ICSR insight

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"A Step in the Right Direction" – Reviewing the U.S. Government's Counter-Radicalization Strategy

Summary

In no other country has the political debate about violent radicalization been more contentious than the United States. The latest installment of the so-called "King hearings" – named after Peter King, the Chairman of the House of Representatives' Homeland Security Committee, who initiated them – has yet again shown why.

In the meantime, the White House has quietly embraced a common sense approach towards tackling radicalization. The administration's new policy document – "Empowering Local Governments to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States" – is a step in the right direction, but leaves many questions unanswered.

Context

The latest installment of the congressional hearings on "The Extent of Radicalization in the American Muslim Community"took place on Wednesday last week – just five days after the terrorist attacks in Oslo. In his opening statement,Representative Peter King, the Republican Chairman of the House of Representatives' Homeland Security Committee, insisted that it was right for his Committee to focus on "Muslim radicalization", arguing that "there is no equivalency in the threat to our homeland from a deranged gunman and the international terror apparatus of al-Qaeda and its affiliates". King's counterpart, Ranking Member Bennie Thompson, repeated the Democrats' position, saying that the hearings were deeply flawed and would achieve nothing but stigmatize an entire community.

Other than strong language, neither Republicans nor Democrats on the Committee have offered any practical suggestions for how the issue should be handled. King's comments that "over 80 per cent" of mosques in the United States are controlled by extremists, and that ordinary Muslims do not cooperate with law enforcement, are not only untrue, they are nurturing the idea that Muslim Americans are "enemies within". In doing so, they are playing into the hands of Al Qaeda recruiters and propagandists, who keep telling their audience that they cannot be good Muslims and loyal Americans at the same time.

The Committee's Democrats, on the other hand, have ignored their own administration's assessments according to which Al Qaeda remains the "preeminent counterterrorism challenge we face today", and that a " small but increasing number of individuals here in the United States have become captivated by [Al Qaeda], seeking to commit violent acts here at home". The refusal of Committee Democrats to contemplate any action to prevent and counter radicalization among Muslim Americans is unhelpful and short-sighted – not least because it will be ordinary, law-abiding Muslim Americans who will suffer the "backlash"that is likely to follow a homegrown terrorist attack.

The noise that has been generated by the hearings is inversely proportional to the influence they have exerted over the administration's policymaking. Far from endorsing any of the committee's hardline views, White House officials have quietly embraced a pragmatic, common sense position, which attempts to address the threat of homegrown terrorism by introducing new instruments for terrorism prevention, but refuses to divide the country by portraying Muslim Americans as "fifth columnists".

Strategy

The 8-page document that was released by the White House on Wednesday is titled "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States". It sets out a framework for confronting "ideologically motivated violence", which is thought to include white supremacists, Al Qaeda related or inspired homegrown terrorists, as well as other kinds of "domestic terrorist groups".

Although the paper says that the framework is meant to be long-term and, therefore, needs to be flexible enough to accommodate threats other than Al Qaeda, it states clearly that – for the time being – "al-Qaeda and its adherents represent the most significant and direct terrorist threat to our country".

One of the paper's core messages is that counter-radicalization efforts need to be carried out in partnership with – not against – the communities that are targeted by violent extremists. The federal government, the paper argues, has a role to play – it can convene, facilitate, educate and support – but ultimately, it is the communities themselves who will have to take the lead.

The paper outlines three principal areas of activity: engagement; training; and counter-ideological messaging. It explains the purpose of these activities, and how they relate to the overall aim of countering violent radicalization.

A fourth prong – highlighted throughout the text – is the idea that many counter-radicalization activities will be part of existing government programs aimed at addressing community safety challenges and good governance. This may include programs aimed at educating new immigrants, for example, or lessons about internet safety in public schools.

The paper concludes by setting out a number of key principles that will guide the government's counter-radicalization efforts and strategy. They emphasize the community and bottom-up driven approach of the strategy, and make it clear that people should not be targeted based on their religious practices or political convictions alone.

Assessment

The White House's domestic counter-radicalization strategy has been long in the making. Previous governments, including the Bush administration, have worked on similar papers, but never managed to follow through. In that sense, the document is a step in the right direction.

