly fund counterextremist voices, including Quilliam, a think-do tank run by prominent ex-Islamists. Unfortunately, government sponsorship ultimately undermined the organization's credibility among the audiences they were trying to reach.[61] As terrorism scholar Peter Neumann notes, "Thanks to the establishment clause, American officials will never find themselves in a position where they have to 'pick winners' or 'adjudicate in intrareligious affairs'."[62]

Private foundations are obviously not so constrained as the government. Wealthy donors, established foundations, and community donations have been a key resource for a variety of community and web CVE initiatives. Other organizations, including advertising and technology firms such as Google, have lent expertise to training and capacity-building. But reservations remain as far as more actively funding such initiatives. Some Muslim foundations are reluctant to wade into the CVE arena for fear that there might be a backlash among key constituents.[63] Secular institutions are also hesitant. Leadership in the Department of Homeland Security reportedly met with the heads of two leading foundations and directly asked if they would be willing to fund programs and activities that countered extremism. The response was an outright no, with the stated reasoning that they do not wade into matters of ideology.[64]

Credibility, Stigma, and the Oversecuritized Approach to CVE

Another issue to consider is that of credibility and the frequently securitized approach the government takes to engagement with the Muslim community. A number of commentators have noted that when the government reaches out to the Muslim community, it often does so solely to address the threat of terrorism. This, in turn, leaves the impression that the government's only concern is that Muslims may become violent.[65] Likewise, it seems that some of these concerns translate to Muslim-initiated CVE efforts.

As noted, there are genuine concerns that many Muslims do not see radicalization as a sufficiently prominent problem. A small number of Muslims contacted for this study demurred, seemingly because of resentment that they were entreated to address a problem that only furthers the extremist stereotype. Others who did speak with us echoed this concern. One interlocutor observed that "Muslims are not just a problem that needs to be fixed."[66] Another noted, "If you frame [CVE issues] in a securitized way, you end up pushing people away; you stigmatize the very community you are trying to reach out and help."[67] Also, individuals who take to social media seek to address issues that concern them and their audience. As a local imam points out, most young Muslims today are less concerned with militant jihad and more focused on obtaining "student loans and getting married" and "understanding and trying to translate modernity in the backdrop of maintaining spirituality."[68]

The credibility of the messenger and message can also be at risk. There is at least a minority of Muslims who may view an

excessive focus on CVE as selling out to government influence. It was noted that nationalized organizations taking a strong stance on radicalization, as well as other ardent counterextremist voices, are quickly seen as sellouts and lose credibility amid those most sympathetic to jihadi causes.[69] One pragmatic factor here is a reluctance of some to actively seek out CVE-branded content. Mainstream Muslims more concerned with living daily lives will not perceive CVE issues as something that concerns them. Other individuals who become more sympathetic to jihadi causes are unlikely to seek out content that provides a foregone conclusion.

Many of those we spoke with talked of "reframing" the issue. Alejandro Beutal, a former government analyst at MPAC, argues that "framing is key." When a mosque and synagogue conduct an interfaith event, it should not be framed as a counterradicalization issue, it should simply focus on building interfaith relationships because that is "the right thing to do."[70] Some of the most effective voices addressing radicalism today do so by making CVE only a small part of their mission, or by addressing CVE only indirectly. MuslimMatters.org and Suhaibwebb.com are blogs that speak to a variety of contemporary issues faced by Muslims today and so have cultivated large and faithful followers. They provide articles and other content addressing the issue of radicalization only on occasion. The message gets out and leverages the broad-based credibility of the blog without making CVE the primary issue or stigmatizing the audience. The approach of not having all CVE, all the time also helps maintain the relevance of the blog and thus keeps readers returning.

