

Next Generation Seminar Recommendations

Countering Violent Extremism in the NESAs Region

April 17-21, 2017

Executive Summary/After Action Report
Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies



PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS:

Participants in the Next Generation Seminar were security officers, government officials, academics, legislators, NGO leaders, and legal scholars who have on the ground experience in both examining and countering violent extremism.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

From 17-21 April, the NESAC Center conducted the 5th iteration of its Next Generation Seminar, a program focused on synthesizing recommendations for countering violent extremism based upon the experiences of rising leaders within security sectors, legislatures, NGOs, the media, and academies. Held in Bangkok, Thailand, thirty-five participants spent a week presenting their ideas based upon their own experiences, debating the efficacy of CVE methods, and developing a list of policy recommendations useful for both regional and non-regional states to engage in CVE efforts. The NESAC Center conducts the seminar – providing the logistical details to bring participants together. Yet, this program is led by the participants themselves and the recommendations reflect the work these professionals engaged in for a week in late April.

The recommendations emerged along five distinct tracks that represent different ways both private organizations and governments can leverage resources to engage in CVE. The tracks are: communication/messaging mechanisms, socioeconomic structures/forces, state-society relations, political conflict, and de-radicalization tools.

The longer report which follows this executive summary explains both the tracks and recommendations in greater detail, but a quick synopsis of the recommendations is listed here (in no particular order):

- Institutional reforms are an immediate requirement and challenge: prison reform, judicial modernization, education reform, and real socioeconomic development through targeted youth activity programs for at risk populations and entrepreneurial encouragement are examples of what can be done in this regard. Engaging in such institutional change is a difficult process that will strain governments and state resources, but these needed changes have been delayed for far too long in far too many locations. The complication with institutional reform is that change is rarely tied to security institutions, which are often at the forefront of CVE efforts. Instead, education ministries, health ministries, and other similar social offices would have jurisdiction and such government functions are unlikely to be equipped to take action based on future security threats from violent extremism. Different regions face different institutional challenges. In the MENA region and for much of Africa, the challenges are tied to development. In much of East Asia, the European Union, and North America the challenges are related to institutional decay/strain and/or social isolation of minority populations. While institutional problems are most readily visible at the state level, international organizations face similar institutional challenges.
- Refugee and IDP Support: the sheer scale of the refugees and IDPs in the MENA region is a massive problem that both regional states and non-regional actors (and International Organizations) must do more to address. Not only does the scale of this problem put countries that receive refugees under greater financial and social strain, but so many isolated individuals with nothing to do creates a push factor that violent extremist organizations can exploit (seeking to alleviate or advocate for refugees has also been listed as a pull factor for extremists). Donor nations need to do more to support refugee and IDP receiving regional states through financial support, logistical support, infrastructural enhancement, and

social networking. Regional states themselves need to do a more comprehensive job of determining where gaps exist in assistance for refugee and IDP communities and distribute aid resources more effectively. This is an immediate problem that puts strain on many societies that unless addressed today can contribute to regional and even global problems. Put another way, we invest now in solutions to avoid more severe costs later.

