From the Desk of the Director

The recent attack in Orlando has dramatically demonstrated that the United States, like most Western countries, is faced with a multitude of terrorist threats. The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University was launched only a year ago to provide policymakers, the counterterrorism community, and the general public with research-based and non-partisan analysis to better navigate this complex environment.

We are proud to say that our work has been received with remarkable enthusiasm. Our research on ISIS in America (starting with our December 2015 report ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa) has been regularly used in Congressional hearings, law enforcement training, and media reporting. Our positions on countering violent extremism (CVE) have similarly shaped the national debate. We have also produced work on topics ranging from sovereign citizens to the use of social media by terrorist groups.

In the coming months the Program on Extremism will continue to conduct research on various extremism-related topics. It will also undergo an important expansion, as several prominent resident and non-resident experts will join the team. We hope that our continued efforts will contribute to enhancing the national and international debate on extremism and how to fight it.

Dr. Lorenzo Vidino
Program on Extremism’s Director
Events & Activities

On March 1, the Program on Extremism and the Department of State hosted international municipality and non-government organization leaders for dialogues as part of the "Strong Cities: Building Community Resilience to Radicalization and Violent Extremism" professional exchange program. Secretary of State John Kerry provided the opening remarks for the conference. Participants arrived from Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Morocco, The Netherlands, Norway, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The program was a lead-up to the inaugural Strong Cities Network Summit May 11-12 in Antalya, Turkey.

Together with the Center for Cyber and Homeland Security, on May 19 the Program hosted The Honorable Michael McCaul, Chairman of the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee, for a discussion of key policy and operational challenges facing the U.S. and its allies in their efforts to combat ISIS and disrupt its terrorist plotting. In his remarks, Chairman McCaul highlighted his recent trip to the Middle East and Europe, underscoring key findings regarding the fight against ISIS.

On May 25, the Program hosted Justin Siberell, Acting Coordinator for the Department of State’s Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. The discussion, moderated by Seamus Hughes, addressed the Department of State’s implementation of a number of changes to create a more strategic, integrated, and effective approach to CVE. Acting Coordinator Siberell also discussed the Department of State’s work with a range of bilateral, multilateral, and non-governmental partners to prevent the radicalization and recruitment efforts of violent terrorist groups.

On June 9 the Program co-hosted a workshop entitled "Building Off-Ramps and Reintegrating Foreign Fighters and Terrorist Offenders: Challenges and Opportunities." The one-day workshop served as a platform for a group of civil society practitioners, policymakers, and issue experts to discuss the challenges and lessons learned from rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

Over the previous six months, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes have traveled across the U.S. and abroad to lead workshops and conferences on topics ranging from online radicalization to combating foreign terrorist fighter travel to countering violent extremism. Audiences included INTERPOL, the Central Intelligence Agency’s Sherman Kent School, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and a variety of intelligence agencies from the U.S. and Europe.
Testimonies

In addition to hosting panel discussions, leading workshops, and briefing law enforcement and government officials, the staff of the Program on Extremism has testified before the U.S. Congress on a number of timely and evolving issues.

- On January 20, Director Lorenzo Vidino testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs on "Inside the Mind of ISIS: Understanding Its Goals and Ideology to Better Protect the Homeland."

- On June 15, Research Fellow Mokhtar Awad testified before U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa, on "Egypt: Challenges and Opportunities for U.S. Policy."

- On June 23, Deputy Director Seamus Hughes testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on "Countering the Virtual Caliphate."

Publications

Over the past six months, the Program has released a number of occasional papers. In February, the Program published "The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions are Limiting the Social Networks of English-speaking ISIS Supporters," co-authored by POE Fellow J.M. Berger and Heather Perez, a law enforcement analyst. The paper found that Twitter's consistent suspensions of ISIS-affiliated accounts reduced the number of repeat offenders, and accounts that returned did not regain the high number of followers they had originally. Berger and Perez's findings were cited by a range of media outlets, including Reuters, The Wall Street Journal, and CBS.

Later in February, POE published "Hisba in Mosul: Systematic Oppression in the Name of Virtue" by Rasha Al Aqeedi. A fellow at Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and a native of Mosul, Iraq, Al Aqeedi explores the activities of the "Diwan Al-Hisba," or Chamber of Morality Police, in Mosul, presenting accounts from trusted eyewitnesses. Most recently, the Program published "Without Prejudice: What Sovereign Citizens Believe," a primer on the origins, beliefs, and development of the American sovereign citizen movement by J.M. Berger.

On May 18, Seamus Hughes published an article in The Los Angeles Times titled "Islamic State is successfully radicalizing Americans. How do we stop them?" Drawing directly from the Program's analysis of approximately 8,000 pages of legal documents, interviews with family members, and study of online communications, Hughes underscores the limited assistance available to the families and friends of individuals suspected of radicalizing to violent extremism. In the face of the recent surge in radicalization to violent extremism in the U.S., Hughes calls for a formalized approach to intervention.
Beginning in January, the Program began releasing monthly updates on ISIS Recruits in the U.S. Legal System and Terrorism in the U.S. The updates include new jihadism arrests within the U.S. and major developments in existing terrorism-related cases, including pleas, convictions, sentencing announcements, and appeals. These updates have been cited by a variety of media outlets.

Media
The Program on Extremism and its staff has remained a trusted source of research and analysis for the media. In the previous six months, the POE staff have been quoted by The Wall Street Journal, The New Yorker, The New York Times, Reuters, Christian Science Monitor, NBC, The Chicago Tribune, The Boston Globe, and The Daily Beast, among others.

Following the recent terrorist attack in Orlando, a variety of major media outlets interviewed POE staff about the attack as well as jihadism in the U.S. Politico interviewed Lorenzo Vidino for an article dispelling a number of misconceptions about the jihadist threat and radicalization in America. POE staff appeared on a variety of television news stations and were quoted in articles by Associated Press, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, The Daily Beast, Christian Science Monitor, and Voice of America.