Another alternative is to promote a broad array of Muslim voices that, while they might not address CVE issues directly, can have a profound and positive effect on religious discourse within and beyond the community. Muslim scholar Moghul points out that such voices can achieve several important effects.[71] First, there is value in promoting voices that can serve as Muslim conduits to mainstream media. Those who create a "brand and identity" on the web can circumvent the traditional way of becoming an expert and can positively represent Islam to society. These voices can also serve as role models for Muslim youth who are reluctant to reach out to imams or parents. As Moghul says, "I would rather feel they should talk to me, rather than a chat-room. Social media is key because you can amplify intelligent voices so there can be someone young folks can turn to."[72]

Social media can also promote mainstream religious teachings. When Moghul led the Muslim Student Association at New York University, he and his fellow students made a point of placing sermons on the Internet and quickly found that the audience greatly expanded beyond the confines of the university, with 10,000 to 15,000 downloads monthly. The sermons reached Muslims in India and Russia, and Islamic schools in the Persian Gulf states. As Moghul states, social media "puts voices out there and builds this kind of following and that has credibility. When you build capacity and help people think strategically, they will answer questions in the CVE world without making those the central question."[73]

In addition, social media can help fill the void of community in young Muslims' lives. With many mosques run by foreign-born and older membership (affectionately referred to as the "uncles" and "aunties"), a rising generation gap exists with young American members feeling disconnected and alienated. Participation in an active and healthy faith community has been said to help protect individuals from the risks of radicalization.[74] As previously noted, some rising stars, such as Imam Suhaib Webb and Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, are filling this gap with effective web outreach. Others are turning to online prayer groups and social media communities of interest.[75]

Finally, social media can provide an alternative outlet for those in the community to express their concerns and grievances. Moghul provides the example of Bosnia during the 1990s, where thousands of Muslims were killed or displaced in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Muslims worldwide were traumatized by the events and searched for ways to respond. Some, seeking the only recourse they knew, went to Bosnia to fight. This has also been an unfortunate outlet for many angry about the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For this and a variety of other issues important to some Muslims, the web can amplify voices of protest and galvanize a more healthy response.

Case Studies of Capacity Building

Both the U.S. State Department and the "think-do tank" Google Ideas have initiated insightful programs that seek to build capacity and otherwise promote credible Muslim voices. They offer valuable lessons pertinent to our recommendations.

U.S. State Department Capacity Building Program

The U.S. State Department has recently worked with social media experts, including playwright Ali, to provide social media training to key Muslim influencers abroad. Training sessions that ran approximately two and a half days were held in Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Jakarta. Individuals were introduced to social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and more, with a special emphasis on using these tools to conquer hate and extremism and to build bridges between communities. Individuals were taught the basics of how to successfully get a message out, the art of storytelling, and the creation of viral messages. Based on participants' enthusiastic reception, the program was judged a success. In summarizing the overall goal of the program, Ali noted:

> The idea is to empower these leaders and change agents and give them the skills and resources and capacity to engage in proactive work that helps their communities. And the U.S. interest in this is to ensure a healthier narrative emerges that is proactive and nonreactive; one that promotes positive social change and attracts teen-

agers, and instead of them going to al-Qa'ida they will go to these people instead. That is the long-term goal.[76]

Google Ideas' Counterradicalization Initiative

Google Ideas was founded in 2010 and has the goal of using technology to help address complex and intractable problems. In its first project, Google Ideas sought to tackle the issue of radicalization by creating a network of renounced religious extremists, gang members and neo-Nazis (referred to as Formers), and survivors of attacks (i.e., Survivors), nongovernmental organizations and business partners.

In exploring ways to develop their counternarrative, Google Ideas first thought it might make sense to put together a campaign that incorporated everything from billboards to branded wristbands. But this idea met stiff resistance from focus groups of Formers and Survivors. According to Yasmin Dolatabadi, principal at Google Ideas, "These guys are all activists already—they have their own brand and operation and they are not looking for an umbrella brand. From that moment on, the organizers knew that they were best suited to play the role of enabler" rather than imposing something from Google.[77]

