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Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism

Cohort 2, Workshop 2

Gendering the Fight Against All Extremisms:

Creating Active Agents for Sustainable Change and Community Resilience

September 2018

Executive Summary

The Carter Center organized a workshop on Sept. 7–9, 2018, in Switzerland, the second in a series of four workshops designed to build capacity among a second cohort of participants, all of whom are on the front lines of preventing violent extremism, including the rising tide of Islamophobia. Workshop participants came from Morocco, Tunisia, France, Belgium, and the United States. They included 23 religious leaders, social workers, activists, teachers, and journalists with expertise in violent extremism, returned foreign fighters, human rights, women in peacebuilding, and media strategies. The sense of community that was seeded in the first workshop continued to grow. Participants are working to develop their own context-specific PVE initiatives, and networks of collaboration within and beyond individual countries are beginning to form. The Center’s network of PVE practitioners will be prepared to build resilience and effect lasting change in their communities.

In both presentations and discussions, participants were exposed to gender-conscious approaches to their work on prevention and rehabilitation, as well as practical tool-kits for maximizing media exposure. Participants engaged in group exercises at the macro and micro levels in sessions that emphasized the complexity of policymaking and navigating traditional and new media. The workshop engaged participants in project development and marked a transition from vision to effective implementation.

Role of Toxic Masculinity in Violent Extremism

Looking at PVE through the lens of gender is necessary for transformative and sustainable peace. Violent extremist groups differ in ideology and operations – but almost all seek to recruit disillusioned young men. Thinking about PVE in the context of gender often excludes discussion of the connection between masculinity and violent extremism. Discussions of gender in preventing violent extremism have narrowly focused on women without looking at the role of men. Women are regarded as either victims or perpetrators. Examining violent extremism and its prevention is incomplete without investigating how masculinity is understood and enacted amongst these groups.

Violent extremist propaganda, across political and religious spectrums, often equate masculinity with violence, control, and aggression. Workshop experts Houda Abadi, an associate director at The Carter Center, and Arno Michaelis, a former white supremacist and current peace educator, began the workshop by deconstructing toxic masculinity and the role it plays in violent extremism. Abadi introduced the session by explaining that if we don't consider the gendered aspects of violent extremism, we will fail to understand it. And if we fail to understand violent extremism, we cannot prevent it. Policies and analysis to counter violent extremism therefore must incorporate gender analysis in order to identify factors that make men vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups.

Abadi explained that men who subscribe to these ideologies feel betrayed and alienated, and seek to return to a perceived glorified past. Joining an extremist movement is offered as a way to take back what they feel was taken from them, and to defeat shame by reclaiming some idealized notion of manhood. Abadi explained that toxic masculinity serves five main functions for extremist groups:

- understanding grievances
- searching for honor and dignity
- reclaiming manhood
- building identification
- recruiting vulnerable men

Michaelis reinforced these points by describing his personal involvement in a neo-Nazi group, saying that proving one's masculinity plays a central role in recruitment and status maintenance. Therefore, challenging violent extremism must begin with engaging young men as men. Michaelis stressed the notion of gentle power. The people who most influenced him to leave white supremacy groups were the ones who refused to play by his rules. Even though he provoked hostility and wanted people to hate him, they responded with kindness and compassion. Michaelis said there is a need to define and promote healthy masculinity in the fight against violent extremism.

One participant, a religious leader from Tunisia, noted how pervasive toxic masculinity is in the broader culture and how embedded patriarchy is in interpretation and instrumentalization of religious texts. Participants were split, however, on the utility of feminism as counter to toxic masculinity. Some saw it as an effective counterweight, noting that, in the words of a human rights activist from Morocco, “in order for women to fight extremism, they must have resources, like education, that give them the tools to work on these issues. This must be fundamental and proves the importance of feminist organizations that focus on women’s rights.” But another participant, a female religious leader from Morocco, said, “When we fight extremism, we need more humanism than feminism.”

