

SAFE SPACES INITIATIVE

TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING
HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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*Muslim
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Founded in 1988, MPAC is an American institution which informs and shapes public opinion and policy by serving as a trusted resource to decision makers in government, media and policy institutions. MPAC is also committed to developing leaders with the purpose of enhancing the political and civic participation of Muslim Americans.

This publication is designed first and foremost as a practical resource for the American Muslim, grassroots leadership to help deal with the few, concrete cases of extremism that may occur.

On April 15, 2013, the bombings in Boston, Massachusetts reminded the nation that individuals in America with violent tendencies still have the ability to strike. It shined a light on the fact that, despite the precautions our government has taken, there are still gaps to be filled. Law enforcement can only go so far in preventing these attacks. The Muslim Public Affairs Council believes that, in order to keep our nation safe, the American Muslim community must take a methodical approach to identifying and intervening with individuals who may be susceptible to or actually planning to engage in acts of violent extremism efforts.

Violent extremism is a symptom of many factors, where criminals sometimes utilize so-called religious arguments to justify violent actions. Imams and community leaders have the ability to address theological, social, and familial issues much more effectively than law enforcement. This paper is one of a small number of community-led initiatives intended to proactively prevent acts of violent extremism from being born inside our community institutions.

This publication serves two purposes:

- 1 Raise awareness and responsibly inform our community leaders about the limited, but concrete and complicated challenges that violence and extremism pose to our families, friends, neighbors, and brothers- and sisters-in-Islam.
- 2 Provide tips and tools to deal with problematic situations that may arise at one's mosque, community center, Muslim student groups and other community groups.

MPAC hopes that this paper gives community leaders a toolkit to address any signs of violent extremism. The strategies included focus on awareness and dialogue in the broader community environment so that individuals on the fringe never find a receptive community or have any chance to go down a violent path. We all have a shared stake in keeping our nation and our communities safe from any threats.

FAQ: WHY THIS TOOLKIT MATTERS TO MY COMMUNITY

Why does violent extremism matter to me as an American Muslim? Are we talking about this only because the government is concerned about it?

The Qur'an says, "...if anyone murders a person, it is as though he murdered all of humanity and if anyone saved life, it would be as if he saved all of humanity" (5:32). We are talking about this issue because it is what God commands us to.

Let's be very clear: our communities are comprised of hardworking, productive members of society, whose historical connection to our country goes back to the establishment of the early colonies, before America became an independent nation. Therefore, violent extremism is not "someone else's problem". To think that one's own child, friend, or relative is immune from extremist tendencies is dangerously naïve and mistaken.

Unfortunately, there is a very small, but dangerous minority of violent individuals who falsely claim to act on behalf of the interests and aspirations of all Muslims.

In order to recruit people to their backward ideology, they prey on vulnerable and misguided members of our communities. Some of these individuals have gone on to do terrible things, such as carry out the Boston marathon bombings.

Is this a real problem or is the FBI just "setting us up"?

There is no doubt that there have been controversial court cases involving the use of FBI informants, sometimes called "agent provocateurs." As a result, some have claimed that most arrests of Al-Qaeda suspects in our country were the result of informants entrapping defendants. Based on this assumption, some have argued that the FBI is responsible for manufacturing most of these cases. However, the evidence does not support that notion.

A 2013 study directed by Ohio State University professor John Mueller, a national security expert and widely noted critic of the "War on Terror," found that 26 out of the 53 (49%) post-9/11 U.S. Al-Qaeda arrests involved an informant¹. While informants

1 - Terrorism Since 9/11: The American Cases. Ed. John Mueller. (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 2013): 3-7.

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are frequently used by federal law enforcement, at least half of these cases do not involve them at all.

What is “Violent Extremism” exactly?

Violent extremism is another term for “terrorism.” Violent extremists can range from domestic U.S.-based groups, like far-right militias and violent Neo-Nazis, to foreign groups, such as the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. As our short list of examples indicates, it is clear that groups claiming to act in the name of Islam are not the only ones threatening our nation.

What is MPAC’s approach to this issue?

There is no doubt that we need law enforcement to keep our nation safe. However we also believe that not every case of extremism must end in an arrest or someone getting hurt. Our approach to this issue is similar to how public schools and universities across our nation prevent tragedies like violent shooting sprees at Columbine and Virginia Tech.