Google Ideas has played this role of enabler through a number of initiatives that seek to connect Formers and Survivors with key partners. Together with the Council on Foreign Relations and the Tribeca Film Festival, Google Ideas hosted a 2011 conference called the Summit Against Violent Extremism (SAVE). Held in Dublin, Ireland, the event convened a varied consortium of former gang members, neo-Nazis, and religious extremists as well as nongovernmental organization workers and attack victims.[78] The conference helped identify the common threads of the former extremist experience and helped connect these activists with potential funders. They commissioned research that ultimately highlighted how role models and positive personal relationships can keep individuals from entering extremist groups and can facilitate their departure.[79] They also worked with the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue to develop a web platform where Formers and Survivors can connect with other individuals and help them avoid the pitfalls of extremism or exit from radical groups. The website, built with the pro bono help of Rehabstudio, also allows Formers and Survivors to craft social networks with one another and solicit project funding from potential sponsors.[80]

Google Ideas' efforts to play the role of convener and enabler have produced several other key partnerships. The Tribeca Film Institute helped cosponsor the Dublin event and in February 2012 it launched Tribeca Teaches Los Angeles, an after-school digital storytelling program in a gang-infested suburb of Los Angeles. The 18-week program trains middle-school students in the art of filmmaking and seeks to help these young people tell their own personal story and to be critical consumers of media.[81] In addition, the firm eBoost pitched in by creating a website that offers clear and basic advice on the fundamentals of crafting a strategy, developing and sustaining a nonprofit, using social media for outreach, and measuring program success with Google Analytics.[82] There are also efforts to enlist private sector social media firms to help increase the social media capacity of the Against Violent Extremism network. For example, BuzzMouth donated $100,000 worth of pro bono services in the form of social media consulting.[83]

Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to increase the number, reach, and effectiveness of constructive Muslim voices on the Internet and social media.

Appreciate that CVE Takes Many Forms

Efforts that achieve the objectives of CVE stakeholders can come in all shapes and sizes. Some approach CVE head on, including those that directly counter militant ideology, undermine "jihadi cool," and emphasize the negative impact of civilian casualties. But indirect methods also have value, such as programs that foster interfaith relationships or help young Muslims bridge the gap between faith and a secular society.

There is also benefit in social media that promotes a wide assortment of mainstream Muslim voices, even if such voices never make CVE a central mission. Sermons and other religious commentary posted online can help create authentic voices that are echoed in the mainstream media, creating new role models that help youth make meaningful connections with their faith and promoting mainstream religious teachings that provide a subtle counterweight to jihadi narratives by fostering a positive and normative vision of Islam. Social media may also help individuals channel grievances into meaningful political action and can help alienated youth connect with healthy online communities and prayer groups. The options and potential benefits are many, but the key is that efforts placing less emphasis CVE and security aspects will gain better traction and resonance among many important audience members and promote participation from a broader cadre of influencers.

Address Sources of Mistrust in the Muslim Community

As previously noted, there exists a level of mistrust between potentially key voices and their government and broader society, based on concerns about U.S. foreign policy, domestic counterterrorism policies that in the view of many stakeholders unfairly target the Muslim community, and a vocal number of Americans whose anti-Muslim protestations alienate many American Muslims.

The U.S. government should seek to address these policy concerns as opportunities arise. U.S. approaches in this regard were not fully explored for this report and numerous other authors provide focus on this topic.[84] Still, various departments and agencies of the federal government, such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Justice Department, FBI, and National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), have engagement programs that seek to build relationships with Muslim communities and allow individuals the opportunity to air grievances.[85] Clearly, it will be important to continue and expand this effort as it may be vital to

enhancing the reservoir of active and credible Muslim voices. Both tone and empathy are key in such efforts. Boilerplate responses to Muslim concerns are not in order and officials at all levels should convey that they understand and appreciate Muslim concerns and are at least factoring them into policy decisions. Officials should also acknowledge mistakes when they are made.[86] Informants will continue to play an important role in identifying and disrupting future terrorist threats, but the United States should carefully weigh their use, apply them sparingly and ensure that their actions do not unnecessarily antagonize or even radicalize potential targets.[87] As noted by David Schanzer and colleagues, the government should develop clear policies for when informants can be used and should communicate these openly to community leaders.[88]