The discussion of toxic masculinity was followed by a presentation on Daesh recruitment of women. Abadi opened this session by asking participants to reflect on why a misogynistic terrorist organization such as Daesh had success in recruiting young women. Abadi challenged the media portrayal of women in Daesh as “jihadi brides” and brainwashed victims, noting that women, as well as men, are susceptible to Daesh’s rational and emotional appeals. Abadi illustrated how Daesh also speaks directly to women in their propaganda by evoking gender-specific grievances such as marginalization and economic and political disempowerment. Women play a variety of roles in the organization beyond those of wife and mother, serving as translators, recruiters, propagandists, law enforcers, fundraisers, and even combatants. Abadi argued that meaningful PVE interventions must engage women as frontline decision-makers.

After an in-depth analysis of the role of women in Daesh, Mossarat Qadem, cofounder of the PAIMAN Alumni Trust, reflected on the role of women in prevention. She noted that women play a variety of roles in which they can counter the growth of extremism; women are, of course, mothers and wives, but also teachers, policewomen, activists, and policymakers. Qadem argued that where the state provides space for overt PVE work, women can work under this umbrella. However, she acknowledged that even with the passing of U.N. Resolution 1325, “women are still not at the table,” and their “concerns are often sidelined as merely women’s issues.”

Multiple participants noted that the proposition of working with state security services is a contentious one and highly dependent on context. Some said they refuse to engage with security institutions in their work. Threading community-based PVE initiatives between the demands of the security state and the trust of communities is likely to remain problematic for the foreseeable future.

The Returned and the Un-Returned: Legal and Community Approaches to Reintegration

Over the last year, Daesh lost vast territories in Iraq and Syria. Nadim Houry, director of the Terrorism and Counterterrorism Program at Human Rights Watch, explained that this has created

an untenable moral and legal situation – hundreds of foreign terrorist fighters and their wives and children have been detained in Kurdish-controlled Syria or by the Iraqi government. Very few have been repatriated to their home countries, as those countries lack the political will to repatriate them. Where reintegration programs exist, they are untested. Processes of disengagement and deradicalization remain poorly understood. Houry stated that the problem of returnees is “not a future problem, but a present one.” In addition to the hundreds of unreturned fighters and their families held in Iraq and Syria, Houry noted that France has imprisoned approximately 20 returned foreign fighters who are slated for release in 2018-19, but has no rehabilitation programming in place. Other countries are facing similar situations, and the international community and its legal institutions are at a loss for dealing with this pressing issue.

Children brought to, or born in, Daesh territory present a particularly urgent moral and legal dilemma for the international community. According to Abadi, Daesh recruited local and foreign children to engender, validate, and solidify an intergenerational culture of violence and religious extremism. Children are used extensively in Daesh’s propaganda, both in a bid for legitimacy as a state, and as victims and perpetrators of graphic violence. Daesh uses opportunities to mobilize support and prey on children in schools, mosques, town squares, and markets. To recruit foreign children, Daesh offers adventure, a sense of purpose, and the image of a pristine Muslim society. Children play a variety of roles in Daesh’s organization and are systematically desensitized to violence from an early age; military themes are incorporated into early education, followed by military training and the witnessing of public executions. Of the roughly 7,000 who have returned, almost 17 percent – or some 1,200 – are children¹. Such children are in a precarious legal position. They are increasingly viewed as a security threat by their states of origin and refused entry. Often, for those born in the “Caliphate,” parentage is unknown or unprovable, and the lack of rehabilitation programming is acute.

