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TWELVE PRINCIPLES OF COUNTER-EXTREMISM PROGRAMMING

INTRODUCTION

The rules discussed below may be viewed as “filters” through which all key CE decisions should pass. When applied systematically – both to individual CE interventions and to the overall strategic orientations of a given CE program – they should help prevent potentially misguided decisions. They also may point to specific activities, or types of intervention, that one might not have considered initially. By capturing most of the “dos and don’ts” of CE programming, and by drawing attention to the unique challenges, trade-offs, and dangers associated with programming, they should help improve significantly the quality of decision-making in this area.

PART I: EXTREMISM RISK ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Rule I. Develop a strategy only once a thorough understanding of local conditions and dynamics has been acquired.

1. *VE must be approached and analyzed in context.* Explicit efforts should be made to tap into the expertise of practitioners and scholars who are intimately familiar with the history, culture, and socioeconomic and political dynamics of the country.
2. *CE programming should build on an understanding of VE as shaped by some that country’s unique features, including:*
 - ◆ Distinctive historical legacies and cultural narratives
 - ◆ Informal power structures
 - ◆ Key traditions and values
 - ◆ Divisions and other longstanding sources of friction in society (e.g., tribal, clan-based, etc)
 - ◆ Government’s (often complicated) relationship to violent extremist actors
3. *Potentially fatal flaws in CE assistance include:*
 - ◆ Overly ambitious goals/objectives
 - ◆ Strategies not sufficiently sensitive to existing orders within local society
 - ◆ Interventions that violate cultural norms or offend other local sensitivities
 - ◆ Selection of illegitimate or ineffective local partners
 - ◆ Interventions that can be exploited by local forces to undermine CE
4. *The environment should be tracked* so that program adaptations can be made in response to a changed situation or a deepened understanding of how drivers work in concert.

5. *The need for extensive local knowledge should be built into the job descriptions of field officers.*

Rule 2: Disaggregate the threat and prioritize strategy elements accordingly.

1. *The threat posed by VE is rarely monolithic.* Some VE organizations pose a greater danger than others. Moreover, in any given country, the VE phenomenon may encompass a broad array of social forces with different, if not conflicting, interests and outlooks. Those referred to as “violent extremists” may include:
 - ◆ Religious extremists
 - ◆ Local power-holders
 - ◆ Marginalized communities
 - ◆ Bored, idle peri-urban youth
2. Breaking down a given VE phenomenon into its potentially very different components is *essential for the following reasons*:
 - ◆ Different VE groups and actors will call for different responses.
 - ◆ Determine those VE actors and groups that pose a greater and/or more imminent threat from those that don't.
 - ◆ Distinguish those threats that be addressed through CE programming.
 - ◆ Different types of VE actors who are not natural allies create opportunities for CE programming to leverage divisions:

With regard to the last point, it is particularly important that any CE programming attempting to leverage divisions between VE actors 1) carefully weigh all potential risks associated with the type of approach 2) proceed only after securing full embassy support.

Rule 3: In developing a strategy, systematically identify and tap into those features of local society that may protect it against VE. Take advantage of the weaknesses that violent extremist groups display in their environment.

1. *The puritanical, rigid, scriptural and militant brand of Islam that Transnational Salafi Jihadists (TSJ) organizations propagate often is at odds with the manner in which Islam is understood and practiced in societies that, historically, have embraced a more tolerant, flexible and pluralistic form of the faith.* It may be possible to thwart the spread of violent extremist religious ideas through direct and indirect engagement with mainstream Sufi and similarly-oriented religious organizations and leaders.
2. *Violent extremist groups of the Salafi Jihadi type also display weaknesses that should be systematically identified, so that programming (especially communication efforts) then can take advantage of them.*
 - ◆ There typically is a significant disconnect between the transnational objectives of globally-oriented, VE organizations and the much more geographically circumscribed goals of those local groups that TSJs seek to co-opt. CE programming should go to great length to highlight

the systematic differences in interests and goals between local actors and globally-oriented ones.