Related to this, U.S. government agencies could also directly use social media as a means to publicize outreach. While some events should remain private and unpublicized, audience and impact can be greatly expanded through videotaped engagements placed on YouTube, live Twitter feeds, or blogs. Such events should obviously not be contrived. Fishman and Lebovich argue for creating a "safe space" for intra-Muslim discourse on difficult political questions such as the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Muslim Americans should not feel constrained in speaking out on these issues for "fear of being labeled terrorist sympathizers."[89] By allowing and publicizing an active and honest national discourse, U.S. government agency representatives can communicate a willingness to listen and promote healthy political discourse among a key Muslim constituency.

It is clear that U.S. leaders from across the political spectrum must actively work to counter the growing rancor in the public discourse on Islam. President Barack Obama has publicly called for interfaith engagement and tolerance and has been clear that the nation is not engaged in a war against Islam.[90] This sentiment should be loudly echoed by leadership from across the political landscape. In addition, leaders from all parties should speak out immediately and forcefully against any statements from their members or constituents that may appear bigoted or that serve to promote false stereotypes. If American society expects Muslims to take a stand against extremism, it is incumbent upon political and civic leaders to speak out publicly against Islamophobia. Programs that enable interfaith engagement are particularly important. Typically seen as an antidote to Islamic extremism, they also help counter anti-Muslim intolerance among other religious groups.[91]

Finally, while the U.S. needs to address the risks of Muslim extremism, it is important to properly balance this need with efforts to address other domestic threats such as right-wing extremism. Failure to do so only casts undue suspicion on Muslim groups and limits opportunities to detect and thwart right-wing attacks.

Enhance Education on the Threats and Risks Posed by Extremists

The U.S. should carefully use its community engagements to educate American Muslims about the efforts of al-Qa'ida and other extremist groups to recruit and radicalize U.S. citizens—doing so in a way that does not overstate the risk or suggest Muslims are a threat in and of themselves. One such tool is the Community Awareness Briefing developed by NCTC and designed to help inform the public about al-Qa'ida efforts to recruit and radicalize Americans. It highlights recruiting videos and examples of propaganda and the ease with which this content is available on the Internet, and seeks to educate individuals on what governments and communities can do to counter this threat.[92]

Focus Engagements and CVE Education on Social Media Influencers

Broad-based engagement programs are important but there is particular value in reaching out to a diverse array of Muslim social media influencers. These individuals, always eager for new content and storylines, can echo the engagements to a much broader range of people. Furthermore, by demonstrating U.S. government concerns and redresses, there is a greater chance that any negative opinions of the government can be softened or mollified. Likewise, the U.S. government should also help social media leaders understand the importance of CVE-related issues, and the Community Awareness Briefing is obviously a ready-made tool to do so. U.S. officials should identify both established and up-and-coming social media personalities and incorporate these individuals into interagency engagement strategies.

Build Leadership and Social Media Capacity

Enhancing the success and reach of positive voices in the Muslim community, especially those willing to directly counter al-Qa'ida's outreach efforts, will require building the requisite capacity of American Muslim leaders and institutions. This capacity building will need to focus on building general institutional capacities, leadership skills, and social media expertise, along with even broader skills in the arts. Efforts to build networks of Muslim leaders and empower them with information and research are also required.

Build Institutional and Leadership Capacity

Institutional capacity and leadership training are an important and foundational step to enhancing the number and power of credible Muslim voices. One issue is helping to develop religious leaders who have scholarly credentials, understand and are able to work in an American context, and can speak to young American-born Muslims who may feel disenfranchised from local religious institutions. There is also a need to help build Muslim civil society actors and faith-based organizations. Emerging leaders and their institutions will need knowledge in organizational management, the creation of nonprofit structures and foundations, and the ability to compete for foundation grants.[93]

A number of Muslim institutions have started to build this capacity. For example, Hartford Seminary helps train American Muslim chaplains to work in universities, hospitals, and mosques, and the American Muslim Civil Leadership Institute (AMCLI)

and MPAC both offer leadership training to a diverse array of up-and-coming Muslim leaders with the goal of enhancing their skills for civic engagement.[94] Funding from foundations and nonprofits are key for such programs and should be enhanced where possible.

