



The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee

**Written Testimony to the
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security**

**On
Combating Homegrown Terrorism**

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Dear Chairman Trey Gowdy, Ranking Member Elijah Cummings, and Chairman Ron DeSantis,

I am writing to you on behalf of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the nation's premier Arab-American civil rights organization. ADC is a secular, non-partisan grassroots civil rights organization founded in 1980 by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk. ADC has protected the Arab-American community for over thirty five years: (1) defending and promoting human rights, civil rights, and civil liberties of Arab Americans and other persons of Arab heritage, (2) combating stereotypes and discrimination against and affecting the Arab-American community in the United States, (3) serving as a public voice for the Arab American community in the United States on domestic issues, (4) educating the American public in order to promote greater understanding of Arab history and culture, and (5) organizing and mobilizing the Arab American community in furtherance of the organization's objectives.

ADC routinely works with a broad coalition of national organizations to protect the rights of communities of color in the United States. ADC has standing commitment to open government, and government transparency and accountability. ADC opposes surveillance, racial and religious profiling, and interference with Constitutional rights, particularly the First Amendment, Fourth Amendment, and Fourteenth Amendment. The constitutional, civil and human rights of Arab Americans are more than ever at stake. ADC respectfully takes this opportunity to provide a statement for the record with comments regarding the Subcommittee's recent hearing titled "Combating Homegrown Terrorism."

The fact that Muslims was the sole focus in a hearing regarding violent extremism is a problem. There was no discussion of terrorism committed by white nationalists, which is arguably more relevant considering the rise in anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, xenophobic sentiment in recent months.

In his testimony, Mr. Kerry Sleeper, the assistant director at the Office of Partner Engagement at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, bragged that the FBI's "Don't Be a Puppet" CVE website garners approximately 7,400 views a month. ADC opposes the "Don't Be a Puppet" program, as the website targets Arab and Muslim students, conveys false information about the so-called path to radicalization, infringes upon First Amendment rights, demonizes innocuous behavior, and promotes the bullying of Arab and Muslim American youth.

This CVE program promotes radicalization theory, or the idea that there are specific indicators that an individual is heading down the path of a violent extremist. However, despite many years of federally-funded efforts, no list of indicators can actually predict who will engage in violence. The indicators that the program lists include common religious practices and normal behaviors associated with political activism--effectively criminalizing many innocuous, constitutionally-protected practices of Arabs and Muslims. For instance, the program advises individuals to "contact someone you trust if someone you know is...traveling to places that sound suspicious."

The website doesn't define what "suspicious" means; we know that what constitutes as a "suspicious" destination would be influenced by anti-Arab and Islamophobic bias. The program also asks people to contact someone they trust if someone is "using code words or unusual language." Again, "unusual language" is not defined--but one could imagine that the Arabic language that has been vilified as solely associated with terrorism is more likely to be identified as "unusual" over languages like English or Italian. Another notably ludicrous advice that the website provides is to contact someone they trust if they see someone "studying or taking pictures of potential targets (like a government building)." In effect, a tourist, or otherwise innocent person snapping some photos of the White House or the Washington Monument for their Instagram page could potentially be thought of as a terrorist suspect. The listing of innocuous indicators cultivates an atmosphere of fear and paranoia, and causes innocent activities to be scrutinized through the lenses of national security.

A defining issue of CVE programs like the "Don't Be a Puppet" website is that it deems extremist ideology as a precursor to, a motivation for, terrorism. However, this simply isn't true: people can espouse perspectives that may be considered as "extreme" without acting violently, and vice versa. Studies show that most people with radical beliefs do not engage in violent behavior. Counterterrorism expert, Professor Randy Borum stated, "A focus on radicalization ... risks implying that radical beliefs are a proxy — or at least a necessary precursor — for terrorism. We know this not to be true. Most people who hold radical ideas do not engage in terrorism, and many terrorists — even those who lay claim to a 'cause' — are not deeply ideological and may not 'radicalize' in any traditional sense." The "Don't Be a Puppet" website uses the terms "extremist" and "radical" interchangeably with "violent extremism," effectively promoting the idea those ideas that may lie outside of the mainstream could be categorized as ideas of a potential violent extremist. For example, individuals and activist groups that criticize or oppose United States foreign policy in the Middle East could be seen as espousing violent extremist beliefs. This presents an infringement of constitutionally-granted rights to freedom of speech.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a union representing 1.6 million American teachers also opposed the implementation of CVE programs in our nation's schools. In an open letter sent to former FBI director James Comey, AFT detailed the way the CVE website causes the bullying and profiling of Arab and Muslim youth. They describe it as "ideological profiling and surveillance" that would have "a chilling effect on our schools and immigrant communities, jeopardizing children's sense of safety and well-being and threatening the security and sense of trust of entire communities."