- Narratives regarding CVE must become more multifaceted. First, countering the narratives of violent extremists is vital but it cannot become an automated and lazy enterprise. Counter narratives need to carefully exploit the weaknesses of violent extremist organizations to mitigate their ability to disseminate their message effectively. Second, independent narratives need to be created that truly integrate society into the political culture. Violent extremists are often effective because so many do not trust or believe the official narrative. Thus, the official narrative of a society needs to avoid becoming static, elitist, and unrealistic. It should also effectively utilize the ease and reach of technological platforms for communication. Rely less on the official proclamations and television statements and focus more on using our wireless age to reach targeted populations. As example – the countries of East Asia have developed a series of apps for digital devices through which people can communicate to officials about important topics.
- The Power of Culture: cultural forces are an affordable and often overlooked tool that society can use for CVE. If adolescents and young adults in particular are brought into organized sporting leagues, artistic troupes, music centers, and other forms of cultural expression then the call of extremists is less probable to have an impact. The corporate side of culture also plays a part in this effort. Media companies, entertainment firms, and similar private enterprises can undercut messaging if they are not responsible or contribute heavily to positive messaging if they take an active role. There are numerous examples from all over the world, but Bollywood in India has done this effectively on topics like social class, ethnicity, and religion.
- The Border Dilemma: state resources, security forces, and social programs are often limited in CVE because their actions must cease at the end of their jurisdiction. Not only should regional states do more to coordinate their CVE responses through more regular and focused CVE conversations, but also enhance information/intelligence sharing and judicial partnerships, among others, to combat the problem of radical returnees and the illicit networks that often facilitate violent extremist organizations. The global nature of violent extremism means that all states, whether bordering a hot spot of extremism or not, need to be proactive and not merely wait till the threat appears inside their territory.
- Non-Regional Actor Responses to CVE: while the NESR region itself deals with the direct and indirect results of spreading violent extremism, the major non-regional actors can spend political capital to provide assistance. Primarily, one of the most complex problems in the CVE arena is how active combat zones are magnets for violent extremists. Until these conflict zones are brought under control through political agreement, then CVE will remain about triage and not cures. Regional states mostly do not possess the national power or political capital to address these conflicts zones, but major world powers do. Major Powers need to invest more in cooperating with each other and to provide intensified pressure to the parties engaged in conflict. This is not a short-term project but participants were overwhelmingly interested in emphasizing this need.

After Action Report:

From 17-21 April, 2017, thirty five participants gathered at the Lebua at State Tower Hotel in Bangkok, Thailand to hold the 2017 Next Generation Seminar: SUBTITLE. This program, which brings together

emerging leaders from security sectors, legislatures, media entities, academia, and the legal profession, focuses on developing recommendations for countering violent extremism that are based on hands on experiences in the contexts where violent extremism is most pernicious. These recommendations are developed by the participants and beyond centering on success in CVE, also take into account feasibility.

The program began with two days of presentations by the participants where they presented their ideas and recommendations for CVE based on their experiences. Upon presenting, the program provided Q and A sessions where participants could ask questions of their peers, critique ideas introduced, and develop ideas that could form the basis for general recommendations. Following the first two days of presentations, the participants broke down into two days of breakout sessions. The breakout sessions began with a tabletop exercise designed to have the participants take on the role of different actors engaged in CVE efforts. The tabletop exercise was designed to allow the participants to think outside their accustomed position, but to also eventually lead the groups full circle where they could synthesize the presentations of the first two days and their discussions during the tabletop exercise. The fifth and final day of the seminar brought the entire group back together for sessions devoted to developing a specific list of recommendations that all participants could ratify.

As the Next Generation Seminar has matured as a program, so too have the seminar's recommendations become more precise. Participants were not satisfied with simply listing a set of recommendations that reflect a wish list of what needs to happen for CVE to be successful. Rather, they developed thematic tracks by which CVE efforts can progress and the recommendations were structured to be categorized within these tracks. Participants took this approach due to the varying challenges their individual countries face when countering violent extremists. For some states, the problems are primarily political in nature, but for others the main challenges could extend from socioeconomic problems. In short, there is no one size fits all solution for CVE, but certain types of challenges are faced by multiple countries. Categorizing their conclusions in this way allows for greater accuracy. It is also worth mentioning that participants took efforts to focus on the ever-present challenge of feasibility. States, NGOs, and international organizations involved in CVE do not have limitless resources and often have to prioritize actions based upon what is practical. The recommendations from this seminar are structured to focus on what is immediately possible, but also make sure that the recommendations are tied to larger, more complex challenges that loom on the horizon.

The five tracks that were developed to help categorize the recommendations are as follows: communication/messaging mechanisms, socioeconomic structures/forces, state-society relations, political conflict, and de-radicalization tools.

