Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation

POLICY BRIEF
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Reorienting Cultural Production Policies: Ideas to Dissuade Youth from Joining Violent Extremist Groups

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Introduction

This policy brief responds to a growing interest among counterterrorism officials and experts in programs to counter violent extremist ideologies and in the search for new policies and approaches to dissuade youth from joining violent extremist groups. It delves into factors of social alienation and discrimination that increase identity-seeking and examines the salience and resonance of violent extremist groups' appeals to identity seekers. It concludes by exploring the potential role of cultural production policies as inoculation as well as diversion strategies and by offering some additional steps to effectively reorient cultural-sector policies and reforms to reduce youth vulnerability to violent extremist and terrorist group radicalization.

Defining the Problem

Counterterrorism experts have identified several root causes, i.e., social, cultural, economic, and other conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, that contribute to a population's vulnerability to violent extremist groups' radicalization and recruitment efforts. These conditions are not themselves precipitating factors; the linkage between root causes and proclivity toward violence is indirect. The probability of successful terrorist-group recruitment increases when these underlying conditions result in social instability that is amplified by motivational factors, such as group grievance, social norms that legitimate the use of violence, and terrorist group latitude to put mobilizing structures in place.[1] The argument in this brief centers on social alienation and discrimination as sources of vulnerability to violent extremist groups' identity appeals.[2] Perceptions of social alienation build slowly over time, in response to dynamics including urbanization, demographic change, progressive strictures on civil society, and narrowing opportunities for educational and economic advancement. Alienation, in turn, prompts identity seeking.

A correlation between identity seeking and terrorist activity can be documented through interviews with terrorist group recruits. For example, a 2010 study presented a "four seekers" typology of al-Qaida recruits, based on interviews with more than 2,000 foreign fighters.[3] Identity seekers—those who define themselves by the groups to which they belong, along with their role, their friends, and their social interactions—comprised the largest percentage of the combatants. Omar Sheikh, convicted kidnapper of Daniel Pearl, is a case in point. Sentiments that Omar shared with cell mate Peter Gee suggest an overriding need to belong and to be liked and reveal a frustrated search for a sense of belonging that neither London nor Lahore could satiate.[4]

The status quo response to countering violent extremism relies on one strategy or a combination of three basic strategies to address a number of "root causes."[5] The first strategy seeks to narrow the "hope gap" through

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structural remedies and development assistance. These measures reduce or remove disadvantages or horizontal inequalities in social and cultural status and ability to participate in politics and the economy.[6] Just as root causes or horizontal inequalities can prompt myriad forms of political mobilization, with oscillation between peaceful and violent protest, structural remedies yield multiple benefits related to human security and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Deterrence is a second strategy that is more exclusive to combating violent extremism, including deployment of law enforcement, intelligence, and sometimes military resources in response to known and anticipated threats, as well as public condemnation of violence, to shrink the space in which violent extremist groups operate. The third accepted strategy is often geared toward communication efforts to engage in the "battle of ideas," challenging and discrediting the ideologies espoused by violent extremist groups or exploiting disunity among movement leaders. Communication efforts can take many forms, including participation in ongoing, online conversations, as exemplified by the U.S. Department of State's Digital Outreach Team that engages actively and overtly with Arabic, Persian, and Urdu language Internet sites, including blogs and discussion fora.[7] Rather than address policy issues with prepackaged news releases and press guidance, the team relays an American perspective through a shared lens, such as poetry, and in discussion of shared interests, such as global sporting events.[8] The team's primary purposes are to explain U.S. foreign policy, correct misinformation, and encourage consideration of new and alternative ideas as opportunities arise in the online conversation.

As counterterrorism tools, structural reforms, deterrence, and strategic communication largely overlook loss of identity and alienation as factors that may increase the pool of terrorist group recruits.[9] Success in the "battle of ideas" is sender focused, measured by the degree of persuasiveness of extremist group propaganda. How violent extremist groups frame their audience and the call to action is a primary focus of inquiry. For example, we know that identity-based movements use frames such as "righting injustice" to mobilize supporters, assigning them roles in the narrative.[10] This communication paradigm gives insufficient attention to developing an evidence base on how youth and others targeted accept or reject these frames.

Fresh research is needed on specific narrative techniques. One example is the use, resonance, and revision of projective, "quest" narratives, which violent extremist groups have subverted to their own ends by valorizing self-sacrifice and inciting individuals to take real-world action to right historic wrongs, ward off chaos, and eliminate an existential threat.[11] Potential danger of the projective narrative can be found in *The Turner Diaries*, a chief influence on Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.[12] *The Turner Diaries* is a fictional work that has galvanized the Christian Identity movement in the United States, promoting a particular brand of Reconstruction Theology to justify violence in defense against a repressive, secular government and the eventual establishment of a Christian theocratic state.[13]

The narrative feeds into movement members' mythic worldview that begins with identity seeking.[14] Movement members believe that their identity—their very existence—is denied. They find a scapegoat and explanation for their plight in the writings of movement leaders such as William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries*; Robert Jay Mathews, a protégé of Pierce and founder of The Order, a real-world organization based on Pierce's fictional template whose members waged a campaign of

terrorism against the "system" by targeting state and other prominent institutions;[15] and David Lane, a member of The Order, convicted as an accomplice in the murder of Denver radio personality Alan Berg, as well as on charges of racketeering and conspiracy, who called his supporters to "secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."[16] *The Turner Diaries* and similar tomes present the signs of a sacralized struggle taking place in the here and now. When members commit acts of violence against the group's named enemies, they enact their role in this mythic struggle and thereby affirm their legacy.

