



Losing the War of Ideas

Countering Violent Extremism in the Age of Trump

By Alia Awadallah, Hardin Lang, and Kristy Densmore August 2017

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

When President Donald Trump took office in January, he inherited a military campaign against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East that had yielded impressive gains in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, in Syria. Since then, the Trump administration has largely continued to rely on President Barack Obama's counterterrorism strategy of working through partners in the region. However, the strategy to counter the spread of violent extremist ideologies that give rise to terrorism remains a work in progress. Initial steps by the Trump administration give cause for concern.

Countering violent extremism (CVE) is a relatively new field. It was first incorporated into official U.S. national security strategy in 2006.¹ The challenges CVE seeks to address are more diverse and intangible than those targeted by the traditional tools of counterterrorism. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "CVE aims to address the root causes of violent extremism by providing resources to communities to build and sustain local prevention efforts and promote the use of counter-narratives to confront violent extremist messaging online."² Yet there is little consensus on what constitute the key drivers of extremism. The effectiveness of various interventions also remains a subject of significant debate.

After more than a decade, efforts to counter the ideology of terrorist networks by the United States and its partners have yet to accrue a tangible return on investment. Following the 9/11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration linked its global war on terrorism with its freedom agenda, an effort to promote political reform in the Middle East. These efforts failed to produce greater overall stability in the region. Nor did they lead to significant advances in democratic development or major achievements in the battle against violent extremism.

In its first term, the Obama administration launched a new effort to engage the Muslim world through dialogue. But this policy of engagement had little impact on the spread of extremist ideologies that were evolving rapidly with the rise of

new Al Qaeda affiliates such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State. The Obama administration's reactive posture to the 2011 popular uprisings across the Middle East sent mixed signals to the region about U.S. long-term engagement in the battle of ideas.³

To date, the Trump administration's approach to violent extremism has been mixed. On the one hand, the president's campaign and early policies were packed with vilifying rhetoric about Islam and Muslims and included an ill-considered travel ban on the citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries. At the same time, the administration has made significant outreach to key leaders in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt. However, this outreach has yet to be leveraged into concrete actions designed to reduce extremism.⁴

This report assesses opportunities to strengthen CVE initiatives in the Middle East. It explores the state of current CVE efforts in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia. These countries are among the United States' closest partners in the region. Their experiences in CVE to date reflect what remains a deeply contentious and controversial field. Their success going forward in the battle of ideas will determine whether America can turn battlefield success against terrorist organizations into lasting victory.

Additionally, the report argues that the Trump administration should pursue an indirect strategy that seeks to strengthen the capability of U.S. partners in the region to counter violent extremism. The administration should discourage these partners from adopting an overly securitized approach to CVE. It should also channel resources through multilateral initiatives, prioritize the identification of local drivers of violent extremism, and take a more rigorous approach to evaluating the impact of CVE programming. Finally, the administration should refrain from rhetoric and policies that exacerbate the problem instead of contributing to the solution.

To succeed in defeating violent extremism in the Middle East and arrest negative trends, this report recommends that the Trump administration take the following four actions:

1. Make the case to partner countries that repressive policies are counterproductive, and encourage leaders to support basic freedoms and respect for pluralism and inclusivity.

2. Support the adoption of national CVE strategies, prioritize monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and promote research to identify local drivers of violent extremism.
3. Invest in multilateral organizations and initiatives such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), Hedayah, and the Ideological War Center.
4. Abandon Islamophobic and inflammatory rhetoric.

Worrying trends in the Trump administration's approach to countering violent extremism

Although President Trump has been in office for little more than six months, three trends detailed below have emerged in his approach to violent extremism in the Middle East.

Overreliance on a securitized approach to CVE

President Trump's first trip to the Middle East sought to unite regional governments in combating extremist ideology. However, the president also signaled to the region that freedom and human rights, bipartisan tenets of American foreign policy, are no longer a priority for his administration. Indeed, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, Trump remarked, "We are not here to lecture—we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be."⁵ This statement and others like it were widely perceived as a break from previous American leaders' efforts to promote American values in the region.

In making this remark, the president signaled that America would no longer hold regional partners accountable for domestic repression. Regional governments have often used securitized and repressive measures to address extremism, including censorship, overly broad counterterrorism laws, and bans on political activity. There is a real danger that such measures will worsen the societal fissures in which extremism thrives.⁶ In addition, the Trump administration's passive response to this approach risks implicating the United States in Middle Eastern citizens' grievances against their rulers.

