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Creating Spaces for Effective CVE Approaches

Summary

- Countering violent extremism efforts strive to prevent at-risk individuals from being recruited into or joining extremist groups. Identifying who is at risk and who poses a threat, however, is a complicated inquiry.

- In Kenya, as in many other places experiencing violent extremism, the young, the undecided, the coerced and others might—if properly guided—move away from rather than toward violence.

- Many at risk of becoming involved in violent extremist groups are too quickly categorized as an enemy and given no opportunity to move in a different direction.

- Empathy is critical both to learning why individuals are vulnerable to engaging in violent extremism and to creating the space and willingness in a community to help those at risk.

> " Understanding why individuals engage in violent extremism is critical not only to developing effective and appropriate strategies to counter potential violence but also to promoting the empathy needed to provide openings for these measures. "

The neighborhood of Eastleigh in Nairobi, sometimes referred to as little Mogadishu, is home to a significant ethnic Somali population. It is an insular and separate community, enmeshed in Somali clan culture, politics and business, and has an identity apart from the rest of the city, and indeed the country. It is also the focus of law enforcement crackdowns by Kenyan police and security forces, who in the aftermath of the devastating Westgate attack in September 2013 have been conducting heavy-handed raids and filling detention camps with "potential suspects." These tactics have come under increasing criticism from human rights groups internationally, even as the violence of al-Shabaab persists and terrorism remains Kenya's security priority. Many see the Kenyan security services as engaged in a dangerous cycle of violence, in that blunt and hardened security responses generate more recruits and further polarize the Kenyan and ethnic Somali communities in country.

Understanding who poses a threat or who is at risk of radicalizing and joining the violence is a complicated inquiry. Stories have emerged of boys from Eastleigh as young as thirteen joining in the "fight," enabled and encouraged by their families, their clan and community leaders. Some have articulated the social and financial benefits of joining al-Shabaab, seeing participation as an opportunity for boys to become men, to earn status in the community and to bring financial support to their families. Others have talked about the fate of boys who traveled north to Somalia and returned traumatized and damaged. Mothers, in particular, bear the burden of providing and protecting these boys, some of whom are destined to spend their days hidden—both out of shame because the experience did not reap the expected rewards and to avoid detection by the Kenyan authorities.

These scenarios, anecdotal as they are, represent a singular but important level of insight into radicalization in Kenya and elsewhere. Certainly, many engage in violent extremism for other reasons and their participation is deeper, darker and more committed. As in many conflicts, however, the young, the undecided, the coerced and others might still change their trajectories away from rather than toward violence—if properly guided and supported. What happens, then, to those who come close to violent extremist groups and are at high risk of becoming more involved, if they are prematurely labeled the enemy and have no opportunity to change direction? As much research on radicalization underscores, a true commitment to the ideology or mission of a violent extremist group often occurs after an initial experience of participation or exposure to violence. The absence of a chance to move in another direction, and to retreat and start anew, reinforces this likelihood.

This is precisely the focus in the field of countering violent extremism (CVE): preventing individuals at risk of radicalization from being recruited into or joining violent extremist groups. Although part of larger counterterrorism strategies, CVE is a different realm. It is not centrally aimed at apprehending or stopping those who are already committing acts of violence, but instead those who are vulnerable to joining them and those who sympathize with them and enable them to persist in their violence. CVE is a decidedly complex endeavor, largely because the reasons individuals become involved in extremist violence are in themselves complex and the dynamics are unique to each conflict.

Understanding why, on a human level, an individual might become part of a violent extremist group or endorse its tactics, however, does more than inform counter strategies—it also allows for empathy, a crucial and often overlooked component in effective CVE. Empathy is not only necessary to fully appreciate why an individual is vulnerable to the influence of violent extremism, it is also a prerequisite for programs that aim to disengage and reintegrate the potential violent extremist into the community. CVE only works in environments with space for forgiveness and understanding and a willingness to build "exit ramps"—opportunities for individuals to retreat from the influences of extremism, even if they have dabbled in the experience.