The elements and ends of a projective narrative are not deterministic. The very quality of open-endedness of projective narratives presents individuals with choices on what roles to adopt for themselves and others and how to complete the narrative. Cultural policies that place a premium on creativity and critique can prove instrumental in reducing the convincingness of radicalizing appeals. Cultural literacy and creativity programs are among the tools available to provide guidance in interpreting and explaining historical events, humanizing problems and conditions, celebrating the ordinary hero, and expressing confidence that change can be achieved through ordinary, nonviolent means.

Belongingness and group identity are closely related to goal achievement, making young people especially vulnerable to the loss of identity caused by social upheaval; the absence of leadership and opportunity spurs contemplation of one's self worth and place within a larger community.[17] Diasporic and second-generation youth are doubly challenged, forced by circumstance to revise personal narratives to express cultural and ethnic identity in a way that is acceptable to their host communities. Individuals seek membership in groups that are well regarded and yet not entirely conformist; distinctiveness creates the boundaries between "us" and "them" and thereby engenders group intimacy and pride and reduces identity-seeking behaviors.[18]

Violent extremist groups use messaging strategies, information and communication technologies (ICT), and social networks to shepherd individuals through an interactive, multistep process ending with violence as the only available option to remedy social injustice and ensure group survival. Visualize a staircase: As one climbs higher, the group becomes more exclusive and single-minded, with greater proclivity to engage in violence. At the top of the staircase, committing a violent act cements one's identity, proves one's loyalty, and imbues specialness.[19] This process takes place within a collective of individuals with a shared sense of outrage, belief, and experience; individuals further along the path to violence function as Sherpas for those in the earlier stages of inquiry and exploration.[20]

As the staircase metaphor implies, radicalization is a process with multiple decision-points at which the individual steps back, plateaus, or continues to the next level. At each decision point, the number of windows and doors open or blocked to the individual will determine whether the individual takes the next step.[21] Offering multiple doors and windows for individuals to reduce their sense of alienation, to avoid a forced choice in how an individual defines his or her identity, remains an essential policy goal toward reducing the number of individuals who can be persuaded to commit acts of violence.

ICT, sometimes referred to as "new media," has positive and negative attributes for identity seekers and the violent extremist groups attempting to exploit them. The dynamic that plays out involves information-pull by identity seekers and information push by violent extremist and terrorist groups that monitor individuals who browse their websites.[22] If a violent extremist or terrorist group obtains the

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information seeker's Internet Protocol and e-mail addresses, the group can push information to the individual target, including messages, invitations, web links, and YouTube videos sent through web-enabled cell phones and other mobile devices. Information-push techniques channel information-seeking behaviors and build enthusiasm, creating tunnel vision, on the part of the message recipient.

Moreover, web-based communication is insufficient to spur an individual to join and follow through with a terrorist group attack. Personal contact and social interaction are necessary to the oxygenation process, during which face-to-face communication reinforces interpretations of experience and events, renders the group identity tangible and memorable, and solidifies individuals' commitments to take action.[23] The role of web-based communication becomes more complex, however, when considering the phenomenon of the "lone wolf" terrorist, such as Faisal Shahzad, whose May 2010 attempt to detonate a car bomb in New York City's Times Square was disrupted by vigilant bystanders and technical deficiencies. The Web exposed Shahzad to radicalizing messages, and he relied on websites for operational planning, communicating with Pakistan-based militants exclusively online.[24]

Proposing a Solution

The foregoing section addressed identity seeking as a precipitating factor that violent extremist and terrorist groups can exploit, presented anecdotal evidence that identity-seeking behavior is a motivational factor for committing acts of violence, and highlighted associated knowledge gaps and policy goals. This section offers a framework for cultural policies that can reduce identity seekers' vulnerability to violent extremist groups' appeals. An individual's identity has stable and dynamic elements. Dynamic elements are influenced by historical memory, language, and culture, which in turn are the rhetorical resources necessary for exercising one's voice and negotiating social relationships, and drive the creative enterprise.