Pluralism and tolerance are essential in the fight against extremism. Some authoritarian governments in the Middle East have responded to the Arab uprisings by closing political space and censoring dissent. In doing so, they have nurtured a landscape in which resentment-driven ideologies face no real intellectual competi-

tion. Traditionally, the United States has recognized that political repression helps to fuel the spread of violent extremism. The Obama administration’s CVE strategy addressed this by stating that “leaders who use counter terrorism laws as an excuse to crack down on protestors, journalists, or civil society only deepen the fissures and grievances that can help fuel extremism.”⁷

Disengagement from multilateral CVE institutions and programs

Trump’s fiscal year 2018 budget proposal leaves intact most of the State Department’s CVE program funding—in contrast to many other programs the administration proposed to gut.⁸ However, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has not submitted a request for \$60 million of 2017 international CVE funding earmarked for the State Department’s Global Engagement Center (see the text box below).⁹ If not transferred to the State Department by September 30, the funding will expire and leave a substantial gap in U.S. efforts to work with partners on countering violent extremism.

During a trip to Saudi Arabia in May, President Trump inaugurated the country’s new Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, called Etidal in Arabic.¹⁰ The center is slated to conduct counterextremist messaging online and in the media. To date, however, the administration has not demonstrated any substantive support or follow up for the initiative. It is also not clear how Etidal will coordinate with the many existing multilateral institutions already doing this work—many of which are led or funded by the United States (see the text box below).

According to U.S. officials, interventions that they term “made in America” are likely to lose legitimacy among the target population.¹¹ It is therefore essential that the United States coordinate with and work through its allies and partners, especially those in the Muslim world. To this end, the United States has made significant investments in multilateral CVE programs and initiatives, including those described in the text box below. A key goal of these efforts is to develop a shared understanding of violent extremism in the Middle East based on analysis and research.

The United States and multilateral CVE initiatives

The United States has partnered with other countries on several international CVE initiatives, including:

The Global Engagement Center is an interagency center that coordinates U.S. counterterrorism messaging for foreign audiences. While the center is not a multilateral initiative, it collaborates with foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations to counter violent ideology abroad.¹²

The Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund is a nonprofit foundation based in Geneva and financed by the United States and 12 other countries. The fund works in partnership with governments, civil society, and the private sector in target countries to support national strategies to address the local drivers of violent extremism.¹³

Hedayah, launched as part of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, is hosted by the Emirati government. According to its website, Hedayah is a research and best practices platform “for expertise and experience to counter violent extremism.”¹⁴ Among its activities is a capacity building aspect that seeks to work with local actors around the world to “design empirical responses.”¹⁵ This has involved engaging directly with religious and community leaders to develop effective and local CVE interventions.¹⁶

The International Institute of Justice and the Rule of Law is, like Hedayah, part of the Global Counterterrorism Forum. Its mission is to provide rule-of-law-based training for police, prosecutors, lawmakers, judges, and other justice sector officials on how to address terrorism and related criminal activities.¹⁷

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is a security-oriented intergovernmental organization with 57 participant countries. The organization leads social media campaigns and events to unify communities against violent extremism.¹⁸

The Sawab Center was co-founded by the United States and the UAE as part of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. The center’s mission is to combat extremist narratives and terrorist propaganda.¹⁹

Promoting CVE policies that embrace pluralism and tolerance through multi-lateral initiatives was a core concept of the Obama administration's approach to CVE. In September 2014, President Obama addressed the U.N. General Assembly to urge unified, global participation in CVE. In September 2015, leaders from more than 100 countries, 20 multilateral bodies, and 120 civil societies and private-sector organizations participated in a summit to affirm their commitment to CVE and coordinate preventive strategies.

By contrast, the Trump administration has so far pursued counterextremism on an ad hoc, bilateral basis. This approach selects partners and tactics in response to immediate challenges, rather than addressing underlying structural drivers through existing institutions.

Lingering risks and damage of Islamophobic rhetoric

The Trump administration's warm relations with Muslim leaders stands in tension with its inflammatory rhetoric and policies against Muslims in the United States. During his first weeks in office, Trump issued an executive order banning travel from seven Muslim-majority countries, which was widely perceived as a "Muslim ban."²⁰ In addition, the administration reportedly intends to rebrand counter-violent extremism initiatives as "Countering Islamic Extremism" initiatives.²¹ Furthermore, Trump's statements, and those of some of his key aides, denigrating Muslims and Islam have been widely covered in the Middle East and negatively affect the popular perception of the administration in the region.