Together with recent speeches by senior administration officials, such as President Obama's counterterrorism czar John Brennan and Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough, the document offers a good insight into the administration's thinking, and – specifically – its desire to bypass the highly politicized discussions in Congress by opting for a "more holistic approach".

The document is explicit in naming Al Qaeda as the priority target of future counter-radicalization efforts and making resisting Al Qaeda's ideology one of the principal prongs in this effort. This should

be welcomed by those on the Right who – in the past – have condemned the Obama administration for refusing to name Al Qaeda and counter its ideology out of fear that doing so would be seen as "politically incorrect" or "offensive" to American Muslims.

Equally, though, the paper makes a clear distinction between Al Qaeda and the Muslim American communities which Al Qaeda seeks to radicalize and recruit. Those on the Left who have argued that any effort to counter radicalization would end up victimizing Muslims and play into the hands of "Islamophobes" should be heartened by such language. The paper views Muslims as partners, not as potential terrorists, and it clearly refutes any attempt to "securitize" the government's relationships with them.

What the document fails to provide are specifics. On one level, this may be understandable – and even intended – given that counter-radicalization is a novel concept that needs to be explained to the American public, policymakers and community leaders before jumping into specifics and details of implementation.

At the same time, considering how long this document has been in the making, it clearly should have said more about "how" exactly the government hopes to accomplish its many aims and objectives. Arguably, the speeches by senior officials that were meant to "prepare the ground" for the release of this document were richer in detail than the document itself.

No doubt, the paper goes further than previous administrations in heeding the 9/11 Commission's call for a preventive strategy to counter violent radicalization. It educates policymakers and sets out key principles and objectives. It signals the "direction of travel", and may help to catalyze action on the ground.

But many questions are left unanswered. For example, given that engagement, training and, to a lesser extent, messaging, have been promoted by this and previous administrations for many years, how will future efforts be different from existing ones? Will we see more of the same, or will future outreach, training and messaging be fundamentally different in nature and scope? How will such efforts be coordinated, and who will be in charge?

Because it doesn't say much about "how" the government's policy aims will be translated into policy practice, the document doesn't qualify as the "strategy" as which it has been presented. It represents a framework – nothing more, nothing less. What it stands for in practice will hopefully become clearer in the process of implementation.

Implementation

ICSR has played a significant role in helping to define and create momentum behind the administration's approach. For example,last month's Bipartisan Policy Center report on *Preventing Violent Radicalization in America* – authored by ICSR Director Peter Neumann – set out key principles and recommendations that should guide the administration's emerging policy.

A large number of the report's recommendations are reflected in yesterday's policy document. Others, however, still need to be addressed. They include:

- Who is going to lead federal efforts, and how are they going to be coordinated? What mechanisms will be created for sharing best practices and evaluating the effectiveness of counter-radicalization efforts?

- How will local and state officials be convinced to adopt the mission? What, if any, incentives can the federal government provide?
- What are the criteria by which local partners are to be selected? Will the federal government provide any guidance?
- What changes will be made to the provision of federal training grants? Who will do the training, and what areas and skills will it focus on?
- How can the excessive focus on policing, and – thereby – securitizing, Muslim communities be avoided? Are there any plans involving local officials, such as Mayors?
- How will the government promote counter-radicalization in"at risk" environments (e.g., the internet and prisons) and among "at risk" populations (e.g., young males)?

Finding answers to these questions will be critical to ensuring the strategy's success. Even more important, however, is the need for persistence. According to Neumann:

"Resilience, be it national or communal, does not emerge overnight, and it will not be possible, therefore, to fully assess the effectiveness of any policy for years to come. The key to successful counter-radicalization may not lie in any particular policy prescription but, rather, how consistently the policy is implemented and maintained over a long period of time."

"As a result, the American public will have an important role to play in holding government to its word. They need to make sure that whatever approach the government adopts, its commitment and attention to challenging and countering radicalization never wavers. As the 9/11 Commission pointed out, making America safe from terrorism is a 'generational challenge' and 'the American people are entitled to expect their government to do its very best' in meeting it."

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