

# The Institute for Stabilization and Transition

*Finding solutions to global challenges for policy-makers, practitioners, educators and media*

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## GUEST ESSAY

Guest Essay to the IST

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### Do CVE Programs Reduce Violence and Extremism?

*By Guest Contributor*

When pundits and politicians want to sound both pious and sophisticated about resolving the many disputes in the Middle East and North Africa, they will assert that there is no military solution to a given conflict and that only a political solution can bring peace and stability. One element of any such political solution is said to be an effort to counter the highly effective recruiting of the extremist groups to go along with negotiations to address the issues underlying the conflict. The perceived need for programs to counter violent extremist thought before it turns into behavior has sparked the creation of a small but growing industry designed specifically to get USG funds allocated for that purpose. The good news is that any such efforts are orders of magnitude less expensive than military action. The bad news is that they have little chance of actually reducing the prevalence of violent extremist thought and action in the target population. As an alternative to failure, we should play to our strength in providing education and English language training to undercut the extremist narrative.

Assessing CVE programs, the only real question is whether they reduce the amount of violent extremist behavior. This measurement is phrased to consider whether such a program has the desired outcome. An outcome metric is both the gold standard and extremely difficult to achieve because drawing a causal link between a particular program and the behavior of a whole population is almost impossible given the number of other factors in play and, in a lethal environment, the physical difficulty of doing social science.

But, program managers have to do something to show their funding providers that they are worth the money, so they focus on output metrics. These measurements aim to prove that the program is producing a product, even if there is no necessary link between that product and the result the project is designed to achieve. For example, a CVE program designed to introduce concepts of moderation and tolerance into national educational curricula will count textbooks produced and teachers trained. The underlying and untested assumption is that the books and the trainees will then actually produce moderate and tolerant students who will not engage in violent extremist behavior. Space does not allow the enumeration of the assumptions and deviations that will impede such results in a given environment. One result that does occur is that the funding providers will be sufficiently appeased so that they will provide more money and maintain the employment of all those engaged in the project.

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To be clear: people who run these programs whether contractors, consultants or bureaucrats are mostly well intentioned and believe that they are doing good, both in terms of making the world a better place and in furthering the interests of the United States. But they have no way of knowing that such is the case. Insisting on an

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outcome metric is against their personal interest in continued employment and against the interests of all those who support a CVE program rather than some other policy alternative, which can include members of the executive and legislative branches. Thus such programs have serious reasons for continued existence wholly apart from whether they are actually reducing the sum total of extremism in the world.

Measuring the effect of any such program is only the least of the issues to consider whether to undertake a CVE program. More importantly are two overriding facts of life: we are likely to be bad at preventing the creation of more extremists, while our enemies are demonstrably great at replicating themselves. CVE programs, like any other form of human endeavor are artifacts of the culture that produce them. Our culture in very broad terms is designed to produce moderate and tolerant individuals who support the continuation of the system in which they find themselves. Nothing in that environment and education enables an individual to empathize with an extremist mindset, much less consider how to counter it effectively. Even if the rare individual were able to do so, through some combination of God-given talent and very unusual life experience, that person would find himself blocked in program design, which would have to be quite idiosyncratic, by a bureaucratic system with a strong bias toward consensus and the familiar, not to say mediocrity. The argument here is that our entire system and culture mitigates against the development of CVE programs that are effective in another culture.

Without getting into the arguments about whether Islam as a religion and a culture promotes violent extremism, it is clear that many extremist groups and individuals emerge from countries in which an Islamically-based culture is present, or even dominant. It is also true that the presence of extremist ideologies and actions in these countries can be explained by other factors than the existence of an Islamically-based culture, such as lack of economic opportunity, political alienation under illegitimate dictatorships, educational systems that offer little preparation for success in the globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century and even lack of interaction with the opposite sex or serious prospects for marriage in the near future, given the financial requirements to get married in those societies. All of these factors help create a pool of recruits and recruiters who know exactly how to press the right psychological buttons, since they are themselves products of those cultures. In other words, recruiters and leaders of extremist groups are as well prepared to develop appealing extremist programs as we are ill prepared to counter their work. One final tool that extremists groups have is that they lie fluently and without any regret or negative consequences. Except under very limited and specific circumstances we do not engage in deceit to counter the lies of our enemies.

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So, what then? Are our choices limited to either imposing a military or intelligence based solution on extremist groups or pulling back inside our own borders to wait for the extremists to make themselves so obnoxious that overwhelming force becomes the only option? No. We should instead learn from our enemies. They are able to recruit effectively because they play to their cultural strengths. We should do the same. Specifically, one thing the West in general terms and the US in particular, does well is provide education that is at least nominally oriented at preparing students for success in the modern world. Obviously, there are real disputes about just how to accomplish this task and many students are not getting the kind of education they need, but the Western models, whether European or US are demonstrably appealing to many people in the countries who tend to produce violent extremists. This appeal is made clear by the hundreds of thousands of young people who leave their homes to seek an education the US, which can be an unforgiving, and uncomfortable place for those not

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completely versed in our culture. Overseas, USG English language programs are also wildly popular, again even in countries where both governments and people take real issue with aspects of our policy and are not too sure on balance whether our existence as a country is even a good thing.

Since we have such a powerful capability in our hands, the question is how to use it to further our broader policy aims such as countering terrorism. The simple answer is to do more of the same. The basic argument here is that education, even short term English language training itself counters violent extremism because it provides some knowledge about alternatives to violent ideologies and actions. Extremist recruiters are effective because they are able to convince young people that there is no viable alternative to their ideas and that their vision of the future, including martyrdom is appealing to the desired self-image of the recruit. Because the recruiters are from the culture themselves, they sense which psychological buttons to a press in a way that is impossible for us to understand, or act on given our own bureaucratic and cultural constraints. When it comes to developing and pushing out explicit CVE content, the best we can do is support the efforts of indigenous governments and groups, whose interests and approaches are consistent with ours.

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More of the same on English language training and education would require money to make successful programs available to a larger number of people. While the State Department has never been good at making the case for its budget on the Hill, a close connection to CVE objectives could only help, especially when compared to the massive costs and risks associated with the use of the military as our most effective CVE instruments. Another underutilized source of money is corporate sponsorship from US and even other companies with significant operations in target countries. The pitch would be that such programs demonstrate corporate social responsibility in environments typically suspicious of the role of foreign corporations and would create a groups of locals who might be more suitable for employment, than would otherwise have been the case. US oil companies looking for capable local engineers would be an example.

## An IST Publication

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To counter violent extremism which threatens US interests requires that we accept that our entire culture, and system mitigates our ability to design and implement CVE content. Even if we could conceive of an effective program our ability to adjust it to the reaction of our enemies or to any changes in the situation at the velocity needed to compete in today's information market place is nil. Instead we should exploit and expand programs that we are good at, people in key countries seem to want, and regional governments support or at least do not oppose, as they do other programs that they perceive as trying to meddle in their societies.

*The author of this guest essay has elected to remain anonymous.*