Assessing Two Countering Violent Extremism Programs: Saudi Arabia’s Prac and the United Kingdom’s Prevent Strategy

By William Sheridan Combes

Throughout America’s War on Terror, the United States military and national security apparatus has demonstrated extreme lethality and efficacy in combat counterterrorism operations. Arrests, drone strikes, and targeted killings have resulted in the deaths of al-Qaeda’s major operatives and ideologues, specifically Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki. These ideologues espoused a violent ideology for militant Islamists that believes in a selective interpretation of the Quran, opposes the beliefs of non-Muslims, and rejects political participation in both Western democracies and Middle Eastern institutions of government.

Despite the successes of the aforementioned operations in neutralizing some of the main proponents of this ideology, these ideas still exist. Due to the ubiquity of these ideas and their penetration into civil society, a few nations have sought to take a more comprehensive and non-violent approach to tackling violent extremism. Authorities label these programs as countering violent extremism (CVE), and they exist in both Muslim and non-Muslim majority states. Two such programs have gained notoriety for their effort to tackle militant Islamist extremism: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and After Care (PRAC) program in Saudi Arabia and the Prevent Strategy in the United Kingdom (U.K.). Through an analysis of PRAC and Prevent, we can contrast two different ideological approaches to CVE, see the importance of social welfare in implementing these programs, and understand the difficulty in evaluating the efficacy of CVE programs. An analysis of these case studies—one found in a Muslim majority state and one not—will benefit the national security of the United States as policy makers implement and assess the country’s nascent CVE program.

In order to properly assess the CVE programs found in the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, we must first analyze some of the fundamentals of these programs and the intellectual debates surrounding these concepts. Early scholarship on violent extremism placed it in the context of criminology and asserted that many terrorists were merely maligned individuals that could not reverse the deviant path down which they have traveled. As counterterrorism experts Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon characterized the previous mindset on radicalization, “‘once a terrorists, always a terrorist’”.[3] Yet, this consensus has changed dramatically over the past decade as radicalization has since been defined as a process or a spectrum. [4] To radicalize, a person first engages in cognitive radicalization: Where he or she “adopts a set of ideas
that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refuting the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure.”[5] A radicalized individual will move along the spectrum toward violence when that set of ideas justifies and prompts an individual to support or engage in violence for social change.

Most CVE programs seek to counter violent ideology along the entirety of the radicalization spectrum through the employment of radicalization awareness, de-radicalization, and disengagement. [6] Therefore, radicalization prevention programs seek to raise awareness of a violent ideology and the behavior associated with the adoption of this ideology. Awareness is proactive and its success relies on the entirety of society to understand radicalization and identify symptoms of this process in the populace. De-radicalization and disengagement, on the other hand, are reactionary and target individuals. De-radicalization is measured by an individual’s abandonment of militant views and disengagement represents an individual’s disconnection with a terrorist group. Radicalization awareness, de-radicalization, and disengagement represent the three fundamentals of a CVE program and or strategy. Two such programs, Prevent in the U.K. and PRAC in Saudi Arabia, have engaged in this comprehensive approach to violent extremism and developed comprehensive programs to check the rise of violence in their respective societies.

Saudi Arabia’s PRAC program grew out of domestic terror campaigns of the mid 1990s and early 2000s. [7] From 1995 to 2003, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia became besieged by a militant Islamist insurgency. Saudi officials successfully crushed the militant Islamists with a brutal combat counterterrorism campaign. Yet, Saudi officials understood that they could not challenge violent Islamist extremism solely with security measures. Therefore, Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of the Interior (MOI) developed a CVE program to compliment the Kingdom’s robust combat counterterrorism operations. The MOI designed this CVE program to “combat the intellectual and ideological justifications of violent extremism by engaging an ideology that “the Saudi [G]overnment asserts is based on corrupted and deviant interpretations of Wahhabi Islam.”[8]

PRAC exhibits an ideological approach to CVE driven by a blend of Islamic theology and state authority. PRAC assumes that it can counter militant Islamist ideology by diffusing it within the framework of Islam and proving to extremists that their ideology has perverted true Islam.[9] The ideological aspects of the program focus on the Islamic concepts of authority and understanding of religious doctrine to delegitimize the theological underpinnings of militant Islamist ideology. Through education, PRAC seeks to strengthen a participant’s understanding of Islamic theology as practiced by the Saudis and the ways in which militant Islamist ideology warps true Islam.

