Fostering Community Resilience for Preventing Violent Extremism: Perspectives from Central Asia

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Community resilience refers to the "capacity of a community to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of adverse events, either natural or caused by an individual or a group". It is a measure of the sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations and to learn from past disasters to strengthen future response and recovery efforts. Community resilience is a term often associated with disaster risk reductions, preparedness to mitigate environment disasters, emergency response and the ability to recover in a way that restores normal functioning in society. Although resilience is a term most often used for development in risky environments (such as a natural disasters), it is increasingly used for a broader set of adversity: economic downturn, a pandemic, crime, conflicts and terrorism. This paper will focus on how community resilience can help prevent terrorism.

Key words: community resilience, radicalisation, terrorism, tolerance, extremism, counter terrorism, prevention

Introduction

In the fight against radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism, it is evident that traditional law-enforcement tactics are insufficient by themselves. They need to be complemented by more proactive approaches, which consist of responding to the threat of radicalization and violent extremism, or, preferably, preventing it. Responses concentrate on identifying and pursuing individuals and groups prone to violent extremism and terrorism, curbing the financing that sustains their efforts, preventing their travel across borders, data gathering, sharing and analysis for intelligence. Methods for prevention include understanding and tackling the motivations that drive people and groups to radicalization; monitoring the Internet and social media for materials that spread radical narratives and incite violent actions, awareness-raising and the promotion of a culture of peace, dialogue and tolerance via the mass media and education systems. The most effective long-term solutions would be to address the grievances that those vulnerable to radicalization purport to suffer

from. Grievance targeting could include addressing discrimination in society and job markets, encouraging more representative government, providing socio-economic opportunities, including employment possibilities, education and social programs for marginalized youth. All these strategies are based on targeting individual motivations: be they economic (poverty, economic insecurity), political (ideological, religious), personal (revenge, grievances and psychological) or communal (marginalization, horizontal inequalities, poverty, discrimination on the basis of religion and ethnicity.).

While social and communal factors influence motivations, less attention is often paid to the environment in which individuals are either radicalized or deradicalized and the role that families and communities might play in this regard. The question of communities tends to come into the equation of strategies to counter terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization under two different lenses: One scrutiny, based on a negative narrative, focuses on how the community creates conditions for its members to become radicalized. This for example can happen among members of a religious community (in certain madrassas for example where a particularly unforgiving version of Islam is being taught); in prisons which are notorious hotbeds of radicalization through exchanges among prisoners; and even within families which help recruit brothers, wives etc. into so-called Jihad, such as is often the case in Central Asia.

The positive narrative, on the other hand, sees the community as the potential vehicle for helping prevent violent extremism (PVE), combat its manifestations, and cope with its aftermath. Such a proposition is based on the potential of communities as long as they are made resilient. This paper will examine this potential positive narrative to examine under what circumstances community resilience can help prevent, combat and deal with violent extremism and what the pitfalls could be.

It first describes what community resilience entails, before examining the potential role in each of the stages (before, during and after). The paper then raises a number of challenges or risks associated with over-focus on communities on the question of PVE before making some general conclusions on what could be considered for further action.

Conceptualizing Community Resilience
Preventing violent extremism (PVE) policies, as opposed to purely counter-terrorism (CT) strategies that have traditionally focused on developing technical resilience through emergency response, protection of infrastructure etc., need to fostering resilience at the level of ideas to counteract the appeal of violent extremism and terrorism (Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, 2009). This requires a local approach to PVE, an approach that brings the state closer to communities. While the responsibility for preventing, combating and managing the consequences of terrorist acts lie primarily with the state, communities, much like civil society, the media and private sector, are also stakeholders interested in the successful outcomes of the efforts of the state.

As PVE is a shared responsibility based on mutual support between the state and communities.

The term 'community', though complex and subject to different interpretations, can be said to generally consist of "individuals, groups and institutions based in the same area and/or having shared inter¬ests". As such, community can be see as a stakeholder group concerned about common issues, and/or an entity made up of individuals within a specific geography, a town, region, country, etc. It goes without saying that individuals and groups often belong to more than one community. Communities of interest can also transcend borders and have global and transnational dimensions, with new technologies facilitating linkages around common issues of interest.

Community resilience refers to the "capacity of a community to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of adverse events, either natural or caused by an individual or a group" (Fran et el, 2008). Rand Corporation defines it as a measure of the sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations and to learn from past disasters to strengthen future response and recovery efforts (OSCE, 2014). Community resilience is a term often associated with disaster risk reductions, preparedness to mitigate environment disasters, emergency response and the ability to recover in a way that restores normal functioning in society. Although resilience is a term most often used for development in risky environments (such as a natural disasters), it is increasingly used for a broader set of adversity: economic downturn, a pandemic, crime, conflicts and terrorism.