- ◆ Cultural barriers between TSJs and the local populations they seek to manipulate also represent a significant obstacle that extremists have to overcome. CE programming (especially communication efforts) should take advantage of these drastic differences in outlooks and visions.
3. *It also may be possible to exploit the leadership rivalries, clash of interests, or strategic disagreements that may exist either within a single VE organization, or among rival VE groups.*
 4. *Programming should seek to reach out to those frequently sizable constituencies that are vilified and/or threatened by VE (e.g., Shiites or Sunni Islamists who participate in the political process, and seek to advance their interests through legal means).*

PART II: PROJECT AND PROGRAM DESIGN AND ADAPTATION

The rules discussed in this section of the report may be of use to those staff trying to adapt existing development assistance program to respond to evolving extremist threats or emerging drivers as well as to those designing CE programs de novo.

Rule 4: Think holistically: design all activities to support the overarching CE strategy; integrate interventions across sectors; look for complementarities and mutually reinforcing impacts; and coordinate among key stakeholders.

1. Violent Extremist strategy itself is often multidimensional integrating large- and small-scale attacks with the systematic exploitation of a wide range of grassroots grievances – including grave developmental and governance deficits – and carefully thought-out efforts to manipulate public opinion. *Against this background, an effective CE strategy must weave together, into a coherent whole (a) security-oriented measures; (b) development and democracy/governance (D/G) activities; and (c) a communications program.*
2. *Development and D/G professionals may need to approach development and D/G issues from different perspectives.* A gender rights program implemented from a human rights or Western secular humanism perspective in a society that has largely accepted Wahhabi/Salafi views might well backfire, producing discredit for the US (and perhaps the host government) and certainly not demonstrating respect for local cultural norms or interpretations of Islam.
3. *The benchmarks traditionally used to assess developmental and D/G activities may not be appropriate to evaluating such activities when they are part of a CE strategy.* When D/G or education projects are carried out as part of a CE strategy, their D/G benefits are secondary to their expected contributions to the fight against VE.
4. *Preference should be given to activities that are likely to have impacts across several of the dimensions, discussed above, of an integrated CE strategy.* A local government project that addresses local economic growth and makes a concerted effort to engage youth in local decision making and community development activities would be preferred to one that focuses only on municipal budget and planning skills and broader citizen participation.

5. A “coordinated approach” refers to the required coordination among all key stakeholders, during both the design and the implementation phases. Donor agency stakeholders will coordinate a) Delivery of D/G and developmental assistance; b) Securing the population, and protecting it against efforts at intimidation and coercion; c) Public communications efforts; and d) Monitoring and analysis of VE groups, their operations, and their evolving strategies and tactics.

Donors also should coordinate closely with the host government and other potential partners in the host country. Implementation should not begin until host actors have provided input and bought into the strategy, and until an agreement has been reached regarding their various responsibilities in its implementation.

Rule 5: Direct assistance to at-risk groups and communities; prioritize interventions; and maintain a sense of modesty in projecting likely results.

1. *Programming should be approached with a sense of modesty regarding what counter-extremism interventions can accomplish* in light of the complex and multi-dimensional nature of VE, and because of other constraints likely to be faced by the donor and/or implementers. That is not to say that the problem at hand is immune to the tools in question; it is, instead, to underscore that one needs to be very clear about what those tools can and cannot contribute to the resolution of the challenges posed by VE, and over what kinds of time-frame
2. *Programming also must be consistent with resource and staffing constraints.* a strategy intended to address all existing sources of VE would be not merely unrealistic; it also likely would backfire, by leading to interventions that may be so intrusive as to generate more VE, not less.
3. *Finally, the need to approach programming with realistic expectations and a due sense of modesty about what can be accomplished through counter-extremism interventions also stems from the lack of a solid base of relevant empirical data.* We simply do not know enough, yet, about the relative value of different types of CE programs and interventions, or about the most effective mix of activities to address given forms of extremism. Continued systematic collection and analysis of data is called for with CE programming.