The impact of these actions is already being felt. Recent polls show extremely low confidence in the Trump administration among Arab populations. In Jordan, Tunisia, and Lebanon, confidence in President Trump is significantly lower than confidence in President Obama at the end of his term. Additionally, those polled in these countries overwhelmingly described President Trump as "intolerant" and "dangerous." The majority of survey respondents in Jordan and Lebanon expected that relations between the United States and their countries would get worse during President Trump's tenure.²² This lack of trust in the administration undermines the United States' partnerships and legitimacy in the region.

Regional efforts to counter violent extremism

For more than a decade, several key countries in the Middle East have developed programs and adopted new approaches to address the challenges of extremist ideologies. These programs and their impact have varied considerably. Many national-level CVE initiatives in the region suffer from the same set of weaknesses. But their existence demonstrates a recognition in the region of the widespread problem. An overview of these efforts is presented below.

Common themes in regional CVE programs

The proliferation of CVE programs in the region signals increased attention to the challenges, but many of these programs have not produced significant results and are riddled with weaknesses. A new approach should integrate efforts to shore up common weaknesses, as well as build on existing strengths.

Most of the countries reviewed in this report prioritize some form of religious intervention to counter the spread of violent extremist ideology. Additionally, many interventions examined here are state-owned and often restrict political freedoms. In doing so, most undervalue civil society's potential to complement governmental efforts in CVE. However, there are unique elements in the approach of each country that reflect national experiences and histories.

Two key centers of gravity in the fight against extremist Islam are in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Saudi Arabia is uniquely situated in the broader ideological battles within the different schools of thought in Islam, given that it is the birthplace of the religion and its unique role as “custodian of the two holy mosques” in Mecca and Medina. For centuries, Egyptian religious institutions have heavily influenced Muslim thought and Islamist ideology, with Egypt's Al-Azhar University serving as one especially influential forum.

The UAE's involvement in CVE reflects its significant interest in combating extremism, as it defines the term, to ensure stability at home and diminish threats arising from political Islam to both security and stability. The country has initiated a number of new activities in partnership with other countries and international organizations such as the United Nations.

Tunisia has prioritized the role of civil society organizations in the response to violent extremism. Unlike other countries in the region, Tunisia has avoided a totally government-owned and implemented effort. In Morocco, the king enjoys an important degree of religious legitimacy, which lends credibility to the country's efforts to contain the influence of radical clerics.²³ Jordan has pursued a primarily state-led strategy that includes a mix of counter-messaging and religious scholar training, but it is increasingly working with the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and international nongovernmental organizations to expand its CVE programs.

The major weaknesses of existing CVE efforts in these countries are described below. An overview of each country's CVE programs is available in Appendix I.

Absence of comprehensive, integrated national CVE strategies

Few countries in the Middle East have national strategies to guide their efforts to counter violent extremism. Among those examined in this report, only Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco have a national strategy or framework. National CVE strategies are important for several reasons:

1. They provide a public commitment by a state to counter violent extremism.
2. They establish a framework to organize and coordinate efforts.
3. They set out goals and objectives that can be measured and evaluated.
4. They can provide greater opportunity for civil society participation.

Lack of data-based interventions

Few, if any, CVE interventions in the region are grounded in robust data or analysis of the drivers of extremism. Robert McKenzie, a former senior adviser for CVE at the U.S. State Department, concludes that “efforts are mostly designed and funded on the basis of anecdotal evidence, with unknown results.”²⁴ The effectiveness of all existing scholar-led initiatives is uncertain due to the lack of transparency and accessibility of data in these countries.

Most regional countries prioritize religious interventions of some form without a strong analytical basis for understanding the role played by religion. In addition, governments often blame what they term “incorrect” interpretations of Islam without pointing to a commonly agreed upon “correct” interpretation. This results in lack of unity and contradiction—between, for example, religious authorities in Saudi Arabia and Morocco—that undercut CVE efforts.

Lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

None of the countries reviewed have in place transparent and independent evaluation mechanisms for their CVE programs. In some cases, this is due to the nature of the intervention. For example, prevention is especially resistant to evaluation, due to the sheer “variety of the programs categorized as prevention” and “trying to prove that a behavior or action has not occurred,” according to the Department of Homeland Security’s terrorism study center at the University of Maryland.²⁵ Prevention initiatives take the form of preemptive public relations campaigns aimed at stopping the spread of violent extremism among a target population. Most evaluations of such programs use attitudinal surveys, which are of limited use because of the difficulty of proving a negative.²⁶

However, de-radicalization and disengagement programs should be easier to evaluate. Their objective is for an individual to reject previously held views and withdraw from a violent extremist group if they are a member. These programs involve individual interventions that include counseling, religious debate, and economic and social assistance in the form of job training. Evaluation focuses on recidivism rates based on “whether an individual returns to active participation in an extremist group” or “whether an individual has a prison release revoked or has been rearrested.”²⁷

Overall, none of the programs in these six countries include clear evaluation methods to determine the effectiveness of their interventions, and none provide numbers that can be independently verified. This makes it difficult to identify the strengths of existing CVE initiatives and recreate them on a larger scale.

Increasingly repressive approach to CVE

There is evidence to suggest that some governments in the region have progressively securitized their approach to countering extremism during the first six months of the Trump administration. This includes the use of heavy-handed counterterrorism tactics and political repression. Relying primarily on security interventions risks obscuring other possible drivers of violent extremism, including poor governance structures and a lack of economic opportunities.

Since 2013, Egypt has become increasingly restrictive of NGOs, journalists, activists, and political dissidents. This has escalated in the wake of President Trump's praise of Egyptian President Fattah el-Sisi. Only a few days after a meeting between the leaders, Sisi passed a law placing stringent restrictions on civil society and aid groups and blocked 21 websites, including several news outlets.²⁸ Some qualitative analysis suggests that these types of measures may add to the grievances that fuel Salafi-jihadi recruitment.²⁹

The relationship between violent extremism and nonviolent Islamism remains controversial. The past several years have seen an increase in regional competition for influence by leaders and Islamist parties.³⁵ States such as Qatar and Turkey back the Muslim Brotherhood, while others—such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—oppose it. The latter countries have welcomed the Trump administration's apparent support for a hardline approach to the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁶ Most recently, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt insisted that Doha sever all ties to the Muslim Brotherhood as one of the key demands for lifting the blockade imposed on Qatar in June 2017.³⁷

Jordanian, Tunisian, and Moroccan leaders have not adopted high-profile, heavy-handed measures since Trump took office. But they appear to be turning to securitized measures to tackle extremism. Over the past decade, all three countries have signaled their intent to introduce political reforms and take steps toward democratization. However, reform efforts have subsided in recent years. Jordan has quietly

taken steps to close political space, including media censorship and a counterterrorism law that has allegedly been used to silence journalists and citizens critical of the government.³⁸ Tunisia's parliament recently considered a new security bill criticized by Human Rights Watch on the grounds that it "could criminalize the conduct of journalists, whistleblowers, human rights defenders, and others who criticize the police."³⁹

Salafi-jihadism: The basics

Salafi-jihadism is a fundamentalist form of Islam that specifically sanctions violent means to realize political ends. Methodological disagreements exist within Salafi-jihadi communities, however, on the political application of violence.³⁰ Political ends often constitute a religious obligation, "fard" in Arabic, to purify Islamic society and states. This requires that Salafi-jihadis oppose existing Islamist states, which they believe propagate a polluted interpretation of Islam. The Salafi-jihadi movement includes the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, as well as other radical Sunni groups.³¹

Salafi-jihadism stems from Salafism—a literalist interpretation of Sunni Islam that adheres to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the three successive generations of his followers. Salafi Muslims hold that the pious predecessors, as those three generations are known, preserved most accurately Muhammad's words and deeds. While scholars sometimes group Salafism with political Islam, many Salafi Muslims are in fact apolitical, earning a reputation for being quietist. However, the minority of politically engaged Salafi Muslims disproportionately shapes the political landscape of their societies.³²

A key figure in Salafi-jihadi history and jurisprudence is Abdullah Azzam.³³ A Palestinian cleric, Azzam became a global recruiter for Afghan-Arab jihad against the Soviet Union. Salafi-jihadis previously conceived of jihad as a struggle against internal, intrastate enemies. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, however, reframed jihad as a struggle against external adversaries.³⁴ With Osama bin Laden, Azzam founded Al Qaeda, a base from which to execute jihad.