Emphasis on community resilience represents a paradigm shift from emergency response and infrastructure development, which sees people as passive victims of adversity, to transforming them as agents of change, people who can make informed decisions about avoiding and reducing risks through their human action (Jason, 2009). As such, community resilience is a very appropriate approach for the field of countering and preventing violent extremism.

Community resilience is part of an equation that includes community cohesion, an equation that leads to community security: not just physical security against assaults, but also human security in the wider sense of the word which cover a range of issues affecting the quality of life of community members (safety, welfare, livelihoods, dignity etc.). Increasingly so, national CT and PVE policies aim to build resilient communities in order to protect them, and the nation subsequently, from violent ideologies and actions. Resilient communities are supposed to then join the efforts of the state in support of PVE and CT efforts. The state therefore has an important role to play in creating, encouraging and sus¬taining cohesion among and between communities while protecting them against harm.

When it comes to the relationship between the state and communities in PVE and CT efforts, however, distinction should be made between community-

targeted and community-oriented approaches. Community-targeted efforts, the more traditional practice in CT and even PVE, including in Central Asian countries, involves the state, driven by national security priorities, targeting communities for law enforcement and intelligence-gathering efforts. While these efforts, which should be carried out within the framework of law and respect for human rights, may be necessary, they may also alienate communities under scrutiny (Spalek, 2012). They also don't take into consideration the needs of the communities as a whole and its members separately (for example men an women). As such, they may run the risk of marginalizing or even stigmatizing some communities and individuals. On the other hand, community-oriented approaches, of which community resilience is a major pillar, are better suited for gaining the trust of local communities, consulting with them, involving them, and ultimately responsibilizing them as stakeholders in PVE and CT efforts. They also put community concerns and safety on the same par as the national security concerns of the state, with the understanding that the security of the state depends on the human security of its citizens.

There is a growing recognition worldwide and in Central Asia that involving communities and building their resilience turns them from passive objects of law enforcement activities to active stakeholders. Such initiatives can also contribute to increased accountability of decision makers to citizens while strengthening public confidence in the states' security policies, measures and institutions of law and order.

Community resilience can be both the goal/vision/objective to achieve as well as a strategy/methodology/tool, a means to get toward the desired goals. In practice, resilience becomes a strategy and a vision for three stages: 1) prevention, 2) combating and 3) dealing with the aftermath of violent extremism and terrorism.

Community Resilience in Practice: Examples from Central Asia

Prevention
A resilient community is one that can detect and prevent radicalization that can lead to violent extremism and potentially terrorism. Resilience through community-oriented approaches requires community engagement, strong social networks and ties, communication, and multi-sector partnerships between government and communities. It can also be built through engagement with a variety of credible community actors, each requiring a specific kind of approach and strategy.

•   Families: In traditional societies such as those in Central Asia, where extended family ties are important vehicles for identity and support, there have been many cases of husbands influencing their wives and children to join them in fighting zones such as in Iraq and Syria, or even cases when women have agitated the youth for war in the name of "jihad". However, families can also be key stakeholders who can help identify and respond early to manifestations of violent extremism, and further dissuading their members from joining

extremist groups. Mothers, fathers, siblings and close family circles can be crucial conduits of positive values, traditions and worldviews. They can also help detect early signs of engagement with violent ideas or activities. Building resilience for families would entail raising awareness of its members, building trust with authorities, bringing them out of isolation, especially women whose great potential as moral authority can be downplayed by patriarchy or lack of economic empowerment. The role of fathers should also not be neglected, given how an absent father figure can lead to feelings of resentment and isolation, something very worrying in the Central Asian context of massive labor migration and the disruption of family bonds.

•   Cultural and religious leaders: Much has been written and said about radicalization that is supposed to stem from sermons and teachings of some clergies' narrow interpretations of Islam in madrasas and mosques of the region. At the same time, however, cultural and religious leaders/Imams who are close to communities and trusted by its members can also play a positive role by raising awareness about true religious principles and counter extremist narratives. Religious figures in Central Asia can become figures of moral authority instead of agents of recruitment into takfiri ideology. Building resilience among religious communities would require building trust among leaders both with state authorities and community members. It would also require legitimacy, religious proficiency that can provide authority, and a generally supportive environment. In the Central Asian region, the state has increasingly interfered in the affairs of religious leaders, specifying for example the topic of Friday sermons, registering and controlling madrassas, banning public servants from attending mosques and providing certification of Imam Khatibs. Balance is needed between undermining the role of religious leader through cooption and control and giving free hand to those preaching intolerance and violence.