Rule 6: Anchor the implementation in partnerships.

1. Assistance should be designed and delivered in ways that *give the local stakeholders a sense of ownership in CE partnerships* with USG agencies, host governments, and other stakeholders.
2. *This “partnership rule” suggests that priority should be given to interventions that meet the following criteria:*
 - ◆ They should seek to maximize community involvement in the design and implementation of projects;
 - ◆ They should connect the population to moderate groups and leaders (religious and secular) where possible;
 - ◆ They should connect the local population to the host government or local authorities in ways that make decision-makers more accountable, more receptive to popular input, and more likely to deliver good governance; and
 - ◆ They should allow for positive, trust-building interaction between USG staff on the one hand, and local communities and community leaders on the other.

Relying heavily on partnerships implies that special attention should be paid to cultivating the personal relationships of trust and mutual respect without which those partnerships can neither be built nor sustained. It also points to the necessity of identifying locally influential figures that are both legitimate and able to deliver.

Rule 7: Convey respect for indigenous religious and cultural norms and traditions: style and symbolism matter.

1. *In both their content and the manner in which they are implemented, activities should communicate respect for Islam and indigenous customs and traditions.* They also should convey proper deference to prominent religious figures or community leaders who are highly regarded by the population. Such considerations cannot be approached merely as a “plus” in programming; instead, they should be front and center during both the design and implementation phases.
2. *It is critical to guard against the possibility that interventions will be viewed as intrusive, heavy-handed, or insufficiently sensitive to local values and power brokers.* It is essential both to implement activities that are specifically designed to counter such perceptions that Islam or other indigenous traditions are vilified, denigrated, or under attack, and to avoid interventions – especially in such sensitive, “loaded” areas as gender roles or the content of education – that local populations easily may perceive as efforts to impose certain values on them.
3. *The less invasive the intervention, and the more actively it engages credible local leaders and institutions, the more likely it is to succeed and avoid triggering a backlash.*
4. *Leading ill-advised interventions involve efforts to press for secular values and systems, and/or to undermine the role of religion in educational curricula.* Violent Islamist extremists (VIEs) often are characterized by their lack of religious knowledge - especially those active since the early 2000s. Countering violent extremism sometimes lies in stronger and more effective (not less) religious education.

A related, but separate, argument revolves around the limited appeal of secular nationalism across much of the Muslim world (as, indeed, elsewhere). The significant constituency that once existed (during the 1950s and 1960s) for secular nationalist ideas has largely withered away. In this type of environment, promoting (or even appearing to promote) secular values as a potential antidote to violent religious extremism may be a non-starter.

Rule 8: Ensure that development and D/G interventions are designed to produce CE benefits or impacts, and that the CE benefits are significant enough to justify the interventions.

1. *The anticipated CE benefits of development and D/G interventions cannot be taken for granted (implicitly or explicitly).* They must be carefully articulated and made clear and explicit.
2. *Two misconceptions* should be dispelled from the outset:
 - ◆ Mere multiplication of standard development interventions (such as building wells, schools, or health care units) will not have a significant CE impact according to the evidence. To be effective, those activities need to be integrated into a comprehensive, well-thought-out CE strategy (see Rule 4).

- ◆ Building isolated pieces of infrastructure here and there, or engaging in welfare and relief activities, necessarily will not counter recruitment efforts by violent extremist groups, or undermining their ability to operate within certain communities. The interventions in question do not necessarily generate gratitude. More importantly, gratitude may not be enough to counter intimidation and coercion of local populations by VEs.
3. *Programmers should also ponder whether the gains generated in any given sector are sufficient to justify the investments involved.* That is particularly true with regard to governance-related interventions. If the lack of basic social services is a major force sustaining the marginality in question, building a few health units will have negligible impact. For any given amount of resources, what should be the proper mix between clinics, schools, wells, and job-creation programs? If job-creation programs are considered, is there a minimum number of jobs that must be created in order to reduce sufficiently the alienation that fuels VE?

