Policy Note

Why the U.S. Military Should Support Domestic CVE

by Joe Becker

Abstract

This Policy Note highlights the valuable role that the U.S. military, and especially military veterans, could play in domestic efforts to counter violent extremism. The fight against radicalization has been one of the most challenging aspects of counterterrorism for both the U.S. government and civil society. Success against the proliferation of extremist ideologies will require this nation to openly address difficult questions and develop novel approaches that incorporate a broader range of national resources. The U.S. military has unique capabilities that should not be dismissed out-of-hand. Careful planning and execution could make the military a useful partner in domestic efforts against radicalization and strengthen national security at home and abroad.

Key words: Military, community relations, counterterrorism, countering violent extremism

Introduction

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is a catch phrase covering a spectrum of activities designed to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies at the community level before they lead to violence and to preempt planned acts of violence in the earliest possible stage.[1] Unfortunately, this term has become a lightning rod for controversy in Western countries, including Europe and most recently the United States. Many individuals view attempts to identify vulnerable communities and individuals as a form of racial, ethnic, or religious profiling. For some, activities associated with CVE, such as "community policing," are viewed as an attempt by the government to convince friends and family members to spy on one another.[2] Others, while eschewing extremist ideologies, view any attempt by the U.S. Government to propagate values or influence perceptions as tantamount to propaganda – an activity the U.S. government is generally prohibited from conducting against its own population. However, in recent years, leaders such as (now former) FBI Director James Comey have consistently identified the threat of "lone wolf" attackers (those who act independently after exposure to radical ideas) as one of the greatest threats to U.S. national security.[3] While CVE may be controversial in practice, the need for effective strategies has never been clearer. In order to safeguard the U.S. population in the coming years, the U.S. government must address these controversies head-on, develop coherent policies and socially acceptable approaches with regard to CVE, and engage in a concerted effort that maximizes its available resources. Departments and agencies across the U.S. government, including the Department of Defense (DoD), will have to learn to operate outside their comfort zones in greater coordination with each other and in direct partnership with the public.

The U.S. military has become the primary face of this nation's efforts against violent extremists overseas, with a continuous record of deployments and operations since the attacks of 9/11. U.S. military personnel are familiar with the conduct of CVE on foreign soil. On the domestic front, the military provides limited support to a broad range of counterterrorism initiatives, primarily through U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). This has recently included consideration of various CVE programs, and USNORTHCOM planners are familiar with the topic, but these projects have yet to move beyond the most nascent stages of planning and implementation. Most of the military focus in support of domestic counterterrorism is currently apportioned between consequence management in the event of a major terrorist attack [4] and support to interdiction operations against threatening materials and actors entering the U.S. Homeland.[5] While this arrangement is constitutionally appropriate, given the restrictions on military operations in the

domestic space, the military has tremendous potential to support domestic CVE. The Department of Defense (DoD) should look for creative ways to get involved, and policymakers would be wise to ask this of them.

Why the U.S. Military Should Get Involved

Why should the DoD consider increasing its support to a mission like domestic CVE, which falls outside of its traditional purview? The first answer is that CVE is an important component of the global counterterrorism effort that has received insufficient emphasis and support in recent years. Responsibilities for domestic CVE within the U.S. Government are divided primarily between two agencies, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DoJ). These two agencies jointly established a CVE Task Force in 2016 to provide central leadership in coordinating the activities under the CVE umbrella. [6] However, this remains a fledgling endeavor with minimal funding, no tasking authority back to parent organizations, and only a small staff of personnel on temporary loan from participating agencies. In spite of dedicated efforts by a handful of American CT professionals, the CVE Task Force represents a humble start toward addressing the many issues that the DHS identified in its own Advisory Council's 2016 report on CVE.[7]

For a variety of reasons, including both political pressures and legal complications, the U.S. finds itself behind many other Western nations in the application of CVE techniques – often looking to European partners for best practices.[8] Ironically, the U.S. provides funding for some of these other nations' programs through the Department of State (DoS) while struggling to replicate them at home.[9] The DoS even published a 2016 strategy for the conduct of international CVE that paints the U.S. as a member of the global CVE community. Yet this document has almost no practical linkage to concrete activities within the U.S. itself.[10] Further complicating the picture, effective CVE efforts are by, their very nature, often decentralized, drawing on initiatives from local governments or civil society. The U.S. has made little headway in providing formal coordination, direction, and integration across this enterprise. Even with a significant boost in resources and authority, it might take the CVE Task Force years to build a coherent and effective program at the national level. They cannot achieve this by themselves. The CVE effort needs all the effective partners and support that it can get.

