

PolicyWatch #1673 : Special Forum Report

## Fighting the Ideological Battle: The Missing Link in America's Effort to Counter Violent Extremism

Featuring [Matthew Levitt](#), [J. Scott Carpenter](#) , and Juan Zarate  
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*On June 21, 2010, Matthew Levitt, J. Scott Carpenter, and Juan Zarate addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. The event marked the release of recommendations from their forthcoming report (coauthored by Steve Simon, adjunct senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations) on Obama administration efforts to address violent extremism. This new study is a follow-up to the Institute's 2009 bipartisan task force report [Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization](#). Dr. Levitt is director of the Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](#). Mr. Carpenter is a Keston Family fellow at the Institute and director of [Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas](#). Mr. Zarate is a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and senior national security analyst for CBS News. The following is a rapporteur's summary.*

### Matthew Levitt

Many of the functional and structural recommendations of the Institute's March 2009 bipartisan task force have since been adopted by the Obama administration, and remarkable progress has been made in certain areas. Nevertheless, more must be done to combat radical Islamism, particularly given the recent acceleration of homegrown radicalization. Proving that ideology recognizes no borders, the global threat of violent Islamism has come home. This new study recognizes the important steps the Obama administration has taken to address violent extremism and suggests ways to advance counterradicalization efforts even further.

The threat to homeland security reflects the multilayered nature of the terrorist threat today, including the al-Qaeda core, al-Qaeda affiliates, and homegrown, independent actors. Amid assessments of the progress being made against all three, one key question is not receiving sufficient attention: why are relatively well-educated, well-off individuals from a myriad of sociocultural backgrounds and geographic locations perpetrating or attempting terrorist acts? Plots such as Najibullah Zazi's planned 2009 New York subway attack or Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab's Christmas 2009 airplane bombing attempt demonstrate the power of a metastasizing, globalized ideology.

Recognizing the underlying radical Islamist ideology that motivates violent action and undermines American interests is critical to short-circuiting the radicalization process and preventing attacks. Articulating a strategic approach to undermining such ideology requires a sharp distinction between the political ideology of radical Islamism and the Muslim faith.

Two fundamental strategies for disrupting the radicalization process have already been implemented to some degree: integrating immigrant communities and supporting alternatives to extremist ideologies. Integration builds resiliency by minimizing the local grievances and alienation that radicalizers typically use as a point of entry to introduce their violent worldview. U.S. efforts on this front have generally been successful, in part due to America's inclusive, immigrant-friendly environment, aggressive antidiscrimination legislation, and strong

belief in equal opportunity. Justice Department antigang programs, which provide funds to state and local governments to keep children out of dangerous organizations, are one replicable model now being deployed to counter terrorist radicalizers.

Contesting violent extremism also requires countering the radical Islamist narrative. This does not mean arresting or banning despicable but protected speech; rather, it means openly contesting extremist views by offering alternatives and fostering deeper ideological debate. The objective in either case is to strengthen the moderate center against the extremist pole and help Muslim communities become more resilient in confronting the challenge. Community engagement and "hard" counterterrorism are key elements of this comprehensive strategy, but in the wide space between them counterradicalization efforts must be emphasized.

In short, directly contesting Islamist ideology with deliberate language, in conjunction with integration programs that dissuade individuals from joining extremist organizations, should serve as the foundation of the administration's renewed approach to counterradicalization.

### **J. Scott Carpenter**

In developing its strategy to counter radicalization, the Obama administration should emphasize that radical Islamist ideology is the key driver of the violence espoused by al-Qaeda and its cohorts. At minimum, this development should be done internally to provide bureaucratic clarity and improve intradepartmental and interagency coordination on these issues. Such a move would strengthen the whole-of-government approach and better align budgets and programs with declarative policy.

To sustain strategic focus, the administration should designate a single address within the White House for addressing the effort's ideological components. Toward this end, the forthcoming task force report recommends the creation of a full-time senior director post, reporting to the deputy national security advisor for combating terrorism. Key aspects of this official's job would be to coordinate efforts to contest extremist narratives at home, ensure that country-specific strategies are developed to strengthen mainstream voices abroad, and better balance civil and military resources in future administration budgets.

In empowering mainstream voices, the administration's focus should not rest on one organization or individual, but rather on a diverse set of actors -- the more localized the better. Washington's approach must be deliberate and broad based. At home, it should help ensure that the loudest and best-funded groups are not the only ones at the table. Abroad, it should recognize that Islamists do not represent the majority of the Muslim world.

The U.S. approach should also pay heed to recent regional history: in democratic polities such as Indonesia, violent Islamism is losing ground, whereas rampant authoritarianism in the Middle East is contributing to its spread. Accordingly, the administration must strengthen efforts to protect human rights and advance democratic governance so that pluralist alternatives to Islamist ideologues can emerge within expanded political space.

### **Juan Zarate**

In recent years, it has become clear that America is at war with a violent Islamist extremist ideology. Unfortunately, the United States is not well equipped or inclined to fight on this ideological battleground. Two key facts inhibit the chances for success on this front: first, that the adversaries in question are substate, asymmetric actors, and second, that the struggle has strong religious undertones -- a dimension the U.S. government, predicated on separation of church and state, is not well suited to tackle. Indeed, this is a struggle that emerged from within Muslim societies, with al-Qaeda pulling America in from the sidelines. Given these challenges, it is pivotal that Washington determine how best to engage in this battle without feeding the enemy's narrative (e.g., not providing opportunities to cast America as anti-Islamic or imperialist).

To successfully combat a religiously motivated, nonstate enemy, the administration should first define the ideological forces driving violent extremism. Doing so would mean naming the problem, enabling a more nuanced and localized approach to contesting radicalization. Although Washington must adopt an activist stance, it must do so subtly, since overt government involvement could taint the counterradicalization narrative.

More specifically, the United States should focus on enlisting, empowering, and networking with individuals and organizations -- such as the Quilliam Foundation and Sisters Against Violent Extremism -- that have begun to combat radical Islamism in their own communities in an attempt to spur aggressive grassroots movements. Such engagement must be tempered with the recognition that, alongside government initiatives, an ideological struggle for Muslim identity is taking place within these communities. Consequently, the government must be careful not to create an American Muslim "other" that might give rise to even more homegrown violent extremism.

As the terrorist threat evolves -- with more homegrown actors adhering to Islamist ideology and more geographic clusters developing within the United States -- mitigating the problem will only become more difficult. Accordingly, the administration should not constrain itself by referring to a war against "al-Qaeda and its affiliates" alone. The terrorist threat is growing: nonaffiliate actors are taking center stage, and al-Qaeda's core strength is diminishing. At a time when al-Qaeda is no longer America's singular focus strategically, neither should it be rhetorically.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Benjamin Freedman.*

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