Rule 9: An effective communications plan is essential to success. Formulate that plan early on and use it to shape the content of development and D/G interventions, as well as the manner in which they are to be carried out. Make adjustments in the communication strategy and the program as target group feedback suggests is required.

1. Extremists that place public communications at the heart of an approach, and whose strategy presumes that the war will be won or lost based on public perceptions, can be *countered only through programming that makes information operations front and center* as well.
2. *Because winning “the war of perceptions” is so critical, interventions should be undertaken only after a communications strategy has been developed.* Some activities, at least, should be intended primarily to support a particular communication strategy (as opposed to the other way around), and help that strategy gain traction with at-risk populations.
3. *Communication campaigns must be grounded in reality.* Superficial “hearts and minds” approaches will backfire and antagonize their intended audiences. . Information operations have to be able to point to, and be given momentum by, on-the-ground efforts to address grievances, improve underlying conditions, remedy dangerous gaps in governance, and spur economic development. They also should tap into initiatives on the diplomatic front that contradict the enemy’s propaganda. Not only do actions speak louder than words, but they also are critical for words to gain traction.
4. Because *indigenous voices typically enjoy greater credibility and resonate far more* than those of foreign actors, communication campaigns should rely heavily on them, relay them, and seek to amplify their impact.
5. *Communication efforts should emphasize gains that result from programming* – particularly those that relate to the key grievances of at-risk populations.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATIONS CAMPAIGNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radio and TV PSAs that advertise USG assistance and the benefits derived from that assistance • Radio and TV talk and call in shows featuring moderate voices on themes related to grievances and programs addressing grievances • Outreach (face to face or mass media) that corrects extremist-provided misinformation and propaganda • Campaigns that deliberately target youth and the most at-risk segment of the population

Rule 10: Think through the potential unintended consequences of particular interventions before making any final decision about programming. Assess unintended consequences while implementation is underway, and redesign activities as required.

1. *“Do no harm” should remain the cardinal rule of counter-extremism programming – particularly considering how easy it is for counter-extremism interventions to backfire.*
2. *Sometimes, doing nothing – or acting indirectly, or on the margins – can be the wisest course of action. Poor implementation or the termination of projects that results in benefits that do not match the expectations that they generated, may create frustration or anger (and, therefore, opportunities for VEs) that might not have existed if these programs had not commenced in the first place.*
3. *The most dangerous, unintended consequences of counter-extremism programming often stem from the possibility that local populations will look upon counter-extremism interventions as a form of external intrusion. As discussed earlier, when populations believe that their values are being threatened by outside forces, and/or that their space is being invaded, they become particularly prone to rise up against the source of that interference. In short, heavy-handed, highly visible counter-extremism interventions that are insufficiently attuned to local sensitivities can play into the hands of VIEs in a myriad of ways.*
4. *Reliance on community-based organizations to provide for security at the grassroots level, and prevent infiltration by VEs, can be a particularly effective counter-extremism tool. It can isolate VEs from the environment they seek to contaminate, while providing employment opportunities for individuals who, otherwise, might be vulnerable to the lure of the salaries sometimes provided by VE groups..*

Rule 11: Balance the advantages of continuity and consistency against the need for flexibility.

1. *Consistency and continuity in programming help convey a long-term commitment to the country and its population, which, in turn, may be critical to building the local trust and partnerships discussed above. Where counter-extremism assistance is portrayed as part of a broader, long-term relationship, it is more likely to be accepted. Continuity of key staff is important as well, and for the same reasons.*

A degree of continuity in programming also is critical to ensuring that the counter-extremism capacities of the host government and local civil society are being built up steadily.

