Thank you Dean Najam and to the Pardee School of Global Studies for inviting me with speak with you all.

Today, I would like to describe how the U.S. and our partners are addressing the global threat of violent extremism.

Violent extremists attack in theaters of war and where they control territory, but they also strike in peaceful places, far from areas under their control. Boston, of course, knows this threat firsthand. I was teaching at Harvard two years ago when terrorists targeted our cherished marathon. So many other cities have shared similar horror: Madrid, Aleppo, Oslo, Nairobi, Baghdad, Timbuktu to name just a few.

Like these other communities around the world, Boston has grappled with how best to counter the persistent threat of violent extremism emerging locally. The American approach has largely been to integrate traditional law enforcement approaches with new partnerships with at-risk communities.

These efforts face challenges and some controversy. It is difficult to balance security and freedom, to avoid the appearance of profiling while prioritizing effort, and to anticipate a threat that we know from empirical evidence can take root in individuals from any socio-economic, religious, ethnic, or national background.

Efforts to prevent violent extremism from emerging within the United States are the responsibility of domestic government agencies. But US foreign policy has come to appreciate the need for analogous efforts abroad. I’d like to talk a bit today about how the United States has evolved to define and embrace policies and programs that go beyond killing and capturing terrorists, to preventing the spread of violent extremism – to prevent the next ISIL.

During my tenure as Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, supporting this evolution has been one of my top priorities.

I’ll begin by explaining why the evolution of violent extremism since 9/11 necessitated a broader approach – what we call Countering Violent Extremism, or CVE.

I’ll then clarify what CVE entails in our efforts abroad and describe our successes and challenges in translating this approach into our foreign policy.

After 9/11, the U.S. arrayed a range of counterterrorism tools to keep Americans safe: from airport security and intelligence collection, to military operations, and security assistance. These efforts prevented a catastrophic attack on the homeland and degraded core al-Qa’ida leadership.

Yet as the U.S. targeted al-Qa’ida, its remnants exploited local grievances about insecurity, unemployment, sectarianism, or marginalization -- and the general upheaval of the Arab Uprising -- to merge with militias, criminal networks, and insurgencies. In doing so, they created affiliates and inspired savage new groups like ISIL and Boko Haram.

The rise of these groups revealed that while traditional, “hard” approaches to counterterrorism remained critical for protecting us from immediate threats, they were ill-equipped at preventing future ones from emerging.

To do that, we needed a broader approach to better prevent people from turning to terror in the first place.

That begins with understanding what motivates individuals and communities to align with violent extremist groups. And here, as my colleague the terrorism expert Jessica Stern has written, there is no simple answer.

Their motives are complex, overlapping, and context-specific. To untangle them, I’ve found it useful to think about psychologist Abraham Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs. At the bottom are needs critical to physical survival, like food, shelter, and safety. Higher up are more abstract needs for love, belonging, and purpose.

This hierarchy helps explain why individuals with such varied backgrounds have aligned with violent extremist groups.

At the bottom, unmet needs like physical or economic security can act like “push” factors that make individuals or communities vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment. Even when lower-level needs are met, other conditions like socioeconomic and political marginalization can impact higher-order needs like identity and purpose. Further complicating the equation, these grievances can be either real or perceived, experienced directly, or witnessed from afar.

Violent extremist groups can also “pull” individuals and communities to their cause with radical ideologies that often exploit unmet, higher-levels needs concerning purpose or identity.
Each case of personal or community radicalization to violence results from a complex and context-specific interaction between these “push” and “pull” factors. This complexity necessitates a longer-term approach that is at once broader and more creative, but also more targeted and contextual.

CVE attempts to strike that balance in three important ways by expanding the “who, what, and where” of our counterterrorism approach.

Concerning “the what” – CVE is about addressing the “push” and “pull” dynamics that can fuel Violent Extremism. In doing so, CVE seeks to both reverse the growth of active violent extremist groups and better prevent the next generation of threat.

The United States had long recognized the need to address the “pull” factors of ideology and recruitment methods. We had been working to counter the lies and propaganda of violent extremist groups use to lure vulnerable individuals and forge alliances with local communities. That can mean monitoring web traffic or engaging proactively on social media to promote credible alternatives to violence.

