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Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism

Stevan Weine

The Obama administration's landmark new approach to countering violent extremism through engaging community partners calls for no less than a paradigm shift in how we understand the causes of terrorism. The shift is away from a pathways approach focused on how push and pull factors influenced one person's trajectory toward or away from violent extremism, and towards an ecological view that looks at how characteristics of the social environment can either lead to or diminish involvement in violent extremism for the persons living there.

The core idea of this new paradigm, conveyed in the White House's December 2011 *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (SIP), is that of countering violent extremism through building resilience.[1] Denis McDonough, former Deputy National Security Advisor to President Obama, expressed this at an Islamic center in Virginia, stating, "we know, as the President said, that the best defense against terrorist ideologies is strong and resilient individuals and communities."[2] Subsequent White House documents have further unpacked this, for example, in stating: "[n]ational security draws on the strength and resilience of our citizens, communities, and economy."[3]

Resilience usually refers to persons' capacities to with-

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stand or bounce back from adversity.[4] It is a concept derived from engineering perspectives upon the durability of materials to bend and not break. In recent years, resilience has come to the forefront in the fields of public health, child development, and disaster relief.[5] To scientists and policymakers, resilience is not just a property of individuals, but of families, communities, organizations, networks, and societies.[6] Resilience-focused policies and interventions that support or enhance its components have yielded significant and cost effective gains in preventing HIV/AIDS transmission, and helping high-risk children and disaster-impacted populations. Though the present use of resilience sounds more like resistance, today's hope is that such approaches could also keep young Americans away from violent extremism.

A resilience approach offers no quick fix, not in any of the aforementioned fields or in countering violent extremism. It depends upon adequately understanding what resilience means for a particular group of persons and how it has been shaped by history, politics, social context, and culture. It also depends upon government establishing and sustaining partnerships with the impacted families, communities, networks, and organizations. Additionally, it depends on government working in partnership to design, implement, and evaluate what interventions can really make a difference in building resilience, a process certain to involve trial and error.

Responding to the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism. The current shift in counter-terrorism policy to-

wards building resilience was driven in part by the surge in al-Qaeda inspired "homegrown terrorism" in the U.S. that peaked in 2008.[7] Government officials and terrorism experts came to believe that the United States shared similar vulnerabilities as European countries for terrorist recruitment and needed to develop appropriate responses. Especially of concern for U.S. government officials were Somali-Americans, given that between late 2007 and fall of 2008, at least seventeen adolescent boys and young men left the Minneapolis-St. Paul area without telling their parents and went to Somalia to join al-Shabaab militant training camps.[8] All indicators were that this effort was well-organized, involving both transnational and local associates who had conspired to obtain passports and to purchase airline tickets. What was so striking about this effort, though, was that it was possible to get some of the best and brightest young people in that community to return to the war-torn country from which their parents had fled less than twenty years before.

Consider Burhan Hassan, a seventeen year-old Somali-American high school senior and student at Roosevelt Senior High. Osman Ahmed, Hassan's uncle, described Burhan as, "a brilliant student with straight A's and on top of his class. He was taking college courses, calculus, advanced chemistry, as he was about to graduate from high school... He was an ambitious kid with the hope to go to Harvard University to study medicine or law and become a medical doctor or a lawyer ... Like his peers, Burhan was never interested in Somali politics or understood Somali clan issues... He used to go to school, home

and the mosque ... and there's no way you could get that ideology from the school or home."[9]

If recruiters could influence Burhan, a smart, well-liked teenager with apparently strong connections to his family and community, then they could likely influence anyone. The power of recruiters over young men as seemingly solid as Burhan has been of grave concern

Tamerlan Tsarnaev, provided another example of sudden lapse to violent extremism in young adults who came to the United States as refugees from a war-torn country. This attack reminded Americans of the need to act to prevent terrorist attacks at home in part through the new policies that emphasize community engagement and partnering so as to build resilience.

