



the Hollings Center  
for international dialogue

## Dialogue Snapshot *Workable Solutions to Radicalization* October 2016

Numerous studies and efforts seek to understand the conditions in which Da'esh ideology and message spreads, in other words the “root causes” of extremism. However, there is room for more dialogue regarding how communities, civil society, and state apparatuses deal with these root causes. Looking at community-based, local solutions to radicalization as well as civil society counter-extremism initiatives through a comparative perspective will yield a list of best practices that can inform future efforts and policy. To this end, the Hollings Center and the Al Hayat Center brought together sociologists, anthropologists, community workers, opinion leaders, and state officials engaged in counter-extremism efforts to discuss methods, projects, and approaches that have worked, and those that have not been as effective. The organizers hope that this effort builds on other countering violent extremism (CVE) initiatives by focusing on solutions, fosters further dialogue among different governmental and nongovernmental actors, and increases the number of stakeholders in CVE efforts.



Sidi Moumen Cultural Center Feb 24th  
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The main takeaways from the three-day dialogue were:

- **The international community has not been able to develop a working definition of violent extremism.** Political violence is a broad concept, and civil society will need to work within local contexts and local definitions. This means that sometimes legitimate political dissent is legally categorized as extremism by some countries. To the extent that states use counterterrorism as excuse to close the political space to certain groups, CVE efforts will be futile.
- **Radicalization is highly contextualized**, therefore there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to counter-radicalization. Even though best practices are inspiring, they rarely can be applied outside of the context in which they were developed.
- **De-securitizing the language around counter-radicalization is a double-edged sword.** Issues that have hard security consequences are likely to attract more resources and attention. However, responding to radicalization through implementing hard security measures without paying attention to socio-economic “push factors” has backfired in many instances.
- **The million-dollar question in counter-radicalization programs is monitoring and evaluation.** It’s difficult to measure the effectiveness of a program that is meant to deter someone from doing something. Large scale M&E is difficult, whereas collecting stories from within local communities on how certain interventions worked has resulted in better data and provided good inspirational stories.
- **If there is a silver bullet, it’s education; but it will take twenty years to reach its target.** Everybody in the MENA thinks education reform is needed in their respective countries, but nobody knows

where to begin. Redefining the mission of the school, teaching soft skills for better life preparation, anchoring values such as tolerance and peace, pushing for liberal arts education, revising curricula, and improving the quality of educators are among the many changes needed.

### **De-securitizing counter-radicalization**

Increasing violence and terrorism are clearly threats, but stopping them requires looking at the problem through different lenses rather than just a hard security lens. Securitization means the recasting of social, political, and economic problems as existential threats; and de-securitization is reversing that process and seeing these issues in their individual contexts. Securitization is a double-edged sword; while it might draw attention and resources to a problem, raising things to the hard security level can also mean that solutions account less for the human factor and more for the well-being of the state. Many participants noted that state-centric security approaches have violated fundamental rights of people, increasing marginalization and thus violent extremism. So how can civil society build what is called a “human-security” framework? Participants discussed entry points into the realm of CVE in countries where there is extreme polarization, or where the government is not open to working with civil society. A participant stated that sometimes it is necessary to present CVE work as fundamentally a security issue to get the ear of the government, to get funding and resources.

For many countries, radicalization was elevated as a security issue as a result of specific incidents against their citizens, such as the execution of Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh by Da'esh in 2015. A participant complained about the narrow-sightedness of security-related escalations and said, “Only recently there is more attention on things like education. We’re starting to ask, how come our youth lack civic values?”

The slipperiness of definitions around extremism also makes it hard to reach the people who are the most vulnerable. On the local level, some connect extremism to Islam, and others relate it to tribal traditions. Governments might call different groups extremist in order to silence opposition – a participant noted that in East Africa states are coming up with legislation that is equating extremism with political dissent. A participant pointed to the SAFIRE<sup>1</sup> working definition of radicalization as a multi-variable non-linear process that can lead anyone through a complex process to use violence. Participants then asked, how do we draw the line between radicalization and *violent* radicalization? When can one decide that radical convictions are about to turn into violent actions? As a participant noted, this also has repercussions about the limits of free speech. When does free speech become incitement to terrorism, and how does law draw that line? A European participant stated that “from a societal point of view, a building block of European culture is the ability to voice opinions, however offensive they may be, as long as one does it in good spirit. This new reality is forcing Europeans to be more careful about offending religious identity.”

