

POLICY BRIEF

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Challenges to Countering Terrorism in Canada and Abroad

The perceived threat of global terrorism is a source of increasing anxiety for many Canadians today. Finding ways to counter violent extremism – including the “foreign fighter phenomenon”, the rampant spread of violent extremist ideologies, and a dramatic increase in terrorist incidents worldwide – presents a compelling new challenge for those who make public policy at home and abroad.

To address this critical issue, the *Centre for International and Defence Policy* at Queen’s University held an international, multidisciplinary workshop in January 2017 on “Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Assessing Canada’s Domestic and International Strategies.” As part of Queen’s *Public Policy and Canada’s 150* program, this initiative provided a strategic platform to encourage collaboration amongst the university’s strong contingent of policy experts and researchers who provide leadership at all levels of government to help identify and develop solutions for issues of broad public concern.

At the CIDP workshop, more than 40 experts from academia, government, the private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) examined the most pressing policy challenges related to this topic, focusing on what Canada must do both domestically and internationally. Their findings are summarized below.

Defining violent extremism

Before seeking solutions, it was necessary first to find consensus on a definition of violent extremism. Public anxiety is currently fueled by divisive language and media coverage of terrorist attacks, which inflate threat perceptions. These prevailing narratives produce conceptual misunderstandings and unfairly target the Muslim community as the primary focus of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) programs.

Conference participants agreed to define violent extremism as “a spectrum of activities” ranging from hate speech to physical terrorist attacks. This framework allows for the identification of individuals and groups based on their rhetoric and actions, rather than their ideology.

Canada’s homeland security dilemma

Low occurrence terrorist events in the West – such as the deadly attack on a Quebec mosque on January 29, 2017 – have prompted recent budget increases for domestic security and intelligence organizations. This is creating what Canadian political scientist Frank Harvey calls a “homeland security dilemma” (Harvey, 2008).

Internationally, policies such as President Trump’s executive orders, dubbed the Muslim Ban, have suspended US visas to foreign nationals of six Muslim majority countries (Iran, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Sudan and Libya) on the basis of national security concerns.

Identifying citizens from these countries as potential terrorist threats further fuels anti-Muslim rhetoric (Nowrasteh, 2017).

Currently challenged by US courts, this travel ban is not supported by evidence. No terrorist attack on US soil has been committed by anyone from these countries since 9/11. Nevertheless, these damaging narratives have resonated worldwide as right-wing party leaders across Europe borrow from the Trump playbook.

Changing a negative narrative

How can these counterproductive narratives be challenged and changed? The following recommendations emerged from the Queen's conference:

1. Develop best practices for responsible coverage of terrorist attacks

These practices should be developed across the spectrum of stakeholders – including policymakers, security and intelligence practitioners, researchers and civil society organizations. Even small changes, such as avoiding acronyms and related jargon, can improve engagement with civil society and local communities who are often critical of the government's CVE programs.

2. Take a public health approach to CVE

Moving away from the current fixation on security, this approach would redraw the boundaries of what Canadians identify as violent extremism. Within a public health framework similar to successful campaigns that sensitized people to the risks associated with smoking and drunk driving, it would question stereotypes and promote deeper intercultural understanding (Weiner et al, 2016).

A comprehensive public awareness campaign on the positive contributions of all immigrants and refugees, past and present, would highlight the value of diversity without targeting specific groups. Public-private partnerships could be strengthened, as the private sector remains a largely untapped resource with a unique advantage in reaching a variety of audiences through marketing and advertising (Rosand et al, 2016).

3. Strengthen partnerships with practitioners, researchers and civil society

The government should continue existing, and develop new partnerships with non-governmental organizations and individuals in the community who are most likely to have an impact at the local level. This means increasing the funding and support for people committed to addressing violent extremism across the spectrum. Local "buy in" depends on long-term trust-building; the strength of these networks can greatly enhance collaboration and coordination across sectors and levels of governance.

The evaluation conundrum

A challenge for many government programs, evaluation appears particularly problematic in the CVE realm. Yet conducting regular evaluations is essential to build the evidence base required to improve practices on a continuing basis.

Evaluation guidelines should:

- **Be multi-tiered**, with the first layer a set of foundational/standard indicators that can support comparisons across models and serve as tools for process evaluation. The second layer should consist of more context-specific indicators (needs oriented, behavioral, and social indicators) that are ideologically agnostic. Indicators related to demographics and typographies should be avoided.
- **Include multiple levels of analysis** to serve a variety of stakeholders who look for different types of information/data, and to provide a more thorough evaluation of different aspects of the program.
- **Evaluate across various points in time**, with both short-term evaluation to monitor rapidly evolving trends of violent extremism, and longer-term evaluation to identify enduring impacts and patterns of success for potential program replication.

For existing programming, the government should ensure the national strategy is balanced with respect to different phases of the CVE cycle. While prevention of violent extremism has received considerable attention, the intervention and rehabilitation phases remain underdeveloped and underfunded.

Improving our response to violent extremism

Our final recommendation addresses the federal government's Cabinet Committee on Canada in the World and Public Security. The conference suggested increasing this committee's role in overseeing initiatives related to violent extremism across stakeholder groups and various levels of governance. This could include the collection of data from multiple agencies and streamlining of the policymaking process, thus making the Government of Canada more responsive to trends in violent extremism.

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