The power of recruiters over young men...has been of grave concern to family members, community advocates, and law enforcement.

to family members, community advocates, and law enforcement. The recruiters not only had the logistical networks that could secretly move young people out of the country, but they also had ways of reaching young people's hearts and minds. For a time, U.S. government concerns about al-Shabaab's capacities to speak to youth were focused on Omar Hammami, a young man who left Alabama and joined al-Shabaab in Somalia, where he became known as Al-Amriki.[10] In March 2009 Hammami made a recruitment video which has been widely watched on the Internet. Hammami had a clever way of speaking to the yearnings and grievances of diaspora youth, and it appeared that neither the U.S. government nor local communities found responses that could effectively counter such recruitment messages.

The April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing committed by two Chechen-American brothers, Dzhokhar and

Studying Somali-Americans in Little Mogadishu. On one of my first visits to Minneapolis in February 2009, I met with Osman Ahmed, Burhan's uncle, who had recently testified to the U.S. Senate's Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. There, he said, "[f]amily members whose children went to Somalia to join al-Shabaab were scared to even talk to the law enforcement. We have been painted as bad people within the Somali community by the mosque management. We have been threatened for just speaking out." Ahmed was taking considerable risks in speaking openly in resistance to al-Shabaab. On behalf of the families of the missing or youth he asked for the federal government to, "create special task force to combat the al-Shabaab recruitment," and to, "educate members of the Somali community on the importance of cooperation between law enforcement and the community."[11]

When Ahmed and I met at a local community center, I told him that I agreed with his goals and supported his advocacy. He and I agreed that research was one activity that could help to advocate for and inform policy changes. We proposed a study of family and community protective resources among Somali-Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul, which in 2010 was funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through its University of Maryland START Center of Excellence. This was an ethnographic study that looked at the everyday lives of Somali-American adolescent boys and young men in the context of their families and communities in Minneapolis-St. Paul. Now that the results of that study are public, demonstrating what building resilience to violent extremism means in one U.S. community under the threat of al-Qaeda inspired terrorism. Based on em-

pirical data and informed by relevant theory, it identified themes and built a model, Diminishing Opportunities for Violent Extremism (DOVE), which can help to inform prevention strategies for building community resilience to violent extremism in the Somali-American community in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

The research results help in understanding how to implement the White House Strategy on Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism. The overall finding is that building community resilience to violent extremism depends on sustaining and strengthening (or in some cases initiating) protective resources through collaborations between family and youth, community, and government. According to the DOVE model, these protective resources should focus on three risk opportunity levels:
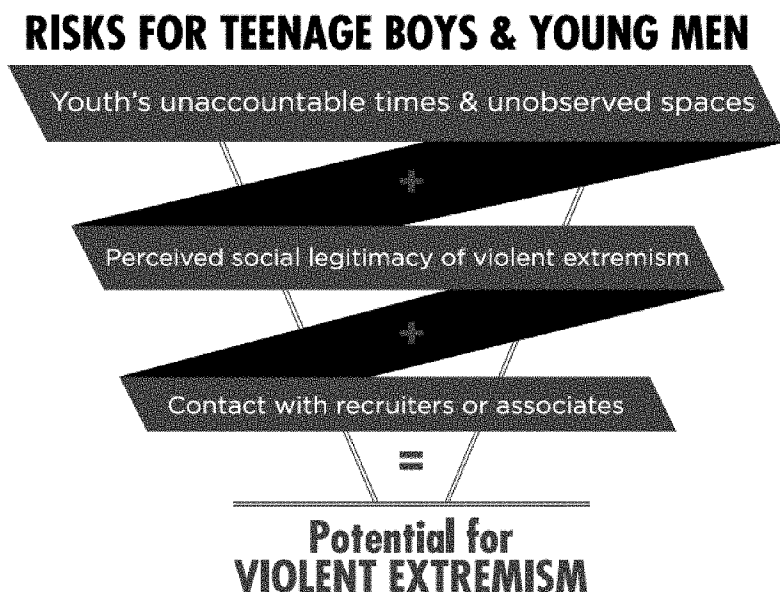

Figure 1: DOVE model.