Communication/Messaging Mechanisms: recommendations listed under this banner reference the interrelated communicative challenges that CVE efforts must address. Violent extremists know how to exploit cleavages inside societies and have proven to be adaptive communicators in both how they disseminate messages and how they target potential recruits. Thus, counter messaging is not sufficient. States need to think of how best to do counter messaging, but also should invest in developing alternative messaging that seeks to transform the conversation to a new focus that inherently undercuts extremist messaging. Corporate entities also need to be a part of messaging, with corporate social responsibility being emphasized for firms that are tied to communication systems (media, social media platforms, tech companies, etc.). Conversations about responsibility can help corporations not only better understand the nature of the challenge presented by violent extremism, but also to show how social responsibility can, in the long-term, propel a firm's revenues.

Socioeconomic Structures/Forces: recommendations listed under this banner focus on the development gaps that exist in many societies. It is no secret that deprivation is a powerful motivator for individuals to

become violent extremists. Addressing the reasons that an individual feels isolated and marginalized are often essential for CVE.

State-Society Relations: recommendations in this category focus on ways to address the problem of separation between a state and the governed. In many ways, this set of problems revolves around trust. When a society does not trust the state, then violent extremists have much greater leeway to operate. Developing trust is complicated, but not an insurmountable problem.

Political Conflict: recommendations in this category center on the malfunctions of political life. Entrenched partisanship that disrupts state functions, corruption, and even armed conflict have all been sources by which violent extremists have cited as to why individuals should place their trust in them and not the state.

De-Radicalization Efforts: this category's recommendations focus on how to reintegrate radicalized populations into society. Generally, most states approach populations that have been radicalized towards violence through the security sector (police, military, intelligence services). Yet, there is much more that state can do beyond relying on a police or military response.

Based on these five tracks, the recommendations decided by the participants are as follows:

Communication/Messaging Mechanisms:

- Develop positive and realistic messaging: too often states communicate poorly, particularly as it relates to the issues surrounding CVE. An immediate mechanism that requires little resources is for states to develop simple, direct positive messaging about the citizens. Messaging should not be about propping up regimes, but about propelling the people. Part of this is to honestly communicate regarding the problems within society. Providing a positive messaging frame that people can trust limits the ability of violent extremists to reach recruits. Such an exercise can and should be state influenced, but it should also be a private enterprise. Examples where private sector firms in media can find success in this can be found in the work social media firms pursued to frame certain political issues or social problems to inspire conversation instead of diatribes or accusations.
- Move beyond state actors, or individuals tied to the state, when crafting narratives: Seeking to control the messengers who communicate to society is a particular problem within the Middle East and North Africa. States have allies inside society that are independent actors and such individuals should be encouraged to communicate about CVE. These independent actors cannot be controlled in the same fashion as those tied to a government in a formal way, but their voices will inherently be interpreted as more trustworthy.
- Counter Narratives are essential and strategic: Countering the narrative of violent extremists can be a frustrating effort as it is a reactionary and not proactive enterprise, but if approached strategically, the benefits are numerous. Counter narratives cannot be an exercise of responding to every grievance or argument put forth by violent extremists. This has proven time and again not to work. Instead, strategize communications to evaluate the messaging of violent extremists and exploit weaknesses. This entails putting effort into understanding the objectives of violent extremist messaging and the ways in which communicative tools are used.
- Understand the Technology and Platforms: Violent extremists employ social media as the primary means of reaching an audience. Countering extremist messaging requires understanding how social media works and how user communities engage in various social media platforms. This effort will require new resources and training for government officials and will require time to adequately put into place.
- Invest in discussions of uncomfortable topics: Divisions within a society are an opportunity for violent extremists to gain a footing within a society. Sectarianism, ethnic tensions, and similar divisions need to be discussed – in the open and by all affected parties. For instance, interfaith dialogues can be an

asset in CVE, but it takes time and spent political capital to bring all institutions together and for real dialogue to commence.