Multilateral efforts in cultural production policies can assist in combating violent extremism, but currently mirror the triad of structural reform, deterrence, and "battle of ideas" strategies. Representative of structural reform initiatives, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Cultural Sector has announced a technical assistance program to help developing countries strengthen systems of governance for culture, thereby reinforcing the role of culture as a path toward sustainable development and poverty reduction. UNESCO's Creative Cities Network and the European Union's Capitals of Culture likewise address structural reforms, promoting the social, economic, and cultural development of cities. The metrics selected to determine program success reinforce the structural reform approach. For example, a before-and-after case study of Liverpool's 2008 Capital of Culture designation focused on the growth of creative industries, number of enterprises and jobs created, improved public perceptions of Liverpool, improved morale of creative industry employees, and optimism for long-term positive impacts.[25]

Illustrating an effort at deterrence, the UN Alliance of Civilizations promotes cross-cultural understanding and seeks to reduce public acceptance of violence as a means to address community grievance. Member states and organizations such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference jointly design and implement programs regionally and nationally. Key thrusts for action programs include dialogue and outreach programs that promote tolerance and respect across cultures;

partnerships with civil society actors, including private sector organizations, to promote intercultural understanding and cooperation in the workplace; and development of tool kits for educators, media, and citizen journalists to increase intercultural competence and counteract hate speech, racism, and cultural and religious stereotypes.

Turning to the "battle of ideas," the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) conducts education and information campaigns, sponsors recognition prizes, and implements related programs to increase public understanding of Islamic civilization and contemporary communities. ISESCO engages in cross-cultural dialogue with a specific point of view, communicating values of justice and peace and principles of freedom and human rights in accordance with its members' defined Islamic civilizational perspective. Answering others' campaigns against Islam and Muslims remains a stated strategic objective of the organization. Looking outside this defensive and competitive frame, ISESCO initiatives expose Muslim identity seekers to an affirmative vision of the Islamic community's contribution to achieving development, progress, security, and prosperity.

These multilateral initiatives present cultural-sector platforms to reduce and overcome social alienation and discrimination. More attention can be paid to the design of cultural-sector initiatives that intercede on behalf of identity seekers, in order to reduce their vulnerability to violent extremist and terrorist group radicalizing messages. Two facets of cultural production can guide planning and implementation. A quantitative metric is the number of youth who actively participate in creative endeavors and cultural production. A qualitative metric is innovation that youth inject into cultural production, aided by society's acceptance of cultural hybridity—the fusion of distinct forms, styles, traditions, and cultural identities—expressed in art, dance, music, theatre, literature, and other media.[26] Cultural hybridity is a coping tool for members of minority communities, to maintain ethnic and cultural identifications that fit with the majority community's tastes and traditions. Cultural hybridity has an added benefit of generating a cross-cultural vocabulary that allows individuals to move between and among social groups with ease, making the boundaries between "us" and "them" soft and permeable.

Keeping these metrics in mind, the following steps can effectively reorient cultural-sector policies and reforms to reduce identity seekers' vulnerability to violent extremist and terrorist group radicalization.

- Integrate incentives for creative industries with urban planning to ensure that cities provide a welcoming environment for diasporic and migratory youth, including circular migration within national borders. Assess the level of participation and quality of youths' cultural expressions within a given urban center as factors in youths' acceptance or rejection of violent extremist groups' appeals.

- Fund ethnographic and allied research to assess whether and how creative cities and capitals of culture attract and provide a safety net for identity seekers. Validate assumptions regarding identity seekers' vulnerability to and resilience against violent extremist group appeals.

- Supplement the evidence base for strategic communication with a research agenda to better understand how youth co-construct narratives, constitute their identity, and participate in the framing process.

- Facilitate the formation of public-private partnerships to attract and apprentice youth in creative industries, extending the

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promise of community recognition and commercial success while imparting skills that youth can transfer to other educational and employment opportunities.

- Expand educators' and journalists' tool kits to include cross-cultural literacy, constructive critique, and incentives to integrate cultural resources and traditions in new, hybrid forms. In partnership with ministries of education and culture, develop new curricula and guided learning tools to help youth frame their own narrative histories and experiences that can be conveyed both in traditional and new media.

- Establish a network of school and other youth counselors and facilitators who are experienced in helping youth maximize the benefits of an integrated, cultural identity. Promote best practices through the network in helping youth make sense of divergent cultural practices, especially when balancing family, peer, and societal expectations and when transitioning into university and professional settings.

- Pilot digital learning environments. One potential concept is a "school within a school" where students, parents, and local community members can increase their digital literacy through experiential learning. Learning objectives might emphasize the benefits of ICT to explore and interpret cultural artifacts that are not immediately accessible; to demonstrate positive norms of online communication, such as reciprocity and community building; and to practice coauthorship.

- Sponsor incentive/recognition prizes and associated programs to guide youth in their understanding and creative expression of the causes, consequences, and nonviolent remedies to social injustice.

- Develop pilot programs in cultural production for communities where one might expect a high degree of social alienation and identity seeking, including communities recovering from sectarian violence and refugee settlements, with a specific objective to maintain or restore connections to cultural identity and memory. Begin with Grass Roots Theater and other cultural programs that have a proven track record in community reconciliation.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, its staff, or advisory council.

Notes

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