•   Education institutions can help build resilience to prevent violent extremism at the community level. As the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair observed in his speech at the UN Security Council in November 2013, "The root causes of extremism will never be defeated by security measures, only the education of young people can achieve their demise." Especially in Central Asia where budget for and quality of education institutions have taken a heavy toll during times of crisis and transition, formal and non-formal education and life-skills need to be on top of the agenda of local authorities. Educational institutions are an important point of interaction for families and communities when values and lessons imparted in the classroom can be reinforced at home. Teachers can also play a role as moral authority if they are trusted.

•   Youth groups could also be credible community actors to build resilience for the prevention approach. When they are ostracized, marginalized, excluded, unemployed and frustrated, they are the vulnerable group potentially subject to recruitment and radicalization. But not all angry young people are voicing their grievances through radicalization. When their resilience is high, they can show by example the possibility of engaging in civic action, local politics, and cultural

and education avenues to lobby for their needs. Tajikistan has an example of a youth group "Avangard", set up in August 2015 to combat the spread of radical ideas among Tajik youth. They have collaborated with authorities to travels among young migrants in Russia in order to hold discussions on respect for the foundations of the state, national values etc., all in view of dissuading potential recruitment. What can tip a potentially disgruntled group of young people from victims or recruiters of extremist groups to advocates for peace and unity within the community is the trust that the state can incite in its relationships with them. In this process of trust and confidence building, the importance of providing jobs, avenues for political participation, hope and dignity for a better alternative future is primordial for success. Attention should therefore not only be paid to youth leaders but also to marginalized youths who may be most vulnerable to recruitment by extremists.

Response

Community resilience is not only a strategy for preventing violent extremism but can also be a way for communities to combat extremism as it happens. Communities can be made responsible for establishing their own secure environment. One way to do that is to engage them in a more community-centric and collaborative approach to policing.

Where trust is built, communities can help the police in keeping vigilance, intelligence gathering and in making arrests, while the police, when seen as a resourceful and efficient institution, can be a point of referral and contact for communities in need for protection. Community policing does not mean citizen's arrest practices or rendering of justice by communities directly. It means proper and effective interaction between the police with families and communities.

Community policing is "a philosophy and organizational strategy that promotes a partnership-based collaborative effort between the police and the community to more efficiently identify, prevent and solve problems at the local level. It shifts the focus of police by placing equal emphasis on crime control, order maintenance, and service provision" (Hedayah Center and Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2009).

The principle idea behind this concept is the partnership necessary between the community and the police based on mutual need and trust. The legitimacy of the policy can increase in the views of the community when consent is sought in matters of local law and order, and public service delivery is tangibly improved (Blair, 2013). The public can in turn be encouraged to share with the police its concerns information, and to report any suspicious activity. The police however should not be seen as meddling between community members or taking sides in local disputes in biased ways that would then endanger its credibility, legitimacy and neutrality.

The role of the state in building resilience for communities to combat violent extremism would be to provide adequate information, improve communication

with communities on its CT activities and policies, make information about protective measures available and accessible, provide credible assessments of terrorist threats, etc..   Public support would also depend much on the respect for human rights and rule of law that state institutions display.

Aftermath

Resilience building for communities that have undergone a traumatic event, such as terrorism, or who have in their midst ex-combatant and foreign fighter returnees requires particular types of initiatives. In order to increase their resilience following a terrorist attack, local communities should pre-plan and prepare their responses, including to persons harmed and injured. Support and practical assistance needs to be immediately mobilized for the victims and survivors of the incident, and the support continued in the long-term in order to help prevent isolation, grief, anger and other negative outcomes that are harmful to communities. Response needs to start with planning ahead through a comprehensive plan which goes beyond immediate emergency response and physical rescue/recovery of victims to providing support and after-care measures to victims and survivors over the short, medium and long-term. The Canadian government has for example prepared a Checklist (Mathew, 2013), which consists of 9 broad categories based on information and lessons learned from international experiences that can help prepare and enhance a community's capacity to respond to victims.

When a former radicalized person (assuming one who has not been imprisoned) is reintegrated into his/her family and community, he/she needs special support for de-radicalization and disengagement. While the provision of skills, employment, education, healthcare etc., are primordial responsibilities of the state in order to prevent radicalization in the first place they also become services needed in the process of sustainable rehabilitation afterwards. Hope and dignity for a better alternative future is primordial for success. Once disengaged and rehabilitated, former extremists and radicals can also become a great voice of experience for countering radicalization among their communities and peers.