Socioeconomic Structures/Forces:

Special Note: restructuring socioeconomic conditions inside a society is an immensely complex and expensive undertaking. Quick fixes to socioeconomic weaknesses or problems are not possible. Thus, the recommendations connected to this track are primarily long-term undertakings that require political capital to be spent by regimes.

- Experiment with pilot programs: The presence of widespread unemployment and economic hopelessness does not necessarily translate into more incidents of violent extremism, but it is no secret that violent extremists will exploit such conditions to recruit. A low cost mechanism for improving conditions, particularly for specific communities or social groups, is to sponsor pilot programs that encourage individuals to become active contributors to economies. These can take the form of providing a small income in exchange for community service, small grants to fund entrepreneurs, contests that provide start-up capital to community projects or new businesses, or other similar ventures. Such programs have proven successful in eastern Libya, Algeria, Nigeria, and the Philippines, among others.
- Refugee assistance: Violent extremist organizations commonly target isolated or maligned communities and few communities are more separated than refugees. In the Levant, the conditions in Syria have created millions of refugees who have flocked to neighboring states (this does not factor in the millions more who are internally displaced within Syria) and these states are barely able to provide basic aid for these millions, even with support from international donors. States facing a refugee crisis should engage with foreign donor states more intensely to receive additional aid to go beyond meeting basic needs for refugees. This intensified engagement should not focus on the humanitarian elements of refugee need, but rather in the security elements attached to CVE. Furthermore, states hosting refugee populations also need to be more strategic in how they support refugees by bringing to bear other resources inside society that can be of assistance – like mental health professionals, entrepreneurs, religious leaders, and other similar individuals who can provide additional support.
- Substantial economic reform: The economies of many states plagued by violent extremism need deep economic reform. This is a difficult undertaking that will require years, if not decades, to achieve. Yet, given the youth bulge in many states and the widespread feeling of deprivation that exists, states need to invigorate the economic realm if they wish to seriously address the security challenges associated with violent extremism. It is common knowledge that a percentage of ISIS recruits joined up not because of ideological agreement or a desire for an “adventure”, but because ISIS provided salaries to recruits. If the process of economic reform is truly initiated, then the public will see that the state is making an effort and this has been shown to diminish the success rate of violent extremist recruiting.
- Gender is an integral part of CVE, Invest in women’s voices: Violent extremism is perceived through a masculine lens – men constitute the ranks of violent extremist organizations and pursue actions that appeal to a specific segment of the male population. This perception is problematic for a host of reasons. First, as ISIS has shown, women are increasingly active participants in violent extremist organizations. They are recruited and become a resource increasingly tapped by violent extremist leaders, due in part to how many societies underestimate the way communication can be used to target females. Secondly, violent extremist organizations often overlook how women, as mothers, teachers, community leaders, and other roles, are a powerful force for undermining violent extremist recruitment. From Libya to Nigeria to France, women have stopped individuals from joining violent extremist organizations effectively. Yet, in many societies, the role of women in CVE is ignored. Find ways to invest in women’s groups who are engaged in CVE.

State-Society Relations:

- Improve community policing: It is far too common for police officers to be seen purely in their capacity as law enforcement, but it is not too costly to reform some police functions to include community outreach and engagement. Officers can be assigned to regularly communicate with certain community gathering spots in the areas they patrol. Such engagement allows community leaders to express the feelings of their neighbors and also point out potential problems that exist that may not normally reach police officers. Furthermore, the more officers are seen engaging positively with the communities they patrol, the more likely that communities will assist when warning signs of violent extremism develop.
- Provide a release valve for social pressures: Feelings of hopelessness are compounded when it is clear that government officials will not address, let alone even pay attention to, grievances held by citizens. Violent extremists have proven in many instances (Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, and others) that they can use distrust in government to gain recruits. Thus, governments need to develop institutions that react to pressure from society.
- Address corruption: Distrust in government is a major hindrance for CVE efforts and nothing does more to undercut the legitimacy of a government than corruption. If no basic service can be acquired without bribery, then people will be more unlikely to listen to any recommendations from government, no matter the topic. This is a very difficult process that threatens a system that is often used by political elites, but like economic reform, the perception that government officials are seriously focusing on diminishing corruption will result in greater trust by the population. Partnerships between states or forms of continuous exchange between regional and non-regional states that focus on capacity building among civilian bureaucrats is a good starting point.