The second reason that the DoD should take a role in domestic CVE is that the military has unique capabilities and characteristics and could offer considerable advantages as a supporting effort and interagency partner. First among these capabilities are its service members themselves, a ready-made pool of public ambassadors. Soldiers (including sailors, airmen, and marines) hail from local communities across the nation and represent every racial and ethnic background of the American "melting pot." Many soldiers have first-hand experience in combatting various forms of violent extremism from operational deployments overseas. A large number have personally witnessed the reality that belies utopian visions presented by groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS). Military veterans carry these experiences into civilian life and could provide an additional source of ambassadors for CVE (either paid or on a volunteer basis). Unlike police and other law-enforcement officers who cannot help but carry the stigma of government authority, service members and veterans could be presented to local communities as relatively neutral parties.

Translating this vision of service member ambassadors to practice would present challenges, but they are surmountable with careful planning and preparation. Perhaps the least controversial starting point might be a concerted effort to recruit and employ military veterans to support various CVE programs at the community level. While veterans offer many of the advantages of uniformed service members in terms of experience and credibility, their civilian status presents a degree of separation from both security services and the vagaries of political controversy. Many veterans also retain a strong service ethic that might predispose them to this type of work. Veterans could serve any number of roles, from guest speaker to behind-the-scenes volunteer, in local-level service and outreach programs designed to reduce the growth of extremism. This

type of partnership could be introduced in a variety of ways, but one suggestion would be to employ a core of professional, full-time veteran staffers to coordinate and direct a network of volunteers. Coordination for this undertaking might fall to USNORTHCOM or even potentially the National Guard Bureau, but the actual hiring and employment of veterans could even be handled by state or local agencies if federal funding is made available. For the purposes of this Policy Brief, it suffices only to demonstrate the viability of the concept.

The employment of veterans presents an appealing possibility, but this does not mean that that the military should shy away from community engagement by active duty service members, as well. The potential outreach forums (both physical and virtual) are almost limitless, and even small-scale efforts by members of our nation's volunteer military could have a positive impact. This said, military involvement should almost always occur in the form of direct support to a civilian organization, according to the needs and preferences of the community. Service members might serve as invited guest speakers, online coaches or mentors, or simply as helping hands, even wearing civilian clothes if appropriate. Service members should be prepared in advance to deal with tough questions, controversial issues, and outright criticism. Much like working with tribal chiefs in Iraq or Afghanistan, they will have to become adept at reading perceptions and interests, before eventually building rapport. In some communities, this might start very small, merely investing time and personnel in community service events like leadership camps or sports clinics. Effective CVE is a long-term relationship-building effort, and every relationship will be different. Fortunately, the military has a reputation for non-partisanship and stands out as one of the most trusted and respected institutions of federal government.[11] This does not mean that the communities and demographics most susceptible to radicalization towards extremist violence will welcome them with open arms, but it does provide a viable platform from which to start. Regardless of how a U.S. citizen might feel about their military, service members cannot hurt them, cannot arrest them, and cannot collect intelligence on them except in very specific cases. This message alone is worth emphasizing to the American public.

While the American service member could put a new and convincing face on CVE, the DoD also has considerable capabilities to support domestic efforts behind the scenes. The military embodies expertise in planning and organization on a level unmatched by other institutions of government. It also trains service members in the various disciplines of information operations, and the military services have a considerable pool of expertise built from experience in practicing their skills overseas.[12] While other agencies struggle to find even small numbers of personnel to contribute to initiatives like the CVE Task Force, the DoD could make a significant contribution with minimal pain. Selected service members would be most effective working in civilian clothes and answering directly to civilian leadership to avoid counterproductive perceptions of a military takeover. However, these individuals would come with ready-made links to international networks of CVE practitioners and planners, forged by shared operational experience from around the world. Extremist groups rely on their own networks and make no distinction between foreign and domestic. In the words of (retired) General Stanley McChrystal, "It takes a network to defeat a network."[13] The U.S. military cannot succeed overseas in its fight against terrorist actors if it chooses to partition its capabilities from the broader long-term effort. Neither can America's domestic CVE community afford to summarily dismiss a robust pool of capabilities because of institutional biases against the military and security forces.