After his comment about the "Don't Be a Puppet" program, Sleeper improperly continued to promote the effectiveness of CVE programs in schools with no basis. In Minneapolis, a pilot city for CVE targeted Somali students in the city's public schools district. The program calls for the implementation of a youth worker intervention model for the Somali community. As Kourtney Kiernat, Executive Director of External Partnerships and Institutional Advancement at Minneapolis Public School describes, youth workers are hired and trained to spend time in the lunchroom and non-classroom spaces with supposedly at-risk youth, and help them figure out "identity issues" which are described as a "root [cause] of radicalization." This program clearly profiles students, and treats them as potential terrorists. Somalis in Minneapolis have criticized

this program for “[institutionalizing] injustice against Somalis.” They have stated, “Parents entrust the district with providing their children a good education; they do not send their sons and daughters to school for racial profiling.”

Furthermore, CVE programs in schools also use mental health professionals to target Muslim American youth. Board certified clinical psychologist and researcher Alice LoCicero, Ph.D., rebuked CVE in an op-ed in *Psychology Today*, stating that the program asks mental health professionals to report Muslim youth based off of vague, unproven indicators of radicalization. LoCicero discouraged mental health professionals from partaking in CVE programs, stating, “We will not spy on our patients. We do not read minds, and we know that none of us can predict the future.”

George Selim, the director of Countering Violent Extremism at the Department of Homeland Security, also testified. Selim discussed the need for law enforcement to work with Muslim communities and build trust. However, CVE actively forms a wedge between our communities and law enforcement. Due to the historical and continued civil rights infringements committed by law enforcement’s use of entrapment and informant tactics, our communities cannot be expected to so easily collaborate with law enforcement. Selim’s claim that working with law enforcement actually enforces bonds within our communities is absurd in light of all of the pain that Arab and Muslim communities have been put through. Law enforcement and governmental claims to want to partner and collaborate with our communities seems hypocritical while our communities are looked at through the lenses of national security. Law enforcement must take concrete steps to gain the trust of our communities--and this comes in the form of showing us that initiatives like CVE that have and continue to criminalize us are ended. In fact, this trust-building in and of itself will counter radicalism.

Even Muslim groups that have collaborated with law enforcement have been surveilled. Information obtained through the Freedom of Information Act requests demonstrate that normal interactions with and observations of Muslims involved in CVE efforts were stored in FBI intelligence files. It is clear that there is a difference in opinion about what community engagement is and what is not.

Raheel Raza, president of Muslims Facing Tomorrow, also testified. Raza’s testimony was laced with Islamophobic rhetoric. She thanked and cited the Clarion Project, a notably Islamophobic organization, and claimed that hundreds of millions of Muslims support suicide bombings. The fact that the Committee allowed this type of rhetoric into a Committee hearing is absurd. Furthermore, Raza fear-mongered about the threat of Sharia, and during multiple times over the course of her testimony, advocated for the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, which would effectively work to criminalize many prominent civil rights groups, threaten their ability to exercise their right to freedom of speech, and impact their advocacy work.

We at ADC are asking for more diverse perspectives about the Countering Violent Extremism program to be included in such hearings in the future. We feel that hearings regarding the Countering Violent Extremism program do not include representative, authentic, diverse perspectives. We were extremely disappointed by the witnesses selected for this hearing as well

as the recent hearing titled “Ideology and Terror: Understanding the Tools, Tactics, and Techniques of Violent Extremism.” The selection of Ayan Hirsi Ali and Asra Nomani, out of all of the Muslim voices that could have been selected, was reflective of the committee’s continued biased framing of the conversation. It is essential that the voices of Arabs and Muslims that have been affected by CVE programs be centered in these hearings and discussions.