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Mightier than the Sword: Social Science and Development in Countering Violent Extremism

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Mightier than the Sword: Social Science and Development in Countering Violent Extremism

Suicide bombings, improvised explosive device attacks, narco-trafficking, kidnapping, and other irregular security threats linked to violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are on the rise.¹ VEOs harm states and citizens alike, taking lives, reducing quality of life, and impeding economic growth. In 2010, more than 13,000 people lost their lives around the world in terrorist attacks,² and the economic consequences of extremist violence around the world have been severe.³

Standard Approaches Have Not Been Effective

U.S. policymakers have favored the use of military force, drone strikes, and covert operations as tried-and-true approaches for dealing with extremist

groups because they produce clear and immediate results. Funding for development and diplomacy efforts remains dwarfed by money for “kinetic operations.” Through FY 2008, for example, less than 7% of funding for counterterrorism operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and under Operation Noble Eagle was set aside for Department of State-led foreign aid and diplomatic operations.⁴ Despite the familiarity of the military response, decision-makers are beginning to recognize that we cannot, as former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen publicly acknowledged, “kill our way to victory.”⁵ Further, programs such as drone strikes, no matter how precise, often aggravate relationships with foreign governments and negatively affect civilian populations, expanding opportunities for VEO recruitment by

1 Andre Le Sage, “Africa’s Irregular Security Threats: Challenges for U.S. Engagement,” *Strategic Forum*, no. 255 (2010).

2 National Counterterrorism Center, 2010 *NCTC Report on Terrorism, 2011*.

3 Alberto Abadie and Javier Gardeazabal, “The Economic Costs of Conflict: A Case Study of the Basque Country,” *American Economic Review* 93, no. 1 (February 2003), 113–132.

4 Amy Belasco, “The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress 33110 (October 15, 2008), 10.

5 “Admiral: Troops Alone Will Not Yield Victory in Afghanistan,” CNN Politics, September 10, 2008, articles.cnn.com/2008-09-10/politics/mullen.afghanistan_1_afghanistan-pakistan-afghan-economy?s=PM:POLITICS.



Two Somali policemen are framed by a bullet-riddled street sign on August 13, 2011, in what used to be Mogadishu's busiest commercial district until fighting between pro-government African Union troops and radical Islamic al-Shabab militiamen faced off here. | AFP Photo: Roberto Schmidt

enhancing and supporting master narratives of grievance.⁶ The Pakistani parliament, for example, has recently demanded an end to U.S. drone strikes in its country.⁷

Standard nonmilitary approaches have not shown strong efficacy. Broad-based public diplomacy programs such as the provision of Arabic-language Voice of America television programming have been funded only sporadically, and planners have not convincingly demonstrated their impact on people who may lack access to television. While some have argued that democratization and poverty alleviation can advance efforts to counter extremism, the

process of democratization itself is no guarantee of pro-U.S. or anti-VEO environments, and there is no robust evidence that the presence of a democratic regime eliminates violent extremism.⁸ Broad-based poverty alleviation efforts have been ongoing for decades, but research has not shown conclusively that increased development and rising individual income levels decrease the “production” of terrorism.⁹

Discarding Folk Wisdom

The development approach to countering violent extremism (CVE) rests on new social science

6 “Special Report: Al-Qaeda,” Al-Qaeda Master Narratives and Affiliate Case Studies: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (Open Source Center, September 2011).

7 Declan Walsh, “Pakistani Parliament Demands End to U.S. Drone Strikes,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2012.

8 F. G. Gause, “Can Democracy Stop Terrorism?” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 62-76.

9 Alberto Abadie, “Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism,” *American Economic Review* 96(2) (2006), 50–56; Philip Keefer and Norman Loayza, eds., *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Openness* (New York: Cambridge, 2008).

research on the root causes of extremism and radicalization. Researchers have started discarding folk wisdom that sought to tie radicalization to poverty, madness, and ignorance, and have come to recognize terrorism as a decentralized, complex, evolutionary process.¹⁰ Rather than envisioning counterterrorism efforts as a war fought through military tactics, this soft approach to CVE repositions military intervention as one tool among many. From an economic perspective, violent extremism can be seen as a labor supply problem, and development programs can dry up support for VEOs and reduce their ability to recruit by enhancing the legitimacy of partner governments, integrating marginalized groups into society, and providing social services.¹¹ This approach breaks the deleterious cycle through which VEOs are able to carry out more attacks more quickly over time as they gain new members.¹²

The soft-side approach categorizes drivers of violent extremism as push, pull, and environmental factors driven by political, cultural, and socioeconomic conditions with different impacts on women and men.¹³ Perceptions of social exclusion, real or perceived discrimination, frustrated expectations, and government repression may push individuals into collective violence. Friends, social networks, and services provided by extremist groups, alternatively, may pull individuals into violent extremism. Environmental factors, such as ungoverned spaces, border areas, and dislocation, facilitate movement toward extremism.