After Azzam's 1989 assassination, bin Laden and the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri inherited Azzam's global jihadi networks. While bin Laden and Zawahiri directed Al Qaeda's strategy and tactics, Azzam remains an influential figure in Salafi-jihadi thought.

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers

Hold countries accountable for repressive policies and encourage leaders to support basic freedoms and respect pluralism and inclusivity

Pluralism and tolerance are essential in the fight against extremism, especially in the Middle East.⁴⁰ As such, the Trump administration should leverage its relationships with regional leaders to push back against repressive policies. The administration should put forward an affirmative agenda that links basic freedoms to the fight against extremism. These issues should also be raised regularly during meetings with regional leaders and through existing strategic dialogues.

Congress should also elevate issues of pluralism and inclusivity, especially where the administration fails to give them the necessary attention. Congress should call for hearings in response to repressive policies and actions that could encourage—rather than counter—violent extremism. This should include hearings on relevant issues identified by the State Department’s annual reports on human rights and religious freedom. If current trends continue, Congress could also consider legislation that prohibits assistance or arms sales to countries that use counterterrorism laws to suppress opposition and minority voices.

Work closely with regional partners to devise and implement comprehensive CVE strategies and good governance programs

Adoption of national CVE strategies

The Trump administration should leverage better relations with regional partners to encourage the development of national strategies.⁴¹ National strategies should be led by governments but engage civil society organizations, community leaders, local municipality officials, academics, and other relevant stakeholders. The administration should also privately convene leaders from

the region to coordinate on CVE. Where countries have shown a willingness to develop national strategies, the United States should support a comprehensive approach that goes beyond an exclusive focus on security tools and state control. Governments should be encouraged to make strategies as inclusive as possible and to share knowledge and lessons learned.

Prioritization of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

The Trump administration should draw upon existing CVE evaluations models and scholarship to assist regional partners in developing their own transparent evaluation methodologies. One resource to draw from would be the Department of Homeland Security’s program at the University of Maryland, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START). According to Peter Weinberger, a senior researcher at START, a way for the United States to play a positive role is to “model good designs and programs: show here’s how we designed the program, how we worked with the community, how we collected the data, how we made sense of the results, and how we made changes as a result of what we collected.”⁴²

The United States should encourage transparency both in planning and implementing CVE programs. By supporting publicly accessible evaluations, the United States can highlight gaps in regional efforts, improve understanding of local drivers of violent extremism and the tactics used to combat them, and strengthen national and international faith in implemented programming.

Advanced research to identify local drivers of violent extremism

The United States should encourage its partners in the region to more systematically identify the drivers of violent extremism among their populations. Existing state-led efforts reflect a focus on religious intervention. But absent deeper understanding of local drivers, this approach risks obscuring other root causes. The United States can use its access to researchers and data on the drivers of extremism—including marginalization, poor governance, and state-sponsored violence—to encourage its partners to address these areas as part of their CVE efforts.⁴³ It should also facilitate input from civil society. The United States could encourage regional participation in the RESOLVE Network, a global consortium that collects and catalyzes local research on violent extremism to facilitate the creation of more effective policies.⁴⁴

Invest in and amplify the role of multilateral initiatives such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum and Hedayah

Government-led initiatives may be viewed with suspicion in the region. Furthermore, in the view of one Middle East expert, “The U.S. flag is a problem; it immediately delegitimizes the effort.”⁴⁵ Accordingly, there are significant advantages to working through multilateral initiatives and mechanisms such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, Hedayah, and the RESOLVE Network. GCTF has already disseminated a number of best practice memorandums on CVE. The field, especially in the region, is desperately in need of a CVE clearing house that collects, analyzes, and disseminates information related to interventions.⁴⁶ Hedayah could be encouraged to play that role.

Abandon Islamophobic and inflammatory rhetoric

The president and his team should work to correct the lingering damage of its Islamophobic rhetoric during the campaign. Administration appointments and public statements are two major areas that require prompt attention. American diplomats in the region should engage publicly in a way that emphasizes America’s enduring pluralistic values and constitutional traditions. The administration should avoid making reckless decisions and statements that affect CVE work and relations with the governments highlighted in this report, including policies such as the travel bans. Such words and deeds feed into a clash of civilizations model that can inflame public opinion in the Muslim world and harm regional efforts to counter violent extremism.