In 2010, the U.S. created a consolidated Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications to contest extremist propaganda and misinformation across a range of digital environments. It helps empower credible voices outside government to counter terrorist lies and propaganda online. For example, the CSCC finds vulnerable individuals being targeted by violent extremist groups, trains them to use new communications and social media platforms, and equips them with effective counter-messages.

But addressing “push” factors was a different proposition. Essentially, it meant addressing the underlying grievances that terrorists exploit. President Obama explained that when “people – especially young people – feel entirely trapped in impoverished communities, where there is no order and no path for advancement, where there are no educational opportunities, where there are no ways to support families, and no escape from injustice and the humiliations of corruption – that feeds instability and disorder, and makes those communities ripe for extremist recruitment.” This work often requires filling unmet human needs as described by Maslow’s hierarchy, and these can range from providing security, to expanding economic options, to giving marginalized communities a greater stake in determining their political future.

The Department of State increasingly mobilizes its diverse resources and expertise to advance CVE goals. These range from human rights and democracy programs to strengthening civil society and advocating for marginalized communities, to law enforcement and criminal justice initiatives to promote community-oriented policing and reduce radicalization to violence in prisons, to international exchange activities that convene youth and women leaders from around the world to exchange CVE best practices. Programs that contribute to CVE goals include politically reintegrating communities in northern Mali, strengthening relations between youth and police in Zanzibar, and providing youth in Burkina Faso greater opportunities for civic engagement.

But obviously there are huge human needs that create fertile soil for extremist roots, and we have limited resources to address these potential drivers. Getting the “what” right therefore means investing in analysis. Empirical research can identify the most salient “push” and “pull” factors to effectively target our efforts. This is an area where the academy, as well as NGOs, can help. Evaluation can facilitate course corrections and improve program design. We need to better understand what interventions work – and therefore increase efforts to monitor, evaluate, and experiment.

State’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations recently established a new unit to analyze the underlying drivers of violent extremism in different global contexts. This analysis feeds into a new initiative to design and implement CVE programming through an integrated and holistic process. Now, State is launching CVE pilot programs in Africa focused on the most at-risk communities and key drivers of radicalization to violence with carefully tailored, evidence-based approaches. This is where our new thinking on prevention is taking us.

We were slow to fund such efforts, and our investments in preventive work remains modest compared to US investments in hard security – so vital to respond to existing terrorist threats. But as we have watched violent extremism continue to spread globally, infecting new areas and shaping new generations of youth, we recognized the need to simultaneously engage in preventive work. Prevention is vital for helping our hard power tools become more successful. A key issue, which I’ll discuss shortly, is where to target these efforts.

But first, let’s turn to “the who.”

CVE calls for an integrated and holistic approach to address the “push” and “pull” factors that can fuel violent extremism. While governments have a critical role in this work by ensuring security, respect for human rights, and the rule of law, they cannot effectively address these complex factors on their own.

A holistic CVE approach is only possible by empowering a broader set of actors, including civil society, business, religious leaders, women, youth, international bodies and former violent extremists. This is what we are calling a “whole of society” approach.

At the same time, an integrated CVE approach depends on coordination among these various stakeholders. That often requires building trust and repairing fraught relationships between the government and actors in civil society or marginalized communities, as well as safeguarding space for these actors to operate and peacefully express their views.

Additionally, to better facilitate access to and collaboration between these various actors in society, governments need to coordinate better within themselves by breaking down the silos of bureaucracy. Thus, CVE also requires a “whole of government” approach.

It also calls for a network of global partners, including regional and multilateral institutions like the Arab League, United Nations, World Bank, African Union, and World Economic Forum to reinforce the civilian-led components of this approach. Even with our considerable resources, the U.S. cannot and should not do this alone. Violent extremism is a collective threat to global security and requires a collective global response.

And, finally, concerning “the where” – CVE calls for broadening our focus to upstream risks by supporting communities actively targeted by terrorist groups. These places are often on the periphery of conflict and terrorist operations and individuals there are highly vulnerable to large-scale radicalization and recruitment.

We’ve seen, for example, how al-Shabaab tries to exploit the socioeconomic marginalization of Somali youth living in Kenya. From its base of operations in Iraq and Syria, ISIL has targeted communities in surrounding countries like Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon for recruitment.