10 *Theoretical Frames on Pathways to Violent Radicalization: Understanding the Evolution of Ideas and Behaviors, How They Interact, How They Describe Pathways to Violence in Marginalized Diaspora* (ARTIS, 2009).

11 Alice Hunt, Kristin Lord, John Nagl, Seth Rosen, eds. *Beyond Bullets: Strategies for Countering Violent Extremism*, Solarium Strategy Series (Center for a New American Security, 2009).

12 Aaron Clauset, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "The developmental dynamics of terrorist organizations," working paper (2011).

13 Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism*, Management Systems International for USAID (2009).

Providing educational and vocational opportunities for populations susceptible to recruitment by extremists serves both to counter indoctrination offered by VEOs and to provide youth with new skills, job security, and a positive vision of their future, blunting push factors. The U.S. government could assist foreign governments in understanding the grievances of peripheral communities, such as the Tuareg in the Sahel, and work to reduce marginalization through negotiation over grievances with the goal of reintegration.¹⁴

Rather than broadcasting mass media messages to the few households that may have access both to electricity and televisions, U.S. planners can deliver tailored messages through trusted media channels, such as radio programs run by local residents, on peaceful cross-cultural interaction and positive interaction with the West.¹⁵ More broadly, the United States could use such media to systematically provide a counternarrative to the themes of encirclement, humiliation, and obligation being forwarded by VEOs such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in northwest Africa, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba in South Asia, and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines.

By disaggregating data on relevant communities by gender, the U.S. government can better alter modalities for delivering counternarratives to ensure it uses the most effective ways for reaching women and men, who have different forms of influence over their networks and families. For example, data have shown that women in Pakistan can use various strategies to de-radicalize their children and that women's radio-listening clubs in

14 John Campbell, "To Battle Nigeria's Boko Haram, Put Down Your Guns," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 5 (2011).

15 For developing communities in South and Central America and Africa, radio programs and serialized dramas have proved critical at diffusing information and altering local norms; see Karen Greiner, *Applying Local Solutions to Local Programs: Radio Listeners as Agents of Change*, prepared by Equal Access for USAID (2010).

the Sahel offer new sources of influence in otherwise insulated communities.

Finally, despite the limitations of democracy assistance, the U.S. government can aim to increase the legitimacy of authoritarian and democratic governments alike, help fight corruption, and strengthen the rule of law, thereby reducing the “vicious circle of insecurity” for residents who may join VEOs to find stability and public goods in unstable political environments.¹⁶

Toward the Future: A Critical Role for Social Science

Decisionmakers in the United States and abroad are now taking social science-based CVE analysis more seriously. The 2011 U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism and the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review recognized the need to counter al-Qaeda ideology and diminish the drivers of violence that it exploits. To ensure that the United States moves in the right direction, social science and evidence-based programming must receive pride of place in the counter-extremism community. USAID, the Department of State, and the Department of Defense have begun to use randomized field experiments to better infer causal relationships between variables of interest. For example, quasi-experiments in Western Africa have shown that focused, locally based radio programming increases civic participation and links local residents to counternarratives involving nonviolence.¹⁷

Far too many CVE programs have lacked effective evaluation and measurement criteria, and relevant actors have recognized the need

for local, longitudinal studies on how attitudes and behaviors have changed from the beginning of an intervention to the end, as seen in recent experiments carried out by USAID and the Department of State in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Building on the work in the field of complexity theory, planners could adopt multiple, small-scale tactics rather than single, large-scale ones. Carrying out simultaneous experiments in the field prevents planners from getting locked into enormous, multiyear projects that may have little actual impact. Should any of the experimental interventions prove successful, less-effective methods can be halted and replaced with the more efficacious ones.

The development, diplomacy, and defense framework serves as the new foundation for U.S. security policy, and USAID has a critical role to play in shaping it. Social science-based CVE policy creates stability and security by building resilience to VEO recruitment and narratives in populations around the world. While development-based responses may require a longer time horizon than standard approaches to the problem, their effects are long-lasting and can help de-radicalize marginal communities and create citizens more connected to their governments. As we enter an extended era when irregular, asymmetric engagements and terrorism may be the most salient threats to people around the world, countering violent extremism through development will prove a valuable tool for creating a stable and peaceful future.

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16 David Shinn, “Fighting Terrorism in East Africa and the Horn,” *Foreign Service Journal* 8 (2004): 38.

17 Jeffrey Swedberg and Steven Smith, *Mid-Term Evaluation of USAID’s Counter-Extremism Programming in Africa*, AMEX International for USAID (2011).