A final reason why the DoD should choose to actively engage in domestic CVE is that radicalization, regardless of the source of its inspiration, directly affects the U.S. military. The scale of military recruiting makes it virtually impossible to vet incoming recruits for all but the most sensitive positions. Attacks such as the one conducted by Maj. Hasan at Fort Hood in 2009 provide a stark demonstration that even active-duty soldiers are susceptible to radicalization and recruitment by extremist organizations.[14] Military veterans, including Timothy McVeigh, have also conducted several of the most prominent attacks on U.S. soil.[15] Even closer to home, military family members are potentially vulnerable to online radicalization, especially

as service members are frequently deployed and not always available to actively monitor their children's activities. If the DoD were to implement nothing else recommended by this Policy Brief, it should certainly recognize the need to support and protect its own communities with some of the proactive measures available under the umbrella of CVE. USNORTHCOM is already examining these issues, and the military has a vested interest in any CVE effort which helps to strengthen and secure its recruiting base, protect its families, and secure its standing force from insider threats.

Challenges to This Approach

Any increase to military involvement in domestic CVE will draw some controversy. There are powerful arguments against increasing military support to this effort, and these must be considered before making a decision to proceed. A likely first argument from the military establishment is that increased support for domestic CVE would be a distraction from the service members' primary warfighting mission and functions. It is true that supporting CVE would take personnel away from their regular duties and syphon away a certain amount of funding. On the other hand, the investment required to make a difference in CVE pales in comparison to the cost of many high-end military weapon systems. As a supporting effort, the most effective contributions the military could make would be measured in personnel and time. Furthermore, increased public engagement would provide ancillary benefits, which may include a boost in recruiting opportunities. Findings by the Pew Research Center indicate that, while Americans generally hold a high opinion of the military, those between 18 and 29 had the lowest levels of confidence.[16] Considering that this is both the target age for military recruitment and the greatest window of vulnerability for radicalization, it would appear that the military's interests in public engagement converges with those of the CVE community. It is also important to note that many of the service members who might be utilized for domestic CVE are likely the same who regularly support various forms of CVE and other counterterrorism efforts overseas. This new effort might actually help them hone aspects of their skills and isolate best practices in deterring radicalization. At the very least, it would broaden their understanding of the overall counterterrorism fight and strengthen the network connections between practitioners of CVE at home and abroad.

Another argument against supporting CVE on the domestic front derives from the concept of "mission creep." New missions beget new missions. Any new undertaking risks the possibility of discovering that the keys to success lie beyond the initial scope of the project. Initial successes by the military in supporting CVE might lead to additional demands on an already strained force. This is certainly a concern, but because the military would only provide a supporting effort in domestic CVE, it would not be primarily responsible for ensuring success. Good planners could scope the level of military involvement, and leaders could enforce this scope. The onus will always be on civilian agencies to lead the effort and fight for the funding and resources required to ensure success.

Perhaps the most compelling argument against this initiative involves risks of public (mis-) perception. First, if this were not planned and presented carefully, military involvement in CVE could be perceived as "militarization" within local communities or as "executive overreach" into local security matters. The massive scale of the DoD compounds this risk, and perceptions of anti-Muslim sentiments within the political realm have created landmines that will have to be overcome. These can, however, be mitigated by careful planning and presentation. Second, the military could put its own reputation and popularity at risk by affiliating with a controversial effort like CVE. This is certainly a consideration, but it pales in the face of a potentially existential threat to the freedoms this nation holds dear. The military is charged with defending the Constitution against all enemies, *both foreign and domestic*. The professionalism and dedication of the U.S. military has prevailed through greater challenges, and the DoD could certainly navigate these perilous waters.

Conclusion

Recent generations of military leadership have become adept at cheerleading for interagency partners, especially when it involves missions that the DoD does not want. The U.S. Armed Forces may not initially appear to be a logical fit for domestic CVE, and such a role finds little precedent among military forces worldwide, but the challenge posed by violent extremism defies conventional logic and threatens the values upon which this nation was built. No instrument of national power can afford to sit idle or simply cheer for somebody else's players, especially against an adversary with no respect for the divide between foreign and domestic issues. The U.S. Government as a whole is going to have to wade into the muck and dirt of a difficult issue and develop compromise solutions that will never make everyone happy. The military will not be the leader in domestic CVE, nor should it be. The DoD might even encounter resistance from some elements of the CVE community against its participation. This initiative will require planning, leadership and finesse, but few organizations are more suited to navigating these difficult issues than USNORTHCOM. If the military demonstrates a willingness to jump in and get dirty, it will provide significant informal leadership across the interagency. When the largest department of the Federal Government is willing to operate humbly in a supporting role outside of its core mission, it sends a strong signal. CVE is important.

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Disclaimer: The author's views are his own and do not reflect endorsement by the United States Government.

Notes

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