Another question central to this discussion was about the mechanisms used by law enforcement and other local authorities that are different than intelligence-gathering or stricter policing; mechanisms that are more human-security oriented. There are a few examples: In the Netherlands, community police officers engage with families in their neighborhoods to be able to understand whether kids of certain families are

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<sup>1</sup> Scientific Approach to Finding Indicators of & Responses to Radicalization (SAFIRE) is an EU Seventh Framework Program initiative that collects empirical data to develop a non-linear model of radicalization process. <http://www.safire-project-results.eu/project.html>

at risk of falling prey to terrorist networks. According to a participant, this was at first difficult, because they were seen as intelligence gatherers. Now they started working with welfare organizations at the local level who have youth workers and thus know what is going on. These organizations have more credibility within the community. Trust is key. Another participant added that the Dutch also have some good practices in cooperation with municipalities and schools to engage youth. She added, “You have to work with them until the end before using security measures.” Not all human-security focused efforts were rated positively by participants. A participant criticized the Channel Process in the UK for not adequately involving Muslim communities. The participant added that solely consulting community leaders does not yield an inclusive process that invites participation from the community.

### Push- and Pull-Factors

*“Why can extremists attract our youth and we can’t? What is it that attracts them? Is it violence? If so, then we have a problem.”*

A previous meeting of experts convened by the Center on countering violent extremism [concluded](#) that it is not accurate to regard terrorist groups as a by-product of religion, but rather a creation of a particular set of circumstances and policies. Terrorism, therefore, cannot be fought by antagonizing religion. Religion is only *one* tool used to recruit people into violent methods in their pursuit of political or existential goals. Dissuading people from extreme ideas that will potentially lead

to violence (i.e. counter-radicalization) necessitates addressing these so-called push- and pull-factors.

It is difficult to generalize the push factors, but the largest numbers of foreign fighters are coming from Tunisia where there is a considerable population of well-educated but unemployed people. The mismatch between what people envision for themselves and the actual opportunities they have is key to understanding this frustration. Also, there is a need to better understand what makes the idea of fighting in a foreign land appear to be a viable option. A participant quoted a study of two low-income neighborhoods in Tunisia that reveals that the promise of material gains, not religious ideology, was responsible for radicalization. Some of the people holding these radical views were selling lingerie or alcohol.

Participants agreed that this should not lead to the conclusion that ideology does not play a role, noting that Saudi foreign fighters compose the second largest group of fighters after Tunisians. Other key pull-factors include community linkages and family ties. A participant pointed out that when looking at how terrorists radicalize in Turkey, actual physical socialization rather than online recruitment is key. Friends, brothers, or cousins are more susceptible to being radicalized if they have a family member who has gone abroad to fight.

Deep divisions within a society that marginalize some groups is another factor. The highest number of European foreign fighters per capita comes from Valle, Brussels - a town where there are deep divisions between immigrant and non-immigrant communities. Finally, the dominant international policy narrative and its perceived injustice is another push

*“If we don’t address the issues that are causing the people to feel undignified, we’ll be turning around in circles.”*

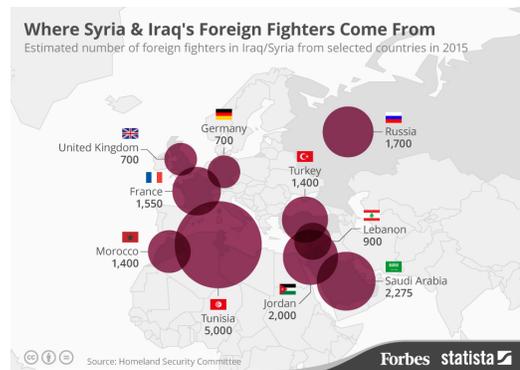
factor. A participant reported that people she spoke with in Iraq and Syria say they joined terrorist groups because they provided the only option of resistance against dictators and unjust Western policies.