Build Capacity for Social Media Outreach

The value of social media training was echoed by a number of those interviewed. As Moghul noted, "You can figure it out on your own but it doesn't mean you will. [Training] saves time and energy. Those with most valuable contributions don't have time to figure it out."[95] Another individual observed that, "You don't have to teach a 20-year-old how to tweet, but you can teach them how to tweet well."[96] Representatives of one marketing firm that provides such instruction agree, observing that training can help individuals know who they are targeting, how to target them and how to, for example, craft effective messages on Twitter with a 140-character limit.[97] Ultimately, individuals and institutions should be able to develop a proper social media strategy, utilize analytics that help determine the reach and effectiveness of outreach campaigns, and improve execution. Trainers should provide guidance on techniques that can help web content rise in Google search rankings, and help religious scholars and institutions understand the importance of proper sound bites that can play well on Twitter and Facebook.[98] Helping individuals and institutions develop substantive content is also important, as social media is simply a tool to convey a meaningful message. Support to theological training such as that fostered by Hartford Seminary and Zaytuna College is recommended.

In promoting this training, it will be important to identify up-and-coming leaders who can most benefit from the education. As the case studies suggest, one approach is to work with CVE stakeholders who are intent on taking up the mantle of countering violent extremism and related causes such as building interfaith relations. Social media training should also piggyback on other civic and religious capacity-building programs such as those by the Hartford Seminary, Zaytuna College, AMCLI, and MPAC. It would also be helpful to provide this training to members of the National Association of Muslim Chaplains and the Muslim Student Association. Many such programs already incorporate a social media element to their training, but enhanced private sector funding and partnerships with technology and social media firms may well increase the value and effectiveness of this training. In addition to in-person training, an easy-use manual or website on best practices for using social media for religious engagement would also be helpful. Such a manual would prove helpful for local community and religious leaders.

Work with Artists

Artists, including those working in film, music, and more, are important because they have the capability to provide content beyond that of scholars, religious leaders, and social-religious commentators. They can weave stories that tell a meaningful and engaging tale, craft videos that have the capacity to go viral on YouTube, and draft screenplays that allow television and the silver screen to serve as important vectors.[99] These artists can play a critical role in the counterradicalization debate both in the United States and abroad. Programs that seek to build artistic and social media skill sets while explaining barriers that limit reach and influence could prove enormously helpful.

Empower Influential Voices with Research and Information

Another key aspect to building capacity is to empower key parties with information that will expand the effectiveness and reach of their activities. This research can take a variety of forms. Mirahmadi and Farooq of the WORDE Foundation argue for enhanced research on Muslim public opinion to better understand Muslim attitudes. They specifically recommend research on the "challenges and threats that face Muslim communities, the reconciliation of Islamic and American values, Muslim identity issues in America, and barriers to integrating into mainstream American society."[100] One imam agrees and argues that, "Foundations should get in tune with what is going on in minds of young Muslims . . . find out what interests them and [learn] their struggles."[101] Classic marketing research can also be helpful. Focus groups were certainly pivotal as Google Ideas undertook its counterradicalization program, and this type of research would also prove beneficial to a broader array of activists. There are also Technographic surveys, which help social media strategists plan outreach efforts by helping them to understand how audiences vary in terms of their participation in social media.[102]

Build Social Networks of CVE Activists

CVE activists, leaders in the Muslim community, artists, private foundations, government representatives, and technology firms should be connected via a broad range of networks. Conferences and workshops are important as they provide a venue where individuals can learn community needs, support and encourage new and existing efforts, share tips and expertise, and build relationships. According to Moghul, "The most profound implications happen after the event and people are socializing; that is when people process and ask the questions that they are uncomfortable asking in a public setting. You take smarter voices in the community and introduce them to mentors."[103] Dolatabadi of Google Ideas notes, "One participant came to [the SAVE conference] with his business hat on but he said he went home and cried [because he had] made great friendships . . ."[104] Ultimately, networking is best started in person through a variety of conferences, workshops, and retreats but can quickly go online and then spread through Facebook groups and other web venues.