2. *Programming should be able to reflect new threats and opportunities; changes in the nature, scope or manifestations of existing threats; as well as lessons learned through the implementation of existing programs. While consistency is important, so is the ability to adjust programming quickly and effectively in order to reflect often rapidly changing conditions on the ground.*
3. *A measure of continuity is essential to signaling determination and commitment. It helps reassure local partners that one will “stay the course,” and conveys to extremists that one will not be deterred or distracted.*

Programming typically should consist of a mix of short-term and longer-term interventions. Short term, quick-impact interventions are likely to be especially critical in high risk environments, where VE

ILLUSTRATIVE QUICK IMPACT ACTIVITIES

- Short term vocational training and job-creation or cash-for-work programs to address youth unemployment
- Humanitarian assistance in natural or man-made emergencies
- Social programs for youth
- Housing or livelihood support for the vulnerable
- Restoration of cultural/religious artifacts

organizations are active and effective, and where government and civil society institutions show serious capacity deficits. Long-term interventions (for instance, those that aim to fight corruption) may be absolutely essential to addressing the structural causes of VE. However, because of their very nature, they are unlikely to produce much visible impact in the short run.

In short, a proper balance between short-term and long-term interventions may be necessary. Critical governance and developmental deficits can be addressed through long-term projects that take time to generate quick results, but do confront some of the key root causes of VE. At the same time, short-term activities may be hard to sustain, and may not be as effective at changing the structural conditions that feed VE. However, they may be necessary to bring about short-term improvements that can “buy time,” and help change perceptions at the grassroots level, while convincing at-risk populations that “help is on the way,” and that there are tangible benefits to reaping from siding with the authorities against VEs.

Even with regard to long-term interventions, priority should be given to smaller, lower-cost projects that can be modified and redirected depending on both the results they produce and evolving conditions on the ground.

Rule 12: In setting policy in high VE risk environments, identify and consider the trade-offs that may exist between counter-extremism objectives and strategy elements and development assistance approaches.

In countries in which VE risk is very high and endangering state stability as well as USG security, counter-extremism objectives are likely to take precedence over development goals. At times, these separate objectives will be mutually supportive, but on other occasions trade-offs will have to be considered between counter-extremism and other goals.

1. Democratic development may call for the empowerment of marginalized populations, and for their being given a greater role in political life and governmental decision-making. *That very process, however, may provide openings for VE groups.* Populations in question have shown themselves to be more susceptible to infiltration by VE organizations.
2. Counter-extremism interventions may call for securing the goodwill of local power brokers who preside over extensive patron-client networks. It may be necessary to channel assistance through them. However, one should ensure that good governance objectives critical to the long-term success of counter-extremism programming are not undermined.

In other words, counter-extremism programming may point to the need for striking with power brokers deals that are hard to reconcile with support for transparency, accountability, enhanced political competition at the grassroots level, and more effective state institutions – all of which constitute the nuts and bolts of standard D/G programming. In this respect as well, decision-makers will have to weigh carefully the trade-offs involved in pursuing counter-extremism as opposed to D/G objectives (and vice versa).

3. More generally, trade-offs may emerge between, *on the one hand, CE-driven efforts to strengthen and rely on local authority figures and institutions, and, on the other hand, the potentially equally pressing need to ensure the cooperation of the central government,* while boosting its capacity to exercise authority across the national territory.

4. One final trade-off that deserves special consideration relates to *reaching out to individuals or groups that hold similarly “extremist” ideas, but who neither engage in violence, nor condone the resort to it.*

CONCLUSION

The rules discussed above should come into play at different points in time. They first should be considered when a CE strategy is being developed and when specific activities are being examined. They also may be used after tentative decisions already have been made in both areas, as a way of “double-checking” that those decisions do not violate any of the basic principles outlined above. Finally, they can be used while implementation is underway to make mid-course adjustments in response to a changing environment or the appearance of harmful or unintended consequences. Doing so should improve significantly the quality of CE decision-making, and help avoid potentially serious mistakes that would make an already daunting task even harder.