The issue of integration and discrimination of immigrant communities in Europe came up in this light. While research and evidence show that systematic discrimination occurs in the job market, in education, and other sectors in Europe, a participant said that especially Muslim women in the Netherlands are eager to break the cycle of victimization. They seize and appreciate opportunities like cheap higher education, and have a heightened sense of citizenship. Another participant contrasted this with the immigrant youth in France and said that the whole education system and the media tend to depict them as social victims, which is unproductive. He added, "It is not the best way to like your country if every day you are told you are a social victim." On the left, people advocate putting more funding into social programs because they see this as a social issue. On the right, the argument is that failure of integration stems from the Muslim culture.

### Political Landscapes

The Arab Spring brought with it high expectations of increased political participation and better socio-economic opportunities. Several years on, these expectations have not been met and post-Arab Spring failed states are becoming the new normal. In many of these countries, economies have been contracting and unemployment is rising, fueling a sense of injustice and frustration. Although there was no consensus among the dialogue participants regarding the correlation between socio-political stagnation, economic bottlenecks, and increasing radicalization, most agreed that in specific cases, these were closely linked.

Tunisia, the origin country of the largest number of foreign fighters in Syria, has 15% unemployment overall and 31% unemployment among university graduates. The dissatisfaction with the current economic and political climate has pitted seemingly attractive jihadist discourse against seemingly unattractive leadership discourse. A participant said, "Political parties became back-stage political machinations, losing their role in the opposition, while major issues remained unaddressed." According to this participant, youth programs are created by people who lack legitimacy and trust from the youth, who then seek answers in alternative spaces such as mosques. Some of these have become major dissemination centers for recruitment and political activity. The participant also claimed that of the 17 thousand non-governmental organizations in Tunisia, almost a fifth operated under a cover of religious service provision, but in reality, worked as facilitators for arms smuggling and fighter recruitment.



Violent groups (on the left, right, ethnic nationalist, etc.) all feed off of the lack of good education, lack of good employment, and a lack of purpose among the youth. The antidote offered in the case of Tunisia, but that could apply across the board, was a multi-dimensional approach integrating dialogue. Such dialogues could occur with Salafi groups as well as with groups vulnerable to radicalization. Other steps need to be taken in the field of education, with more weight given to humanities and liberal arts; and in developing

***“We have come to terms with Islamism and accepted Islamists in the government. Now it’s time to understand the Salafists and their cause, and to deal with them like all other parts of the political landscape.”***

better counter-information systems, using tools and techniques such as simulation and storytelling to provide information to youth outside the official information network.

Looking at some macro-level data on foreign fighters and through machine-learning, some researchers found a pattern that countries that debated the banning of headscarves in the five years before the start of the Syrian war were more likely to send foreign fighters to Syria. The countries that went further down that path – i.e. imposed some form of ban – had

the strongest predictor of whether there would be a large number of foreign fighters. Ironically, leaders who come forth in support of the headscarf ban use a rhetoric that is similar to Da’esh: that one cannot be religious and modern at the same time. Therefore, part of the solution is ensuring that the political process does not create legislation that impedes freedom.

### **Building Effective Counter-radicalization Programs**

The added value of this multi-disciplinary international dialogue in the CVE space was its in-depth discussion on the kinds of programs that work and can set models for other CVE initiatives. Participants agreed that because no two people will radicalize for the same reasons, no two countries, or even towns, will be similar in their vulnerability to extremist propaganda. Therefore, it is difficult to duplicate successful programs in different settings. It is, however, possible to list the *sine qua nons* of successful counter-radicalization programs:

- *Working with local administrations / municipalities:* An example is the European Strong Cities Network where national authority could be circumvented to talk about counter-radicalization from a non-security standpoint.
- *Neighborhood projects:* Working on hyper-local levels allows building stronger relationships and trust.
- *Women:* Their role as mothers and therefore influencers of the young generation is undeniable, but the more successful and long-term impact programs are those that view women as agents of change. Going beyond simple training and education programs and empowering women as political change-makers (such as encouraging their political participation) has proved effective.
- *Youth:* Seeing youth not only as the target audience but as architects of these programs – both at local and national levels – is key to establishing better communication lines into their world.
- *Inclusion:* Exclusion is a major factor pushing people into the arms of violent groups. To get them out of this trap, civil society needs to give the voiceless a voice and offer them opportunities. Some examples of these are civic education programs in which tolerance, acceptance, citizen rights, and duties are taught as values.
- *Critical thinking skills:* Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is more effective to teach someone to debate outside the religious framework in order for them to be able to refute extremist ideas. CVE initiatives should not preoccupy themselves with “right” or “wrong” interpretations of religion, but rather teaching people critical thinking and debating skills.