Understand the Important Role of Nonviolent Islamists

For those seeking to partner with or support Muslim voices, one pressing question is: Which are appropriate voices to support? Scholar Lorenzo Vidino provides an excellent description of this issue in a report published by the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP).[105] Muslim communities in the United States are highly diverse, vary-

ing considerably along sectarian and political lines. Vidino weighs the pros and cons of working with nonviolent Islamists, some of whom hold highly conservative views on women and speak with a palpable anger against U.S. foreign policy.

The risk in working with these individuals is that their ideology may function as a "conveyor belt" for radicalization and may lay the ideological groundwork for subsequent violence. However, as Vidino points out, those who speak out against violence are "in a unique position to influence those most likely to engage in violence." They also have high levels of credibility among populations most at risk of radicalization.[106] Some of those interviewed for this study concur with the risks, but many others argued that such voices are critical in the counterradicalization debate. As one interviewee suggested, this rubric of "good Muslim—bad Muslim" is "damaging." The nonviolent Islamists are the ones "you want to be an ally because those who follow them are the ones you want to inoculate. . . . By eliminating [these voices] you are losing the audience you want to target."[107]

As Vidino points out, there is no clear answer to the dilemma. We suggest that foundations and private sponsors are in the best position to weigh these factors. They will be unencumbered by the vast bureaucracy that saddles government agencies, and so may have more ability to consider any requests for funding or capacity-building assistance on a case-by-case basis. They may also be able to monitor the impact of their efforts and continue or discontinue assistance as the situation warrants, and they are in a position to side-step thorny issues of ideology by basing assistance on specific and defined program objectives such as deradicalizing individuals already on the extremist path, providing online safety training, or fostering interfaith relations. These are worthwhile goals regardless of a group's ideology.

Two other issues are worth pointing out. First, such Islamist groups are a minority in the Muslim American landscape. According to a survey of American mosques, only 1 percent of congregations identify themselves with the Salafi tradition.[108] Such groups are also more likely to eschew funding and assistance from moderate or secular organizations. Consequently, the issue is likely less a dilemma than it might otherwise be. Second, the value of providing appropriate capacity-building programs among a broad cross-section of groups and individuals may outweigh the risks of providing no assistance at all.

Enhance Private-Sector Funding and Engagement

A number of foundations, nonprofits, and technology and media firms have helped support a variety of voices and initiatives important to countering al-Qa'ida's online presence. We recommend that private sector institutions consider new opportunities for enhanced funding. We also urge that the U.S. government play the role of convener and use its funds and influence to facilitate networks of credible Muslim voices, promote funding and assistance from nonprofits, foundations and think-tanks, and invite public relations firms and technology outfits to build web and social media capacity. Such a recommendation has been offered by a number of commentators, including British scholar Peter Neumann and the WORDE Foundation.[109] It has also been acknowledged in the White House's Strategic Implementation Plan.[110]

Find Avenues to Enhance Government Funding

While the government has limited ability to fund American Muslim social media outreach efforts, there are several lines of funding that should not prove controversial. First, the White House's Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships actively funds programs that help promote interfaith dialogue and cooperation.[111] It would not be a stretch to help local faith-based organizations use social media to create online platforms that can maximize the impact of in-person events.[112]