In addition to delegitimizing the theological underpinnings of militant Islamist ideology, PRAC reaffirms state authority by placing it in the context of Islam. The program proposes that the Islamic notion that da’wah (or call to faith) is also a person’s obligation to the government.[10] Violating this da’wah nullifies an individual’s social contract with the Kingdom and contradicts Wahhabi Islam, which is the dominant interpretation of Islam practiced in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Wahhabi Islam “stresses loyalty, recognition of authority, and obedience to leadership.”[11] Therefore, PRAC’s ideological approach to CVE combines theology and civic responsibility, which is important for a “government that relies on religion for legitimacy.”[12]

In addition to its strong ideological approach, PRAC contains robust social welfare for detained militant Islamists. The Saudis established PRAC’s rehabilitative program on the notion that the Saudi Government wants to assist those that have been duped by a deviant ideology; the program is not punitive in nature but rather rehabilitative for those victims of radicalization.[13] PRAC invites detained individuals to participate in a process of education and counseling; the program also works under the
presumption that those attracted to violent Islamist extremism have an “incomplete understanding of Islam.” [14] These clerics will properly educate the participants on subjects such as: Takfir (accusations of apostasy), walaah (loyalty), bay’ah (allegiance), terrorism, the legal rules for jihad, and psychological course on self-esteem. [15] Counseling ameliorates a detainee’s education by allowing the participants to engage clerics in Islamic dialogue. The Advisory Committee, which manages the counseling program, values the relation established between the detainee and cleric. Stressing the importance of a bond, the Advisory Committee will replace a cleric if it feels he has not established a rapport with the detainee. The bond between detainee and state-sponsored cleric is crucial to a program that seeks to establish a new ideological framework through authority and trust.

PRAC also strengthens social bonds during the rehabilitative process by including a detainee’s family and offering social services to him and his family. The Advisory Committee typically includes family members during de-radicalization. Families “are briefed on the condition of their sons, their experiences, and how they have been affected. Families are counseled on how to talk to their sons and persuade them to repent.” [16] To accommodate the social need of a detainee, the Saudi Government will provide financial support in the form of lost salary, family healthcare, and children’s schooling for a detainee and his family during the detainee’s incarceration. This vast array of psychological and financial support represents PRAC’s strong insistence on the social welfare of its detainees and that the Saudi Government “cares deeply about each person and that it will therefore do whatever it takes to support and care for someone.” [17]

Despite its comprehensive approach to CVE, one must wonder about the success of the program. The Saudi Government has rated the program’s success at around 80 to 90 percent and acknowledged that 10-20 percent failure rate does not distinguish between detainees that failed or those that refused to participate. [18] These dubious numbers imply that PRAC’s only failures are those individuals that did not participate. PRAC authorities also have not indicated how the Saudis truly measure success. Saudi officials boast that “a vast majority of prisoners who complete the program are not acting on their previously held beliefs” manifests itself in a recidivist rate of merely 1 to 2%. [19] Yet, recidivism does not gauge how a person has undergone cognitive de-radicalization—just that person may not associate with terrorists or engage in illicit behavior. Disengagement, therefore, does not truly measure de-radicalization.

Like PRAC, the U.K.’s Prevent Strategy seeks to counter militant Islamist ideology. Prevent’s ideological approach, however, finds its roots in British values—not Islamic theology. When British Home Secretary, Theresa May, introduced the new Prevent Strategy in 2011, she placed it in the context of the previous strategy’s failure: An inability to separate a policy of integration from a policy of counterterrorism. [20] The past strategy had wasted too many resources trying to promote Muslim integration into British society. To May, integration did not sufficiently counter radicalization; she asserted that a successful strategy needed to challenge the ideologies behind extremism and terrorism and confront them head on—not try to delegitimize them through greater cultural participation. Prevent defines extremism as a “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for different faiths and beliefs.” [21]

This values-based definition of ideology reflects political discourse of right-leaning European political parties that reject the concept of multiculturalism and see it as a failure. Prime Minister David Cameron has lamented that multiculturalism encourages different cultures to live “separate lives.” [22] He has also argued that Britons should confront multiculturalism with “muscular liberalism,” which he defined as an enhanced pride in British-based values of human rights, democracy, and individual liberty. [23] Therefore, the Prevent Strategy and counterterrorism officials seek to challenge violent ideologies by asserting their
own ideology and not challenging violent Islamist ideology within the framework of Islam.

When countering violent extremism, Prevent combines an ideological thrust based on British values with a strong sense of social welfare. One component of Prevent, Channel, has gained notoriety for implementation of social services to identify vulnerable individuals through a program of awareness and identification. Channel is a police-coordinated, multiagency partnership that evaluates the referrals of individuals deemed at risk of succumbing to the allure terrorism. The government does not evaluate a referral based solely on an individual holding “political opinions of having a commitment to faith.”[24] Rather, indicators include “expressed support for violence and terrorism; possession of violent extremist literature; attempts to access or contribute to violent extremist websites; possession of material regarding weapons and/or explosives.”[25]

The referral process draws upon a wide range of partners and its framework is similar to other social services provided by the British Government. Statutory organizations include local authorities, police, youth offending services, social workers, housing and voluntary groups.[26] This grassroots approach to countering violent extremism leverages previous frameworks for addressing social concerns such as child protection and domestic violence and its success depends on a strong rubric for referrals.[27] Employing British society to identify vulnerable person requires training and awareness—not merely a rubric for referral. In order to better edify the British public, Prevent also consists of an awareness campaign to help the British public better identify some of the warning signs mentioned above. Prevent offers the Workshop to Raise Awareness of Prevent in both physical and DVD form. This program covers issues such as “the history of terrorism, radicalization as a social process, connections to other forms of extremisms, the al-Qaida [sic] narrative and factors which may contribute to vulnerability.”[28] Boosting awareness through education and employing social services represents Prevent’s strong insistence on social welfare while confronting violent extremism.

