

CVE & WHITE SUPREMACY: THE TRAP OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SURVEILLANCE

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INTRODUCTION

In the second decade of the Global War on Terror, the U.S. initiated a counterinsurgency strategy targeting Muslims in their domestic borders - Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) based on its forebear, Prevent in the United Kingdom. Western governments and government-funded researchers claim that CVE is a community-led alternative to traditional counterterrorism that will address “all types of violence.” Despite the thorough and consistent rejection of CVE by community-based organizations, academics, and legal advocates; the trend has expanded globally and continued in both the U.S. and U.K.

The foundation of CVE is the theory of “radicalization”, a concept that took off post 9/11 with attempts from academics and law enforcement to retrofit a

model onto incidents of violence from Muslims.

As Arun Kundnani details in *Radicalization: The Journey of a Concept*, this model focuses on individual social behaviors and minimizes or erases any political factors. The theory spread quickly after *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* was prepared and distributed by the New York Police Department in 2007 – a law enforcement agency notorious for racist targeting of individuals. That report covered eleven case studies and was laser-focused on Muslims, but resulted in the NYPD’s bold claim of identifying a model by which someone “unremarkable” can become a jihadist through four stages of radicalization.

In the following years, Countering Violent Extremism developed in both Europe and the United States, with the poorly constructed and

deeply Islamophobic radicalization theory as its foundation. CVE's core premise is that community members can prevent violence by identifying someone on the path (or conveyor belt or staircase, pick your favorite) to radicalization by spotting certain behaviors. Suddenly everyone was in the business of creating lists of "indicators" of future violence. From ERG22+ to TRAP-18, a plethora of academics and law enforcement agencies developed their own profiles of social factors, while simultaneously noting that these indicators, neither individually nor combined, actually indicate that someone will commit violence.

"The subtle and non-criminal nature of the behaviors involved in the process of radicalization makes it difficult to identify or even monitor from a law enforcement standpoint. Taken in isolation, individual behaviors can be seen as innocuous; however, when seen as part of the continuum of the radicalization process, their significance becomes more important. Considering the sequencing of these behaviors and the need to identify those entering this process at the earliest possible stage makes intelligence the critical tool in helping to thwart an attack or even prevent the planning of future plots." (New York Police Department, 2007, p.10)

CVE is the tool for enacting this theory - convincing community members, particularly in Muslim organizations and social services to consistently scrutinize Muslims using a CVE profile. Through this, law enforcement can cast a much wider net of surveillance and get a step ahead of their typical tools with a predictive policing model embedded in the community.

Today, CVE has expanded within the U.S. and globally, despite Muslims rejecting and organizing against it at every step of the way. The most

frustrating aspect of this for Muslim organizations is that it is so-called progressives who are ignoring the Islamophobic context of CVE and demands from our communities, and instead are rebranding it.

The Obama administration launched CVE in the U.S. in 2015 with a three-day summit alongside pilot programs in Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis through the Department of Justice (DOJ). From there, the framework expanded rapidly through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), providing grants and a range of CVE programs across the country (DHS, 2021). At every step of the way, Muslims resisted and rejected the initiative. Despite caveats from the administration that CVE would look at all types of violence, it was always crystal clear that Muslims were the target - the theory was built solely on Muslim subjects, the lists of indicators were obscenely Islamophobic, and now the programs and grants were almost exclusively aimed at Muslim communities.

RESISTANCE TO CVE OVER THE PAST YEARS HAS BEEN MET WITH TWO TACTICS: REBRANDING AND EXPANDING

Rebranding: Rather than address the demands to end CVE, federal and local governments have used renaming and rebranding to make cosmetic changes and claim that somehow these programs are different from CVE.

- The Boston pilot of CVE initiated by the DOJ was implemented by the U.S. Attorney's Office of Massachusetts and pulled in the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). In response to a Muslim Jus

tice League petition with 1000 signatures demanding that EOHHS pull out of CVE, they insisted that “EOHHS’s engagement is key so that this can be framed as a public health issue” (Donini-Melanson, 2016). EOHHS went on to release the first set of grants in 2017 under the name PEACE Project (Promoting Engagement Acceptance and Community Empowerment).