To gain greater insight into the challenges and complexity of dealing with returnees, Abadi led a simulated case study that broke participants into teams, each with a prescribed role, to develop policy recommendations on whether the women and children in Daesh territory should be repatriated. Participants noted how difficult it was to balance security and humanitarian concerns and gained a greater appreciation for the different perspectives as they assumed a role they may not typically play. One participant, a religious leader from the United States, pointed out how unprepared countries are for this situation and “how poor the institutions are in the United States for rehabilitating those hundreds of thousands already serving time for non-terrorism related crimes.” Another participant, a female religious activist from North Africa, summed it up best

¹ Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State,” *International Center for the Study of Radicalization*, July 2018, page 3. Last accessed September 14, 2018: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

when she said that “the concerns of civil society are different from the interests of the government. We need to find a way to bridge these interests.”

To illustrate some successful rehabilitation programs, Mossarat Qadem shared with participants the PAIMAN rehabilitation program in Pakistan. She noted that PAIMAN uses a community-led peace model. It is done outside of prison, is voluntary, and is heavily personalized and individualized. Qadem emphasized the importance of a holistic approach to reintegration that includes programs at the individual, family, and community levels. Programs can be designed to provide returnees with access to education, life skills, employment, and psychosocial support. Reintegration efforts also must focus on addressing cultural and ethical norms alongside religion, and must ultimately address economic livelihood. Qadem said PAIMAN has rehabilitated over 1,400 former Taliban fighters to date.

Participants celebrated PAIMAN’s work but worried about the applicability of the PAIMAN model to their own contexts. Most worried that working with security services is not desirable or possible in their own contexts and expressed concern about programs that focus on deradicalization and the way deradicalization intersects with Islamophobia in the discourse and public policy of Western states.

Media Advocacy and Effective Storytelling

A central tenet of the Carter Center’s PVE program has been a commitment to building the capacity of Muslim religious and community leaders to populate the online space and harness the power of the media to empower, raise awareness and counter hate. This workshop brought Khalid Tritki, a senior journalist and media expert from Morocco, to train workshop participants on strategies for launching successful and persuasive media messages, requirements for successful interviews, and best practices for writing op-eds. Tritki focused his interventions on teaching participants to continually refine their ideas and present compelling and concrete narratives about their work to the media in interviews and through press releases. Many participants were initially skeptical of engaging with the media; most expressed concern about the media tendency to sensationalize, and some reported past negative experiences with the media. Tritki cautioned that the media’s job is to be skeptical and question their projects and that, yes, the media does prefer the new, the unique, and the sensational. But getting media play is ultimately about telling a story, and Tritki’s interventions focused on story development. Participants worked in groups to identify a problem in their community and a proposed project or program to solve that problem and then presented that problem and solution as a story for feedback from Tritki. The groups were pressed to refine their stories, to make them more vivid, relevant, and concrete.

On the last day, participants were grouped by country and tasked with developing a project that responds to their local needs. A representative from each group presented the project in a mock interview with Tritki. The interviews were filmed and projected for the entire workshop to view and critique. With the help of Tritki, participants could honestly critique their own work and draw out some tools and principles for effective interviewing. The recommendations included the following: 1) be specific and concrete in the description of a project; 2) find a vivid example or anecdote on which to hang an explanation; 3) prepare, and know well, the material for presentation; 4) be poised and confident; 5) use the language of a target audience. These interactive feedback sessions pushed participants to refine their ideas and presentations. While it was perhaps the most tense of all the sessions, participants rated it as very useful and much needed.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The Carter Center's second workshop with PVE practitioners built on the success of the first by further inculcating the skills and knowledge required for participants to design and build effective programming in their own communities. The various sessions generated authentic discussion and honest exchanges, and helped identify potential challenges for effective PVE work, including the conflicting agendas of security-focused and community-based PVE programming. Future workshops will include sessions on negotiation and mediation, lobbying and advocacy, and program design and evaluation, as well as continued media training. Participants will continue to evolve their project ideas; as they work toward implementation, they will benefit from continued interactive workshops with experts and peers. The knowledge and skills they gain in these workshops, as well as the networks of collaboration developed, will augment the reach and effectiveness of their own projects.

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