The community and family also need to be supported in order to accept and reintegrate the former extremist in their midst. This support should be in terms of resources, but also moral, psychological and social. Typically government-led, donor supported programs on DDR (Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration) or on the reintegration of former combatants, put aside small grants for communities willing to host (back) ex-combatants in their midst. These grants, geared towards small infrastructure or social projects, are supposed to act as incentives for the cooperation of the communities with returnees. The UNDP supported Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) is an example in the region with a host of lessons for the future as Central Asian countries prepare for the return of former ISIS members from Iraq and Syria. Below, we shall return to the pitfalls of distributing aid on the basis of not needs but of cooperation with security institutions.

Whether former violent extremists are in prison or not, families can play a particularly critical role in the psycho-social rehabilitation process by

reengaging with them, helping the deradicalization process through support or pressure, etc.

Risks of Over-focus on Communities

While community resilience seems to be an optimal tool and a vision for the prevention of, response to and recovery from violent extremism, over-reliance on it by the state and international organizations is not without challenges. Resilience building can deliver tangible benefits but there are also inherent risks that should be highlighted. These include:

1)   Ostracizing and stigmatizing particular communities by putting them under scrutiny: When a community is singled out by the state as being home to extremists, not only is resilience undermined but isolation and even confrontation ensues. Stigmatization gives the false impression that there are problem communities that are more vulnerable to extremism than others, while in reality it would be a damning sentence on an entire community based on the actions of few individuals. Over-focus on some communities has already undermined the reputation, often underserved, of particular town/entities (for example villages from which a large number of young men who have been recruited into ISIS have called home in Central Asia) or religious communities (notably, the community of Muslims in European cities for example, especially those that hail from neighborhoods where Jihadist have been living, such as the notorious Molenbeek in Belgium for example).

2)   Cooption of communities by the state for security purposes: This paper has made the case that the resilience of communities depends on how much their needs have been taken into consideration and trust is built with state authorities. If communities become mere peons in the security interests of the state, then mistrust , misperceptions and tensions can actually grow, especially if there have already been cases of police misconduct. Engagement of law enforcement authorities with communities could be perceived as a cover for special operations aimed at gathering intelli¬gence, monitoring and surveillance of particular communities. It is for this reason that community-oriented as opposed to community-targeted approaches are infinitely more important for long-term resilience building.

3)   Interference from the outside: An effective community is primarily based on trust and confidence among its members. Change from outside can inevitably impact that trust, often for the better one would hope, but sometimes also for the worse. As the question of violent extremism and terrorism is extremely sensitive, overt and aggressive interference from outside of communities could unleash negative dynamics and backlash. It would be better if the communities evolved organically towards their resilience, supported by external actors, but given the space for autonomous action and digestion of new ideas and methods.

4)   Politicization of aid to communities: As discussed above, support to communities on the basis of their cooperation with security imperatives of the state creates a distortion of the logic and rationale of humanitarian

and development assistance. The politicization of aid based on security conditionality can create negative precedence and inappropriate incentives.

Conclusions

Obviously, preventing and responding to violent extremism and terrorism is not solely the task of the police, of the security services, or of government. Local stakeholders, i.e. communities who are directly affected, should also be involved. Burden sharing is the only effective long-term strategy to adopt. While top down approaches are needed by the state to protect its citizens, create conditions and build confidence in the institutions of the state, bottom up initiatives are also necessary. That is where communities and people come in. Bottom up requires the activation of communities, families, religious leaders, youth and women's groups, private sector, neighborhood watches etc. Communities have an organic responsibility to protect their interests, claim their rights and contribute to local and national solutions. Their degree of resilience is the measure of success for the nation.

The state has an important role to play in creating, encouraging and sus¬taining cohesion, trust and confidence among all communities in society. It can do so by promot¬ing a sense of identity that is both credible and enduring, and conditions for the security of communities. Cohesion and security are reinforced by and reinforce in turn the notion of resilience.

What would be the role of international organizations in this midst? The answer would be a fine balance between supporting top down and bottom up initiatives and helping them meet for a comprehensive, sustainable and nationally owned approach to violent extremism and terrorism. Too often the work of international organizations is isolation of one or the other pillar: Many build capacities of state security institutions without facilitating dialogue with communities and civil society organizations. Others over-focus on community development and resilience projects without emphasizing on linkages with national policies and plans. They should ensure that local initiatives are better aligned with government strategies and vice versa.

In the final analysis, resilience building requires long-term sustained solutions, patience and space for local autonomy. It is fundamentally based on the empowerment of people and communities so that they understand – and take action – that benefits the common good.

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