Political Conflict:

NOTE: The presence of intense political or armed conflict that weakens government institutions has facilitated the rapid growth of many violent extremist organizations. Ending conflict is perhaps one of the most prominent areas that major non-regional actors can leverage their resources to assist in CVE.

- Regional Conflicts, Regional Solutions: In regions where substantial conflicts exist (Levant, West Africa, South Asia, North Africa, etc.) there is a clear lack of investment in political solutions. States that neighbor conflict zones all too often seek to avoid the effects and look to non-regional actors to facilitate pressure for peace talks. Yet, recent history shows that outsider intervention rarely succeeds in reaching lasting peace. Regional states are tied together by history, trade, and culture and until regional political leaders become heavily involved in addressing conflicts inside neighboring states, the probability of solutions to conflict remain low.
- Effective contribution by non-regional actors: By their existence as global actors with worldwide interests, major non-regional states (like the United States, China, and others) will seek to address regional conflicts. In some instance, the support of non-regional actors is a benefit through the provision of key resources like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. However, in other cases the involvement of non-regional actors in regional conflicts can intensify problems. Non-regional actors need to ensure that they engage based on the realities that exist in the region. Multilateral engagement is a good method for ensuring mistakes are minimized and each of these actors should avoid unilateral action. For instance, the casual discussion by the U.S. administration of changing the location of the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem created substantial fear and anger throughout the Middle East. Regional states must do better in how they interact with major non-regional actors in order to limit future mistakes and clearly articulate that missteps today could be a major source for violent extremist recruitment tomorrow.

De-Radicalization Efforts:

- Academic and Psychological Investment: Many countries that face challenges from violent extremism have not invested enough resources into understanding the processes by which a person has become radicalized. Too often, the issue of violent extremism is seen through the prism of security alone. To

mitigate future threats, those that have been arrested/detained for participating in violent extremist organizations need to be interviewed and analyzed by academics and/or psychologists in order to understand how these individuals made decisions.

- **Radical versus Violent:** Because so many states view violent extremism through a security lens, there is a bias among many governments to conflate radicalized views with violence. This bias not only misunderstands the process by which one become a violent extremist (i.e. becoming radicalized does not mean that one will act violently), but it also becomes a tool by which corrupt individuals inside of governments can label unpopular ideas as radical and thus make it a crime to hold said beliefs. The better option is to engage with community groups, civil society, religious institutions, and other similar entities to work with individuals who have become radicalized. State resources, particularly those in the security sectors, should be reserved to address the threat posed by extremists who employ violent methods. Not only does it serve as a better approach, but it also is more fiscally responsible.
- **Entice radicals back into society:** For violent extremists who have been captured by security forces and incarcerated, it is sound policy to invest resources into providing enticements that promise reintegration into society. The prospect of parole or decreased time for cooperation (positive reinforcements) can be an incentive to gain insight into the operations of violent extremist organizations and what threat these organizations can pose for the future. It should be further noted that this is a policy that should be levied only when an incarcerated individual has shown promise as a resource and not as a standard policy for all.

Summation:

The recommendations contained in this report are not meant to be a comprehensive solution to the problem set associated with CVE. Rather, they are the primary recommendations of these participants based on their experiences. The list presented seeks to prioritize those recommendations that are most feasible in the short term, while also pointing out the large scale complications that have to be addressed. Further questions about this report can be sent to the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (c/o Mr. Jeffrey Payne) who compiled the recommendations of the participants.