1. Diminishing youth's unaccountable times and unobserved spaces (the times when adolescent boys are not answerable to parents or other adults and are in spaces where they are out of their sight);

2. Diminishing the perceived social legitimacy of violent extremism (perceptions of the appropriateness and necessity of violent extremist ideology and actions); and

3. Diminishing contact with recruiters or associates (adolescent boys and young men interacting directly with either recruiters or companions who facilitate their increased involvement in violent extremism).

These were the three levels of opportunity in the model that were supported by empirical evidence from the research. These three levels represent the interaction of multiple risk factors at the peer, family, community, global, state, and societal levels; in total, we identified thirty-six such factors. Further, we found that no one risk factor explained involvement in violent extremism. Parents, community leaders, and the government should be concerned that many youth are exposed to level one, and decreasing but still substantial proportions of youth are exposed to levels two and three. In other words, the risks for their involvement in violent extremism are characteristic of the environment in which they grow up.

From talking with parents and community service providers, we found evidence not only of risks but also of protective resources among Somali-Americans. For example, we learned about parents who are their children's confidants and who make an effort to monitor and supervise their youth's activities. We also learned about elders who advise parents and youth about the dangers posed by violent extremism, even though they have never had formal support for those efforts. We learned about community-based service providers, including teachers, imams, coaches, and police officers, who tried to help youth to avoid violent extremism both directly and through their parents, but who hadn't yet been trained in how to do so.

Overall, this study demonstrated not only the centrality of resilience to countering violent extremism, but also that resilience is complex and not limited to individual resilience. Our findings indicate that through additional changes in their social environment, we may be able to diminish the likelihood of their involvement in violent extremism. Family resilience happens to be an important, but often overlooked, component of community resilience. One very important meaning of resilience is parents talking to their children about these matters and supervising and monitoring their activities. But in order for many parents to do so, they need additional support from communities, which in turn need help from the government. For example, a Somali elder said, "[e]lders should organize meetings in the community and explain the consequences if we don't build communication with our kids and explain our culture and true religion. Nobody can take our kids advantage if all community are well alerted about the radicalization." Helping to support an elders' network is one promising path to achieving the White House's call for "well-equipped families" to stand up to

recruiters.

Of course this model does not explain all kinds of terrorism. For example, it does not explain the so-called lone wolf terrorists, like Major Nidal Hassan, who have acted in a variety of contexts and could also emerge in communities threatened by al-Qaeda inspired terrorism.[12] However, the attention currently given to lone wolf terrorists in the public discourse should not detract from the need for developing the social environmental paradigm which underlines the SIP and its resilience approach to countering violent extremism.

Building Resilience to Violent Extremism. Everything known about resilience tells us that it cannot simply be dialed up by turning a single knob. As a policy undertaking, building resilience to violent extremism will be at least as complicated as was building resilience to gang violence, HIV/AIDS risks, and domestic violence. It is achievable but

eda inspired terrorism.

How can public policy use our study's findings on resilience to advance the paradigm shift that underlines the SIP's resilience approach?

One specific way to use the results of this study would be for the government to collaborate with the community to develop, pilot, and evaluate a multi-level community resilience-based prevention strategy based on the DOVE model in Minneapolis-St. Paul, or perhaps adapted for other communities under threat. The findings indicate that this should include these three components: 1) building a web-based resource on risks and safeguards to assist parents and community providers; 2) providing logistical support and training to elders and other critical community voices; 3) creating alternative opportunities for community or humanitarian service for young Somalis.