Conclusion

Countering violent extremism must remain a top priority for the United States and its partners in the Middle East. The United States should continue to play a role in guiding, funding, and developing data-driven CVE strategies that do not lean on repression or counterproductive policies. To that end, the Trump administration should work quickly to reshape its current approach to CVE by abandoning harmful rhetoric and emphasizing thoughtful strategies that uphold American values of political openness, pluralism, and inclusivity. It should also publicly demonstrate its commitment to working through multilateral institutions and partners to build and improve the quality of existing CVE programming that has been developed by Middle Eastern countries since 2001.

Appendix: Country breakdowns

The following appendix is a breakdown of key elements of CVE programming in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia. Its objective is to provide background on the threat that violent extremism poses in each of these countries, their governments' perceptions of the threat, and the types of initiatives implemented to counter the threat. A majority of the initiatives launched in the region prioritize religious interventions but risk neglecting other drivers. Programming also suffers from overt securitization and politicization, potentially exacerbating existent grievances.

Saudi Arabia

Since 2004, the primary vehicle for the Saudi CVE strategy has been the Prevent, Rehabilitate, and Aftercare (PRAC) program. According to a renowned Middle East expert, PRAC is “the most expansive, best funded and longest continuously running counter-radicalization program in existence.”⁴⁷ The program’s focus is undermining the ideological foundations of violent extremism. It does this through three major components:

1. **Prevent:** This component targets populations at risk of radicalization, particularly youth. It stresses what an expert describes as “a more judicious interpretation of religious doctrine” through government-run curriculum reviews, advertising campaigns, and monitoring and assessment of educators.⁴⁸
2. **Rehabilitation:** This component focuses on de-radicalizing detained individuals through intensive religious debate and psychological counseling; nonviolent offenders may qualify for early release.⁴⁹
3. **Aftercare:** This component aims to reduce recidivism. Released detainees are transferred to an external rehabilitation facility to ease their transition into society. Support continues even after release in the form of employment assistance; a selection of benefits, including housing; and even financing marriage costs.

Saudi Arabia has missed several self-imposed deadlines for curriculum review, an important element of CVE in the country, since 9/11, and its current status is unknown. Furthermore, Saudi authorities do not provide their data for transparent evaluation by outside experts. This in turn makes it difficult to assess the high success rates claimed by the government.

The newest CVE body in Saudi Arabia is the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology, launched during President Trump's visit to the country. According to a leading Arab news site, the center, supervised by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, "aims to confront the roots of extremism and promote the true understanding of Islam," both in Saudi Arabia and abroad.⁵⁰

The United Arab Emirates

The country does not appear to currently have a significant domestic extremism problem. This may be attributed to an extensive effort to stamp out extremist influences from educational and religious institutions since the September 11 attacks.⁵¹

The rise of extremism in the region over the past several years has led the UAE to mobilize its considerable resources toward a two-pronged strategy that includes support for anti-Islamist forces and the establishment of an international network of organizations working to undermine the intellectual and theological foundation of extremism.

Notably, the UAE believes that Islamists "inevitably stoke the slow but sure radicalization of society."⁵² In November 2014, the UAE designated the Muslim Brotherhood and nearly all its affiliates as terrorist organizations.⁵³ The designation was followed by arrests, trials and sentencing, and other measures that suggest a security-heavy, zero-tolerance approach.

Egypt

Absent a national CVE strategy, Egypt appears to be using some of its government agencies to mitigate the threat. According to the government, the Islamic State's affiliate in Sinai and the Muslim Brotherhood are the main extremist groups it must guard against. However, the Egyptian government considers its primary threat to be the Muslim Brotherhood. Since taking power in 2013, President Sisi's

government has arrested tens of thousands of people, including many members of the Brotherhood.⁵⁴ The Egyptian government has designated the group as a terrorist organization and argued that “the threat of terrorism as we see it today owes its existence to the Muslim Brotherhood.”⁵⁵

Facing a low-level insurgency and incitement by some Brotherhood members, the government has bet on “the utility of brute force to nip the insurgency in the bud”⁵⁶ without providing a “convincing strategy to stem the tide of extremism,”⁵⁷ according to the Carnegie Middle East Center. Beyond security, the government has presented a disparate set of religious and educational initiatives to counter violent extremism.