By broadening the focus to these at-risk but largely peaceful communities, CVE seeks to prevent the expansion of terrorist networks by proactively addressing the
CVE seeks to keep these most vulnerable communities on a path of stability and resilience by empowering partners to help them address unmet needs that violent extremists seek to exploit.

These elements came into global focus at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism last February, where President Obama convened over 60 countries, 12 multilateral bodies, and representatives from civil society, business, and the faith community to emphasize a preventive global approach to violent extremism.

The Summit elevated CVE as an international priority and produced an ambitious action agenda with nine distinct pillars, from expanding research on the drivers of violent extremism, to developing inclusive national CVE strategies, empowering civil society, expanding economic and political opportunities for at-risk populations, and promoting human rights. Eight countries had regional summits to further develop CVE efforts, states, civil society networks, and international organizations rolled up their sleeves on implementation.

Through this process, a new global consensus and architecture to support prevention is emerging. I encourage you to learn more at cvesummit.org

For example, participants gathered again in September in New York to report progress and chart a way forward. By then, the global CVE movement had grown to 100 countries, 20 multilateral bodies, and over 120 civil society groups with much to report.

More than 70 Young leaders from around the world gathered at the first-ever Global Youth CVE Summit to issue their own agenda for engaging youth in the global CVE movement and showcase innovative tools for countering the appeal of violent extremism among their peers.

Local researchers from around the world launched a new learning platform to better share findings and deepen our understanding about the local drivers of violent extremism along with the best evidence-based approach to address them.

Mayors across the globe launched a new Strong Cities Network to identify and share community-level best practices for building social cohesion and resilience against violent extremism.

Just days ago, the U.N. Human Rights Council adopted a resolution emphasizing the importance of human rights and good governance for countering violent extremism. In the coming months, Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon is expected to present his plan of action to outline the U.N.’s role in preventing and countering violent extremism.

The World Bank has begun focusing the development community on how to address the social and economic marginalization that can drive violent extremism.

Within countries, a new CVE conversation has helped forge partnerships of mutual interest between civil society and governments, often for the first time. Many countries have developed or broadened national action plans for CVE.

While all of these developments are encouraging, we remain sober about the challenges ahead.

Terrorists take innocent lives every day. Governments face real challenges that require the use of military, intelligence and law enforcement tools. President Obama has been resolute in the fight against al-Qa’ida, and more recently in building a global coalition to fight Daesh or the Islamic State.

Yet at the same time, governments face challenges in avoiding counterproductive second-order effects of their counterterrorism actions. Failing to respect human rights and the rule of law in the name of security can backfire and fuel the lifecycle of terrorism. Examples include racial discrimination in law enforcement, killing civilians in the name of counterterrorism operations, or imposing excessive restrictions on civil society, political participation, and religious freedom in the name of security. At the White House Summit last February, Secretary-General Moon warned how “governments should not use the fight against terrorism and extremism as a pretext to attack one’s critics. Extremists deliberately seek to incite such over-reactions, and we must not fall into those traps.”

Counterproductive practices may not change quickly, and they will be most intractable where states feel most under siege. But the U.S. approach to CVE widens the aperture of what was once narrowly deemed counterterrorism, forging a broader set of partners and tools to help contain current violent extremists and prevent new extremist threats from emerging. By emphasizing the long term security benefits of holistic policies that address push factors, including governing with accountability under the rule of law, the preventive approach has fundamentally altered the framework for evaluating and addressing violent extremism.

The morphing infection of violent extremism over this decade shows that we must embrace a long-term and holistic approach — one that, if we return to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs — better aligns our counterterrorism response with promoting human rights and human needs.

In this sense, CVE is fundamentally positive and proactive: it empowers new states and actors, emphasizes preventive action, and advances our collective security while championing universal values. It seeks to build credible and compelling alternatives to terror for our most vulnerable communities.

As Secretary Kerry has said, “the rise of violent extremism is a challenge to the nation state and the global rule of law. And the forces that contribute to it and the dangers that flow from it compel us to prepare and plan, to unite and insist that our collective future will be uncompromised by the primitive and paranoid ideas of terrorists, but instead it will be built by the universal values of decency and civility, and knowledge and reason and law. That is what we stand for. That is where we will stand.”

Thank you and I look forward to the discussion.