A second way is to take the DOVE model that was developed and to use

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not straightforward or easy and will depend in part upon increasing scientific knowledge. Our research is just one study of one Muslim-American community in one U.S. city with limited generalizability to other communities. Nonetheless it is the first study focused on building resilience to violent extremism and may have important implications for public policy in other communities under the threat of al-Qa-

it to study other communities under threat of al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism. This could include other Somali-American communities in the U.S. as well as other Muslim-American refugee and immigrant communities that share the common elements of failed state politics, terrorist organization actively recruiting in the area, and challenges in the diaspora. The goal would be to see whether the model

holds up or needs to be modified in order to become generalizable and useful in informing the prevention of terrorist recruitment.

A third way that the results of this study could be used is to inform the development and implementation of the Obama administration's new policies for building resilience to counter violent extremism. The DOVE model's three opportunity levels should be considered as possible priorities for which new tasks, indicators, and measures could be developed. The DOVE model also strongly supports the SIP's claim that this work should involve cooperation between federal, state, and municipal governments and collaboration with communities. Of course, precisely how to implement these priorities and claims regarding "building resilience" in a manner powerful enough to reshape government, community, and family capacities will be a major challenge.

To accomplish these policy changes concerning resilience and countering violent extremism, there are some additional steps that the federal government could take to address the challenges to developing the SIP resilience approach. The first is to convene meetings that bring together multidisciplinary researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and advocates from different agencies, service fields, disciplines, and communities, to come up with integrated models for preventing violent extremism. For example, the federal government can arrange for interchanges that otherwise wouldn't happen, such as bringing together resilience from child development with those trying to develop ways to counter violent extremism.

Second is to bring together different federal funding agencies to create innovative funding mechanisms to support the kind of multidisciplinary, collaborative research that is needed to create a sound scientific basis for a resilience approach to countering violent extremism. It is especially important to include long-term efforts at implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, as well as community collaborative approaches. Research on building resilience to violent extremism isn't only a matter of homeland security but also necessarily involves social services, mental health resources, education, and more, and we need funding mechanisms that are prepared to fully embrace this complexity.

Third is to conduct a thorough review of refugee resettlement and immigration policy in the U.S. with a view towards making policy changes that would reduce the inequities, vulnerabilities, or grievances that recruiters can exploit. It is no accident that recruitment was successful among Somali-Americans in Minnesota, who are surely one of the most vulnerable refugee groups in the history of U.S. refugee resettlement. For example, a large epidemiological survey conducted in Minneapolis-St. Paul in 2004 found that 37 percent of Somali women and 25 percent of Somali men had been tortured. In 2008, among Somali-Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul, the unemployment rate was 17 percent, the median income $14,367, and the poverty level 42 percent.[13]

Guiding Principles and Conclusions. Finally, in light of our study findings and these public policy challenges, we have identified seven guid-

ing principles for building resilience to counter violent extremism.

1. Ensure that resilience approaches are well supported by theory, empirical evidence, and community collaboration.

2. Shift from individual level to multilevel analyses of risk factors and protective resources in communities under threat.

3. Intervene on all multiple opportunity levels, not just one, and sustain interventions over time.

4. Involve government, community, and families working collaboratively to improve each other's capacities to address each level.

5. Utilize a comprehensive approach to countering violent extremism with key contributions from law enforcement, immigration, public health, labor, housing, education, and media.

6. Adopt balanced, fair and transparent approaches to partnerships not limited by the biases of particular gatekeepers.

7. Conduct research in communities under threat to examine which acts of building community resilience work with whom under what circumstances and why.

In conclusion, a resilience building approach has substantial potential to help with countering violent extremism. It is supported by theory, research findings, practical knowledge, and policy successes. However, paradigm shifts as ambitious and complex as this do not happen accidentally or overnight, which is why we hear policymakers refer to building resilience to violent extremism as truly a generational undertaking. To best realize its potential for Somali-Americans and other U.S. communities under threat, building resilience to violent extremism will require a longstanding, well-informed, and collaborative commitment by federal, state, and local government.

Notes

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