The latest rendition of Prevent does not offer any statistical backing to the claim that its predecessor failed. Rather, May’s Prevent merely alludes to one of the major the controversies that followed the original CVE program. In its executive summary, the Prevent Strategy addresses the notion that “there have been allegations that previous programs have been used to spy on communities… Prevent must not be used as a means for covert spying on people or communities. Trust in Prevent must be improved.”[29] While the government codified a commitment to building trust, the same allegations of spying have followed the latest version of Prevent. For example, one of the communities tasked to identify vulnerable people, the British university system, rejects the notion of observing and referring people deemed vulnerable. The British Union of Students asserts “We're happy with information and awareness raising [sic]; what we're not happy with is the idea that teachers and lecturers are going to be trained to monitor a specific ethnic group.”[30] Despite government efforts to alter the reception of Prevent, segments of the British public feel that the strategy creates “suspect communities,” which deludes the ability to evaluate a program.[31] Allegations of government spying make the Prevent strategy quite difficult to implement and even evaluate. Trust and the public’s reception of a CVE strategy are paramount to a CVE dependent on society’s awareness of and vigilance toward militant Islamist ideology.

Alienating a suspect community is an issue only confronting the multicultural society of a non-Muslim majority state like the United Kingdom. Therefore, the Prevent Strategy has more difficulty than PRAC defining the ideology with which militant Islamists operate. Due to prevalence of a political discourse that disparages multiculturalism, the creators of the newest rendition of Prevent sought to define violent extremist ideology in terms of mores with which they have familiarity—British values. Although Prevent’s ideological approach is rooted in British culture, its application in a multicultural society risks alienating moderate Muslims that may not subscribe to every tenant of British values.


PRAC, on the other hand, has the luxury of an ideological approach rooted in Islam itself. Being a Muslim majority state, Saudi Arabia did not run the risk of alienating minorities and therefore crafted a CVE program with strong theological roots. PRAC also exploits tenets of Wahhabi Islam by merging theology and civic responsibility as a path toward rehabilitation. A rehabilitated detainee will respect the authority of the Kingdom as well as Islam. The two vastly different ideological approaches employed by Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom have national security ramifications for the United States as our nation institutes its CVE program. The two case studies offer observers different approaches to an ideological framework in which to challenge militant Islamist ideology.

The United States can also observe the strong elements of social welfare in both PRAC and Prevent. PRAC seeks to build a connection between the detainee and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by providing him or her with a wealth of social services—including counseling and financial support during incarceration. Prevent seeks to identify vulnerable populations by educating the public and transposing the strategy onto existing frameworks of social services. While the United States does not have the breadth of a welfare state like the one found in the United Kingdom, the United States can learn that CVE is a comprehensive attempt to stop terrorism and must utilize every facet of society to delegitimize violent ideologies.

Society also plays a large role in the success of a CVE program. Prevent’s success depends on public support and participation in identifying vulnerable communities. Like the United Kingdom, the United States is a multicultural society that celebrates the freedom of religion. Therefore, CVE policy makers could learn about the potential cultural sensitivities and how to balance capacity building and alienation.

Finally, the United States can better evaluate its own CVE program by learning from the errors of PRAC. While PRAC’s numbers seem impressive, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a major stakeholder in the program’s success, released these numbers. Therefore, these numbers should not provide evidence of success until an independent agency verifies them. In a society as data driven as the United States, CVE policy makers should seek to hire an independent observer to ensure the policy’s success. A true reflection of a policy’s success has great importance to the national security of our country.

An assessment of the two case studies found above will allow the United States to better calibrate its counterterrorism and countering violent extremism strategies. Yet, one must wonder about the social welfare implemented by the two programs. Does countering violent extremism belong in the conversation regarding the expansion of social welfare? Is violent extremism merely a social scourge that government can cure by replacing the psychological and social voids of an individual previously inhabited by an ideology? Counterterrorism studies would benefit from this type of approach and greater research into the social and psychological conditions that motivate individuals to assume violent ideologies like militant Islamist ideology. Further research may also allow policy makers to make a cognitive shift away from the myopic prism of countering violent extremism as a threat to national security but view it more broadly as a social or public health concern. A change in perception may allow practitioners to truly de-radicalize violent extremists.

The views expressed in this work are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of State, Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

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[10] Ibid.


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[18] Ibid., 21.

[19] Ibid., 1, 23.


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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.


[28] Ibid., 57.

[29] Ibid., 6.


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