The big-picture discussion focused on the real effectiveness of these micro-level projects. A participant expressed her fury about the hypocrisy in creating CVE programs without creating societies with political freedom. This participant said, “Some of the regimes in the Middle East are using CVE as soft counter-terrorism and are effectively using it as a tool to entrench their oppressive regimes. We need to tell Western governments or whoever has the ear of these regimes to raise issues of democratic opening. How can civil society make a difference in these countries when it’s so closely surveilled that it is weak for all intents and purposes, or its “governmentized”? Western governments need to know that any financial support they provide will be futile if NGOs cannot operate in a freer environment.” Another participant objected that despite restrictions, civil society boomed in the 1990s in the Middle East and North Africa: “We are fighting, we are not weak, and we are aware of the strings attached to outside funding.”

*“There can be no peace without justice. Smaller expressions of freedom are band-aids over a cut. The larger picture will not change unless governments open up political space.”*

### **Prevention and Messaging**

In addition to civil society, government agencies around the globe have initiated CVE programs with the aim of preventing radicalization. A participant gave a comprehensive exposé on these programs in the US, and criticized them on four points. The participant stated that these programs securitize Muslim communities so that the primary way the U.S. government engages with these communities is through a national security lens. Second, there is no genuine interest in the community’s issues as citizens. What this means in practice is that the government is interested in the “what can you do for us to help us prevent terrorism in the US particularly?” It does not lead to meaningful changes in either domestic policy, or foreign policy, which means actions such as drone strikes, or solidarity with authoritarian regimes, continue as usual. Third, the programs do not work and they are a waste of government resources, because those who are caught trying to go abroad to fight are radicalized out of the community’s control. In most cases, even the parents are unaware. The FBI and Department of Homeland Security may have better information on these people. So, going to “community elders” might be a waste of time. The other issue is if these community leaders are seen taking money for programs from Homeland Security, they will lose credibility. The vast majority of Muslim Americans came after 1965, meaning they ran from dictatorships and thus have little or no trust in the police or the government.

Finally, to the extent there is a real problem of young Muslim males seeking to join a terrorist group abroad (which, contrary to perception, is a small number around 200-300), social service agencies (not police or the Homeland Security or Justice Departments) should be engaging with these communities. Participants noted the futility of trying to train the FBI or the police to be social service oriented. The current methodology of establishing points of contact in the community to gain access and information may do more harm than good. Such methods reinforce anti-government stigma, regardless of how benign some of these efforts may be. The participant added, “Let them do what they were meant to do: surveil, investigate, and prosecute. And train the community to know their rights.” Funding needs to go to education, health, and social services. The participant recommended that government agencies work with social agencies that understand long-term, development-based prevention methods, linked to the new immigrant experience, especially those from low income groups.

Participants discussed the dichotomy of prevention versus engagement through the example of policing models in the United States in the 1990s. The New York City “broken windows” model supported a prevention strategy that focused on enforcement for small crimes so that more serious crimes could be stopped. In contrast, the so-called Boston “miracle” was a community policing strategy with direct engagement with the community to better understand community trends. Both systems had proponents and both systems became sidetracked after 9/11. The question is, how much engagement is the right level of engagement, and where is the line between a police state and a state that has effective policing? For some participants, this went back to the question of whether there are identifiable signs that someone might turn violent. What one person finds absolutely unacceptable might be a standard practice in the eyes of another. And if in the process of trying to spread a culture of peace and tolerance, civil society is seen as intolerant towards more puritan forms of Islam, that can fan the flames of terrorists using the argument of islamophobia to recruit.