- Similarly in Minneapolis, the pilot CVE initiative was framed as “community-led” despite its top down implementation and was named Building Community Resilience (U.S. Attorney’s Office, 2015).
- After a one year disappearance of the CVE department, DHS relaunched the same department as Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) in early 2020. Muslims reiterated in a letter to DHS (Joint Letter, 2020) that no rebranding would solve the fundamental concerns with CVE.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY CVE

In response to concerns that CVE is grossly anti-Muslim, government agencies have claimed to expand CVE’s targets rather than lay the framework to rest. This is predominantly the tactic of the Democratic administrations. The Obama administration consistently claimed that CVE was intended to address “all types of violent extremism.” In stark contrast, the Trump administration considered renaming CVE to Countering Islamic Extremism and Trump’s Islamophobic rhetoric even caused a number of organizations to reject CVE grants.

During the 2020 presidential elections, the Biden campaign promised to end the current CVE department under DHS (note, there are many CVE

initiatives under DOJ, DHS, and other federal agencies but the DHS program has received the most attention).

“A Biden-Harris administration will confront discriminatory policies that single out Arab Americans and cast entire communities under suspicion. Additionally, the new administration will work to protect communities that are under siege from the growing threat of violence from white supremacists and incitement to violence by far-right extremists. Biden will end the Trump Administration’s Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Program, and, before developing new prevention programs, he will conduct a thorough review of past programs and regularly consult with leaders from historically targeted communities, including Arab Americans, to ensure that civil rights are protected. He will ensure that programs are properly oriented towards actual threats based on data. This will include creating a dialogue with Arab American community leaders on issues of surveillance, policing, and counterterrorism, in tandem with other communities historically affected by securitized relationships with the U.S. government.” (Biden, 2020)

Biden’s promise to end TVTP was bookended with a pledge to protect communities threatened by white supremacist violence and to work with those same communities historically targeted by surveillance. Despite this acknowledgment that indeed, the same communities targeted by individual white supremacists are the communities harmed by surveillance initiatives like CVE, the Biden administration has both rebranded and expanded CVE in 2021. What was initially CVE, and then TVTP, is now the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3).

PATHOLOGIZING WHITE SUPREMACY

The current rebranding and expansion of CVE is not simply a dismissal of the concerns brought forth by targeted communities. Rather it is a misdirected and misguided solution to two issues: that CVE is anti-Muslim and that white nationalist and white supremacist violence is visibly increasing.

The election of Donald Trump and his years in office have included a number of high profile moments of violence from a range of white supremacist and white nationalist movements. The Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 is the first major incident and resulted in the death of a young woman, Heather Heyer. The response from progressive and liberal organizations, media, and politicians to this violence was a call for expanding CVE to address white supremacy. The voices of Muslim communities were drowned out and ignored, though they did continue to demand an end to the framework (AMEMESA, 2017).

As these violent incidents continued, liberal demands to do something, really anything, about this grew. The culmination of this misplaced anxiety was the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol building. Justified concerns about violence from the right were funneled towards an expansion of policing and surveillance, including the launch of CP3 (CVE 3.0).

Now, the thoroughly flawed framing of CVE is expanding in an attempt to both erase the concerns of CVE targeting only Muslims and to allay concerns about white supremacist violence. The lists of indicators are now overly broad and vague, such that they can be applied to the far-

right, but also can apply to anyone and everyone.

Potential Risk Factors Associated With Engaging or Attempting to Engage in Terrorism Among Both Group-Based and Lone-Actor Terrorists in the U.S. (Smith, 2018):

- Having a History of Criminal Violence
- Having a Criminal History
- Having Been Involved With a Gang or Delinquent Peers
- Having a Terrorist Friend
- Being a Member of an Extremist Group for an Extended Period
- Having a Deep Commitment to an Extremist Ideology
- Having Psychological Issues
- Being Unemployed
- Having a Sporadic Work History
- Having Less Education
- Having a Lower Social Economic Status
- Failing to Achieve One's Aspirations
- Having Trouble in Romantic Relationships
- Having Trouble in Platonic Relationships
- Having Been Abused as an Adult
- Being Distant From One's Family

CONCLUSION

CVE in the U.S. has come full circle, from retrofitting a behavioral theory to justify surveillance of Muslims, to now applying that model more broadly to avoid surveilling only Muslims. And yet,

CVE was never shown to prevent violence by anyone – as repeatedly said by both proponents and opponents of the framework. It is a method of

individualizing and pathologizing political violence, while avoiding any analysis of the political context for that violence.

The most perverse example of this is announcements by the Department of Defense to address “extremism” with a CVE working group

and a one day “stand-down” where everyone under all arms of the Pentagon receives CVE training. While Muslims have faced an unimaginable level of violence globally from military adventures and aggressive policies, are targeted by CVE policies of DHS and DOJ, and impacted by individual acts of white supremacist violence – these agencies avoid their culpability at every level of that violence while patting themselves on the back for implementing CVE.

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