There may also be a role for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which awards matching grants to not-for-profit organizations. It seeks in part to use these grants for strengthening local communities and recognizes that art "works on audiences to change, confront, challenge, and inspire" Americana.[113] The NEA has various grant mechanisms that may be suitable to assist aspiring American Muslim artists in enhancing skill sets and creating work that counters extremism. This need not "choose sides" in Muslim ideological debates but could help fund works that promote tolerance and interfaith engagement, counter notions of "jihadi cool," and emphasize nonviolent approaches to conflict. Accepting NEA funding is less likely to stigmatize an artist the way funding from an overtly security-focused agency such as DHS or NCTC might.[114]

An alternative is that the government could work through the USIP or a nongovernmental think-tank to help administer a grant process to fund small initiatives, including capacity-building efforts, for American Muslim artists or others who similarly propose efforts of a nonideological nature. Tim Stevens and Peter Neumann have proposed such a program for the British government, saying a major benefit of working through an intermediary is that it would help avoid accusations of government "meddling and manipulation."[115]

Conclusion

It is worth concluding this report by emphasizing an important and undergirding message: The U.S. government and private funders must play the role of facilitator rather than orchestrator. This is the key lesson learned from the Google Ideas initiative, where orchestrators quickly abandoned a centrally directed media campaign and instead played the role of enabler by building skills, facilitating funding, and helping activists forge new connections. Ultimately, the message belonged solely to the individual activists. This approach entails some risk as activists will criticize policies of the U.S. government or advocate views that seemingly diverge from the mainstream. The challenge comes in appreciating that such authenticity and criticism only serve to empower what is hoped to be a core message of peace and tolerance. Ultimately, the U.S. government and private sponsors must allow credible Muslim voices to reach their own conclusions and find their own message.

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[91] Importantly, interfaith engagements ought not presuppose that fundamental differences in theology do not exist among participants from different religious backgrounds. Instead, interfaith engagements should seek to help participants understand these differences and create an atmosphere where interfaith friendships can take root. Such was the case in an event called "Building Hope: Muslims, Christians and Jews Seeking the Common Good." The ten-day event held in June 2011 brought together influential, conservative, and devout Christians, Muslims, and Jews in order to discuss issues of common concern. The event's unusual length allowed time for participants to share personal convictions, wrestle with and appreciate key differences in theology, and build mutual friendships. See Yale Center for Faith and Culture, Reconciliation Program website.

[92] Executive Office of the President of the United States, "Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," December 2011.

[93] Loskota and Roumani, 2011; Mirahmadi interview, 2012

[94] American Muslim Civil Leadership Institute website; phone interview with Nadia Roumani, AMCLI director, May 31, 2012; Beutel interview, 2012.

[95] Moghul interview, 2012.

[96] Media activist interview, 2012.

[97] Interview with Rebecca Bouchebel, Qorvis Communications, May 31, 2012.

[98] One commonly cited fatwa against terrorism, for example, is 600 pages, far too cumbersome to play well in social media.

[99] RAND has examined how Arabic language works of art can positively counter extremism in the broader Middle East and has considered some of the barriers faced by Middle Eastern artists. Lowell Schwartz, Todd Helmus, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Nadia Oweidat, *Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-879-OSD, 2009. As of November 27, 2012:
http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG879.html

[100] Mirahmadi and Farooq, 2010.

[101] Imam interview, 2012.

[102] For example, the surveys identify the prevalence of "creators" who publish blogs and upload videos, "conversationalists" who post Twitter updates and update their Facebook status, "joiners" who visit social networking sites and maintain profiles, as well as mere "spectators" and "inactives." See Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, *Groundswell, Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, Forrester Research, Inc., 2011, p. 63.

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About This Report

The August 2011 White House strategy to empower local partners to prevent violent extremism seeks to promote community-led counterextremism activities, particularly those promulgated on the Internet and social media. This report seeks to identify ways to empower positive and credible Muslim voices to counter al-Qa'ida's growing Internet propaganda campaign. The findings from this report will be of interest not only to the U.S. government but also private foundations, nonprofit groups, and the private sector, whose support is critical to the success of the new White House strategy.

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