Many CVE programs rely on models of radicalization to explain the complexity of the why of violent extremism. These analytic frameworks, however, often stop short of a full explanation and, more important, do little to inspire empathy. Some have even begun to dismiss such constructs and claim that the concept of radicalization itself is rapidly becoming outmoded. As one scholar has suggested, radicalization is "a deeply flawed, conceptually misleading, and problematic paradigm."[1]

The idea of radicalization as a process by which a person becomes engaged in violent extremism is rooted in several key—and imperfect—assumptions. First, it assumes a causal relationship between radical beliefs and extremist violence.

Those closely examining the dynamics that surround groups such as al-Shabaab know that many of the fighters have joined for a range of overlapping reasons that have little to do with extremist ideology. They have joined to become men, for financial gain, because they were coerced, because they were vulnerable to peer pressure, to obtain status, to seek revenge or to establish their identity. Often the experience of being a violent extremist is deeply intertwined with criminal activity and motivations. None of these drivers renders the ideology irrelevant because these groups are run on the engines of the ideologues and their activities are justified by the radical beliefs. Counternarrative is always an important component of a holistic CVE strategy. At the same time, however, it underscores the reality that the key factors that lead an individual toward violent extremism may not always reflect a social-psychological process that evolves from radical beliefs to violent action.

In addition, many analytic models of radicalization incorrectly assume or suggest that signs of radicalization in an individual are linear or progressive and are observable in a meaningful—and

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Georgia Holmer is the deputy director of the USIP's Rule of Law Center. Previously, she led the Women Preventing Extremist Violence project, which seeks to identify and strengthen the roles women play in building community resilience to violent extremism, for USIP's Center for Gender and Peacebuilding. Using Kenya as an example, and drawing on observations from a recent visit, the author explores how promoting a more nuanced understanding of radicalization can help reach those who are at risk of being pushed and pulled into extremist violence.

public—way. This reality is particularly problematic for law enforcement and security agencies, whose jobs are to prevent violence and terrorism and to detect potential problems. One telling political cartoon in a recent wide-distribution Kenyan newspaper depicts Kenyan police apprehending a man dressed in Muslim religious garb as a Western-dressed Kenyan, weapons peeking from his clothing, passes unnoticed.[2] False assumptions about why individuals participate in violent extremism and who is at risk of joining can only damage relationships between communities and the police, whose job it is to protect communities from such threats. It is those closest to those at risk—family and community members—who have the greatest insights into who is vulnerable to becoming involved in violent extremism and why. The police can have privileged access to this information only if they have cultivated a solid trust-based relationship with the community. In Eastleigh, however, fearful of their presence, "children rush to alert their parents when they see a policeman passing by."[3]

Would it be possible to create an environment in Kenya in which the notional thirteen-year-old boy from Eastleigh who has "met" al-Shabaab is given a second chance and supported in finding a different path in life? Effective CVE approaches require a willingness not only on the part of the state authorities to allow for exit but also among the community, who themselves are suffering from the threat of terrorism, to expand their understanding of what and who drives the violence. All must cultivate some level of empathy, and some space for forgiveness, for those vulnerable to becoming involved.

These factors suggest a need for integrating more innovative methodologies into CVE capacity-building and training programs that promote a nuanced appreciation for the complexities of why an individual might become engaged in violent extremism. Radicalization is still a useful term in helping explain motivations, as long it is carefully unpacked, contextually relevant and not mired in outdated and irrelevant assumptions about causality. CVE practitioners should explore rigorously the varied and multifaceted reasons about why youth become involved in violent extremism and help others move away from simplistic causal explanations for terrorism. Understanding and humanizing those at risk creates the space and willingness needed for effective approaches to preventing youth from becoming the next generation of terrorists.

Notes

1. John Horgan, "Discussion Point: The End of Radicalization," September 28, 2012, www.start.umd.edu/news/discussion-point-end-radicalization. See also Peter Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 2013).

2. *The Daily Nation*, May 6, 2014, p. 12.

3. "Cracking Down on Nairobi Somalis," Aljazeera.com, April 22, 2014, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/04/cracking-down-nairobi-somalis-201442012628685801.html.