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**Responding to the Changing Landscape of Violent Extremism: Practical Approaches to
Conflict Transformation and Rehabilitation**

January 25-27, 2019

Executive Summary

The dynamics of violent extremism are ever-changing. Despite Daesh's territorial loss in Iraq and Syria, violent extremism continues to metastasize. Daesh and similar groups continue to recruit and accelerate civil conflicts in Mali, Somalia, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Unfortunately, efforts to develop rehabilitation and reintegration programs for returned foreign fighters are either nonexistent or severely inhibited by the hyper-securitized environment. Repressive security measures have fueled Islamophobia and emboldened right-wing extremism in Europe and the United States. The threat posed by violent extremism, from Daesh and al-Qaeda affiliates and from right-wing extremists in the West, requires a multipronged and sustainable response.

To respond to these challenges, The Carter Center convened its third reiterative workshop with religious and community leaders from Jan. 25-27, 2019. Workshop participants included practitioners from across ideological and political divides with the credibility and social capital to influence their communities in Morocco, Tunisia, Belgium, France, and the United States. The workshop examined four main themes: a) the changing landscape of violent extremism; b) practical approaches to conflict transformation and negotiation; c) rights-based approaches to reintegration and rehabilitation; and d) the legal landscape of terrorism prosecutions.

The Changing Landscape of Violent Extremism

Houda Abadi, an associate director in the Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program, opened the workshop by mapping current threats to peace and security and emphasizing preventative measures to address the root causes of violent extremism. Insurgencies and terrorist attacks continue to increase in failed and fragile states; white supremacist attacks in the U.S. continue to

outpace attacks from groups inspired by Daesh or al-Qaeda; and narratives of racial or religious purity and toxic forms of masculinity find currency online and in public discourse. At the same time, democratic norms are being eroded in the U.S. and abroad, the rule of law is under threat, and the political space is closing. With the securitization and politicization of terrorism, emergency laws and states of exception have become the new norm.

These problems are global, but in desperate need of localized, context-driven solutions that strengthen social cohesion, expand equality, and affirm the social contract. Chief among these is the role toxic masculinity plays in extremist recruiting and how to challenge these constructions at the community level. Tunisian and French participants both noted that toxic masculinity relates to power and impacts their own work when, in the words of one Tunisian researcher, “biology and society are confused” and women are not given positions of leadership. The Moroccan cohort noted that masculinity in Morocco needs to be redefined, and an American activist called for a return to “prophetic masculinity,” which she described as magnanimous, brave, protective, and not power-seeking. Discussion also focused on participatory modes of non-violent aesthetic resistance that can raise social consciousness and build solidarity toward social justice. Non-securitized approaches to preventing violent extremism are central to the Carter Center’s methodology and our partners’ grassroots work.

Conflict Resolution for Grassroots Leaders

A key component of the Carter Center’s PVE work is equipping local leaders with skills in conflict resolution and negotiation that allow them to address local grievances that fuel violent extremism. Anthony Wanis-St. John, professor of conflict resolution at American University, provided participants with a framework for thinking about violent extremism through the lens of conflict transformation. Wanis-St. John stressed that, despite current discourse, violent extremism — “organized violence for political, ethnic, religious, or ideological reasons” — is not a new phenomenon. Community-based solutions should center on building inclusive societies, which requires communities to find their voice, build coalitions, and advocate effectively for rights and representations. In subsequent discussions, participants were concerned particularly with questions of legitimacy and difference — how to talk with the other side when the differences are fundamental. Wanis-St. John reminded participants that recognizing people’s voices as legitimate does not mean you agree with their position. And in cases where legitimacy is at stake, quiet, back-channel discussions are a possibility.

As part of their experiential learning, Wanis-St. John led a simulated case study in which participants were divided into opposing sides and asked to negotiate an issue of political justice. Each participant was secretly given a role and set of priorities to pursue. Participants struggled to define an agenda for negotiation, but the interactive work of defining potential allies and building coalitions allowed participants to concretize the skills they are learning.

Legal and Psycho-Social Aspects of Rehabilitation

The Center's growing network of PVE practitioners are developing prevention strategies at the community level; however, dealing with the aftermath of Daesh's short-lived "state" has been a primary concern of participants from early on. This includes figuring out how to help the thousands of foreign fighters and their families in Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) jails and camps in northeastern Syria, those who have returned home in need of rehabilitation and reintegration, and those who were arrested in the early days of the Syrian civil war for attempting to travel. For religious and community leaders, developing the knowledge and skills to deal with these issues is an acute and growing need.

To close this gap, a Belgian lawyer and specialist in terrorism cases addressed participants on the complex profiles of returnees and their prosecution in Europe. He argued that there is no single profile of foreign fighters in Belgium, a fact confirmed by workshop participants from France, Tunisia, and Morocco who deal with these cases. The lawyer said that the young people he has worked with were motivated by what Daesh and others offered. In an impoverished neighborhood in Paris or Brussels, in a one-room apartment, there is "no vision or prospects." He continued, "[They are subject to] 15 or more years of maltreatment in life and the media, being told that you are nothing, will be nothing. And [then] you are told that you can be part of a revolutionary project where you can save a whole people! Instead of fighting jihadis, we would do better to stop making them."