Research suggests the paths to violence taken by school shooters and violent extremists are very similar². In those situations, schools have formed teams of teachers, psychologists, and other staff to identify problems and explore alternatives to arrest, such as counseling. That method of intervention has been effective, preventing 120 incidents of violence in the past decade³.

Similarly, we believe our communities can establish processes to identify and properly intervene in situations where a person may be heading down a path of violence.

In 2010, 17-year-old Mohamed Osman Mohamud was arrested and convicted of attempting to bomb a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon. Coming from a broken home and parents who fled a civil war, Mohamud had been experiencing personal problems that led him to a path where he began supporting extreme ideologies, but was not yet doing anything violent.

Noticing his son’s troublesome path, Mohamud’s father believed calling the FBI was his only option. In those

circumstances, arrest and criminal prosecution were the only tools that were available. However, if people like Mohamud’s father have access to community-led initiatives that focus on prevention and intervention, like the framework described in this paper. Then our communities and the nation will be safer and the community can avoid the trauma of the criminal justice system.

What does this toolkit do exactly?

This toolkit seeks to provide you with practical advice on what intervention processes can look like. It also gives a quick background on why some people adopt divisive ideologies and others go a step further by committing acts of violence.

Finally, the toolkit addresses those situations where prevention and intervention may not be sufficient because, in some cases, individuals may still choose to continue down a path of destruction despite the community’s best efforts. In those cases, we provide information to help communities decide when it is time to call law enforcement versus

2 - Adam Lankford, “A Comparative Analysis of Suicide Terrorists and Rampage, Workplace, and School Shooters in the United States From 1990 to 2010,” *Homicide Studies*, Vol. 17, (3), August 2013: 255-274.

3 - “The Path to Violence,” Public Broadcasting System, February 20, 2013. <http://to.pbs.org/1akjx47>

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when there is still an opportunity to stage an intervention.

The best solution, however, is to prevent a crisis from happening in the first place. In this regard, our toolkit also provides suggestions that offer healthy outlets and guidance on issues ranging from increasing religious knowledge to training on political activism to discussing “hot topic” issues like foreign policy, gender relations, and alcohol/drug abuse.

We refer to these three types of community-based assistance the Prevention, Intervention, Ejection model, or PIE, for short.

Why aren't you talking about violence from groups like the KKK? Don't their ideologies need to be addressed?

Organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center, Life After Hate, and the One People's Project have dealt with those groups and their ideologies for many years. The fight against racist extremism and violence

has been, and continues to be, openly discussed, debated, and debunked largely due to these organizations' efforts over the past several decades.

We focus on American Muslims because it is our own community with which we are the most familiar and the one for which our organization was founded to serve and advocate. That said, we do not shy away from discussing other extremist ideologies. In fact, we draw upon some of the successes against those other groups in order to help inform our communities about effective prevention and intervention.

How can I help?

We invite you to check out our toolkit! In it, there are suggestions for leaders of mosques and community centers, as well as Muslim college student organizations, and community members. If you are not a leader in your community, you can still help by providing your local institution or organization with a copy of our toolkit and request to start putting its ideas into action.

WHAT IS MPAC'S 'PIE' MODEL?

MPAC's approach to tackling violent extremism is based on two assumptions:

- 1 A person's path to violence is unique and involves many factors.
- 2 The path to violence can be slowed, stopped, reversed and/or prevented with proper community support.

Our solution rests on three pillars –

Prevention, Intervention, Ejection, or PIE for short.

PREVENTION

The first step focuses on prevention of destructive ideologies or toxic religious narratives, especially those that emanate from the internet and grab hold of our youth. The ideal solution is to prevent a crisis from happening in the first place. In this regard, our toolkit provides suggestions that offer healthy outlets and guidance on issues ranging from increasing religious knowledge and political activism training to discussing hot topic issues such as foreign policy, gender relations and alcohol/drug abuse.

INTERVENTION

The second step is intervention -- by working with those individuals who may be traveling down a dangerous path before they commit to violence. Not every case of extremism has to end in an arrest or someone getting hurt. We believe the best approach in these situations, based on our research, is similar to plans created by schools and universities to prevent violent tragedies such as those at [Columbine High School](#) and [Virginia Tech University](#).

EJECTION

The last resort is ejection. If there is no way to convince an individual to move away from an act of violence, communities should work toward safely removing that individual from the congregation and contacting law enforcement.

(COMMUNITY RESPONSES)



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