Other discussions included what social tools to use to prevent the appeal of violent extremist groups. Based on one participant’s research in Jordan, 46% of parents say they will not allow their children to speak about radicalization in school / university. 50% of the children in surveyed homes said they speak about radicalization at home. Prevention requires starting from within the family. Prevention also requires a safe channel for reporting potentially dangerous cases of radicalization, which either does not exist or is not known to the community. A participant raised the concern that in case someone’s child is on the verge of joining a terrorist group, intervention means involving law-enforcement, which may result in incarceration. The alternative, allowing one’s child to go abroad after this extremist cause, might result in them being in harm’s way. Therefore, equally important is to be able to provide alternatives for people who sympathize with the situation in Iraq and Syria – that is, providing safe channels of showing their support, expressing their solidarity, or expressing opposition to their country’s policies.

Prevention through messaging was another dimension of the discussion. The question of using former radicals or terrorists came up in this context. An American participant noted the case of three girls en route to join Da’esh, who were caught but not prosecuted so that they could be messengers, talking to the communities about how they were recruited. Other messaging can be done through recognized ‘influencers’ in a community. Young people, seeking information and answers will lend an ear to those who they perceive as having religious authority or clout in the community. But when these people do not hold up other basic tenets of democracy and human rights – such as women’s rights – that is problematic. The sole aim cannot be to push one interpretation of religion over another – it needs to be more comprehensive, pushing messages that will contribute to social peace. The dilemma with preventive messaging, according to a participant, is that “when Western regimes that claim to be liberal engage in religious interpretations, and hunt for ‘moderate Muslims’, this creates credibility problems for those they call moderates. It’s also illegal because it violates state-religion separation.” Many have argued that in the Turkish model of secularism, where the state is constitutionally secular, but with a directorate of religious affairs that centrally controls the Friday sermons, builds mosques and appoints Imams, the level of state control on religious messaging has prevented widespread radicalization. Others say that having the state advocate one brand of Islam (one interpretation of one sect) has alienated other sects.

A dimension of CVE that is highly focused on by civil society and governments alike is preventing the online spread of extremist messages inciting violence. This is a tricky area because the internet is not a space that

is governed by one single source. Also, all illegal content does not necessarily lead to radicalization. Governments' coping mechanism with terrorist propaganda or other violent content online has been to take down controversial websites or networking platforms. But those are not effective because for every one takedown, three new sites with similar content pop up. A participant emphasized that a public-private partnership approach is required for effective online prevention. There needs to be differentiation among the three levels of use of the internet for terrorism purposes: dark web, semi-public (password protected accounts where members communicate with each other), and public (Twitter, Facebook, etc.). NGOs do not have the financial or human resources to deal with these by themselves.

According to a participant who works with data on foreign fighters, the US has gotten better at online prevention. Dahesh's luck was that their rise coincided with the Snowden leaks, a time when the tech community was weary of hyper-reaching surveillance, so they were hesitant in cooperating with the government. This participant noted that the shooting in San Bernardino changed the landscape and brought back the importance of effective communications surveillance on the table. The participant also raised an interesting concern: in the counter-radicalization space, U.S. government contracts third parties to comb the internet to find voices advocating violent extremism (such as pro-Da'esh voices.) This information is then shared with law-enforcement and used in prosecution. The problem is that the algorithms used in this type of surveillance are proprietary and are not subject to public accountability, which means they might contain all sorts of bias. The participant suggested that these algorithms should be audited by a representative group of experts to eliminate as best possible any racial, religious, or other bias.

Finally, the use of conventional media in CVE messaging is another contentious matter. On the one hand, media lacks credibility because it is either censored or used as an arm of the government in many countries. On the other hand, radio, television, and print media are still the primary source of information in much of the MENA region. Civil society and the international community need to push for freedom of expression and to demonstrate that it would be in the interest of the governments to be able to spread alternative messages to those of violent extremist groups. Creating open spaces in the media to discuss religious issues as well as social, economic, and political grievances is important. The western media, on the other hand, needs to mainstream Muslims into all of its programming, and not go to them only when there is an extremism-related story.



the Hollings Center  
*for international dialogue*

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey. Its core programs take place in Istanbul—a city whose historic role as a crossroads makes it an ideal venue for multinational dialogue.

To learn more about the Hollings Center's mission, history and funding:

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