The lawyer explained that, given the public fear of terrorism in Europe, the rate and aggressiveness of terrorism prosecutions increased dramatically after the rise of Daesh and the terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015-16. The public anguish over these attacks created a toxic environment; what counts as radicalization in France is oversimplified — a beard or clothing or even prayer become, for the security services, indicators of violent extremism. Terrorism prosecutions are politicized and occur in a context that is so overemotional that "legal exceptions are normalized" and "unrelated acts" are taken as evidence of terrorism. For example, legal debate in terrorism cases "can get into obscure wrangling around how devout somebody is, their level of religious knowledge," etc., to figure out if an act (a murder, for example) is terrorism or can be prosecuted as such. One participant noted that this view has a long history in France, which he referred to as "the colonial management of Islam," adding that a Muslim individual's citizenship is always open to question.

Zohra Harrach Ndiaye, director of the Prevention of Radicalization Project in France, provided a complementary perspective by discussing her work rehabilitating youth lured by violent extremists. Her organization has worked with over 100 children in the past several years, and she said a complex interaction of social, economic, and psychological factors act as lures to violent extremism. Ndiaye argued that, in her experience, there is a trajectory of violent radicalization that

begins with absent or estranged parents; a lost or mythologized heritage; a series of traumas or aggressions; being born again into a new identity, reconnecting to religion, or conversion; alienation; humiliation; disaffection; and ultimately, violence. But this trajectory is fluid and complex. Ndiaya spoke of one girl from an under-resourced and abusive home who found a refuge when she converted to a conservative brand of Islam. Her new identity gave her the strength to stop the abuse from her father, but it also triggered worries of radicalization among her teachers and ridicule from fellow students. She was alienated, under suspicion, and alone, targeted for precisely that which gave her strength. She was also vulnerable. She was targeted by extremists connected to the Syrian civil war, recruited, and ultimately arrested before travelling. In this case, it was the securitized atmosphere around “radicalization” in France that facilitated the young girl’s turn to violent extremism.

Ndiaye said society has failed in providing justice to the most vulnerable and continues to fail to provide justice even as it deals with the fallout of that initial failure. The criticisms and reasons these youth give for going to Syria or “radicalizing” are legitimate. Their grievances are real. We must listen to them and respond to these critiques. Ndiaye noted that often, “it is society that needs to be rehabilitated in the eyes of these French Muslim youth.” Similar sentiments were expressed by participants from North Africa. A Moroccan participant noted that undertaking real rehabilitation is not possible for civil society or religious leaders — aggressive securitization and overly broad antiterrorism laws make even discussing rehabilitation or having contact with the “radicalized” dangerous. A Tunisian imam noted that the stigmatization that seems to facilitate radicalization in Europe is present in Tunisia against conservative and Salafi communities, while a Tunisian social worker advocated for better community relations with local police to mitigate some of this mistrust. Participants agreed that effective interventions must move beyond state-based approaches to radicalization that violate civil liberties, and that rehabilitation efforts must include reforming organizations — prisons, schools, social service systems — in ways that restore humanity to the oppressed. Regardless of country or context, humiliation, exclusion, and alienation are the seeds of violent radicalization. These seeds do not always grow into trees, but building inclusive societies is the only reliable path to prevention.

Conclusions

The work of religious and community leaders is critical to building sustainable peace and preventing violent extremism. The practitioners in the Carter Center’s PVE workshops report in post-workshop surveys that these trainings have increased their skills in media and communication, built their confidence, and inspired them to start new projects and work for change in their communities. Some projects have been implemented and are already seeing successes. For example, the Belgium cohort developed a project focused on training youth in civic engagement and human rights. Through the train-the-trainers model, the goal is to empower and train 1,000 youth leaders in peacebuilding from three regions in Belgium that most often confront violent

extremism. The Moroccan cohort just concluded its first training with youth on media literacy and civic engagement. Like the Belgian project, the goal is to encourage the creativity and innovation of youth to turn them into positive agents of change.

With guidance and support from the Carter Center's design, monitoring, and evaluation expert, participants from the new cohort will refine their projects and implementation strategy in their fourth and last workshop.

Participants also often emphasized the importance of building and maintaining a network of practice for their work. For example, after the second workshop, a young imam from Tunis traveled to Belgium and France to meet independently with other members of the cohort, tour their projects, and learn what they are doing. Participants from the current cohort are planning documentaries and podcasts, youth engagement, the training of imams, and social media campaigns.

Participants requested the continued engagement of the Center and said they look forward to meeting with, and learning from, the first cohort of religious and community leaders. Rehabilitation and reintegration of returned fighters, women, and especially children, as well as rights-based approaches to the repatriation of those stranded in Syria, emerged as issues of critical concern for experts and participants alike. All encouraged The Carter Center to take a more active role in these issues, citing the Center's reputation for honest mediation and its ability to bridge government and grassroots levels.

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