CVE efforts in Egypt suffer from politicization and securitization, and they are designed in the absence of evaluative data needed to legitimize the responses. The government’s crackdown on Islamists risks entrenching grievances against the state and creating a wider pool for violent extremists to recruit from.⁵⁸

Morocco

Following two deadly terrorist attacks in 2003, Morocco has upgraded its counterterrorism response.⁵⁹ But it has also worked to more effectively address the drivers of violent extremism. Morocco’s CVE approach is differentiated by its emphasis on soft power. It incorporates moderate religious education, greater gender equality, and economic and human development initiatives. Below are key aspects of the strategy:

1. Morocco’s King Mohammed VI serves as the emir al-mu’minin, or commander of the faithful, to the Rabita Mohammadia of Ulama, a council of 47 Muslim clerics. The clerics issue fatwahas in order to discredit religious interpretations promoted by violent extremist groups.⁶⁰ Additionally, the council coordinates with the Ministry of Religion to create youth-centric CVE initiatives.⁶¹
2. The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Morchidines, and Morchidates educates students with a moderate religious curriculum to create community religious leaders that disrupt extremist ideology.⁶²
3. The Mohammed VI Institute trains women as morchidates, or religious community leaders.⁶³ By focusing on women, the program views them as essential in countering violent extremism within families and communities.

4. A prison de-radicalization program focuses on religious education and reintegration into society, offering inmates job training and educational opportunities.⁶⁴

While the goals of Morocco's program are laudable—especially compared with its regional peers—it too suffers from the absence of transparent and accessible data, making it difficult to evaluate its overall success.

Jordan

In 2014, the Jordanian government announced a CVE strategy, but little public information about it is available other than a leaked version of the text.⁶⁵ The government has however, established two CVE-related bodies under the Public Security Directorate. The first is the Community Peace Centre. The center works exclusively on de-radicalizing low-risk militants. The second is the Directorate of Combating Extremism and Violence, which is responsible for developing, launching, and implementing the national CVE strategy for Jordan.⁶⁶

Jordan has imam training programs and has limited employment to state-sanctioned clerics to prevent the use of extremist rhetoric in sermons. It is also monitoring mosques in areas known to be recruiting grounds for extremism.⁶⁷ Jordan's government also reviewed its public-school text books to remove extremist passages from them. The new books, however, have sparked intense criticism among conservative elements in Jordanian society, including Islamist groups and teachers' unions.⁶⁸

Information on the success rates of de-radicalization programs in Jordan are hard to come by. Overall, signals from the Jordanian government, including the establishment of the Directorate of Combating Extremism and Violence and its partnership with the UNDP, suggest a welcome commitment to establishing a comprehensive approach for countering violent extremism.

Tunisia

In the chaotic period immediately after the 2011 revolution, extremists exploited the general weakness of the state to expand their influence.⁶⁹ A number of terrorist groups operate in the country, including the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. An

estimated 6,000 to 7,000 Tunisians have left the country since 2011 to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁰ At least 600 of these individuals have since returned, while the government claims to have prevented more than 12,000 from leaving.⁷¹

The threat of violent extremism in Tunisia is a product of the country's history of dictatorship and the management of its transition to democracy. Over the past few years, several attempts have been made to address the CVE threat:

1. In 2014, an attempt to create a national strategy on violent extremism failed. However, it registered notable progress by outlining broad strategic principles, including: balancing security and human rights, sustaining political consensus, strengthening regional cooperation, and adapting to evolving jihadi threats.
2. A 2015 document, drafted by the National Commission Against Terrorism and Violent Extremism, proposed an approach based on the four pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution, and response but was not formally adopted.
3. The Tunisian government has also launched several recent religious interventions. This included prohibiting the practice of takfir, by which extremists declare other Muslims to be unbelievers and sanction the use of violence against them;⁷² employing state-sanctioned imams and monitoring sermons for extremist messages;⁷³ closing mosques controlled by violent extremists; and barring extremist clerics.⁷⁴

Tunisia's fragile transition and rapidly evolving security climate have contributed to the spread of violent extremism in the country. The dictatorship's legacy of marginalizing mainstream religious organizations and scholars, the ongoing border crises, and overall economic hardship necessitate an all-of-the-above approach. The government appears to be mounting a holistic response involving multiple state institutions and civil society actors—a novelty among regional CVE efforts.

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