# POWER OF INCLUSION IN COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Experts have warned that increased social isolation, boredom, conspiracy theories, and feelings of marginalization during the COVID-19 pandemic, will increase the risk of radicalization among young people. Throughout history, extremist groups have excelled at exploiting and manipulating socio-economic grievances to incite violence. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have routinely used injustices in Palestine, Syria, Iraq and other countries to solicit support.

## EXPLOITING WORKING CONDITIONS

More recently, they were quick to enlist the deadly coronavirus as “soldiers of Allah”; capitalizing on simmering tensions and denouncing the capitalistic intoxication of Western leaders, and their callousness towards the wellbeing of the societies they govern. In the wake of international outrage sparked by the killing of African American George Floyd by a white police officer, Al-Qaeda has even positioned itself as championing the oppressed against police brutality and systemic racism.

On the other end of the ideological spectrum, white nationalists are scapegoating the Jews for allegedly manufacturing the pandemic to profit from market collapses through insider trading. Whereas, American far-right groups have encouraged their virus-infected members to spray bodily fluids at police officers and Jews, according to FBI intelligence. It is worth noting that in the U.S., the term alt-right first emerged in November 2008, which was also the year of the worst global financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In the documentary White Right: Meeting the Enemy, the filmmaker asked the NSM (an American Neo-Nazi political party) why they had relocated to Detroit. Their response was: “It’s the perfect time to recruit for

NSM because of the economic decline." Similarly, Journey to Extremism in Africa, a report published by the United Nations, revealed that 55% of voluntary terrorist recruits express frustration at their economic conditions; 83% feel marginalized and believe that their government only looks after the interests of a few; and more than 75% have zero trust in governance and law enforcement institutions. Accordingly, those who expressed a significantly lower degree of confidence in their governments and in their potential to deliver progress or meaningful change, were the most susceptible to radicalization.

In the second quarter of this year, the pandemic will have left nearly 200 million unemployed, proving to be considerably worse than the 2008-9 financial crisis, according to the International Labour Organization. The World Bank released a recent report revealing that the pandemic represents the deepest global recession since World War Two. While this is sufficiently disruptive for developed and stable nations, fragile states are far more vulnerable. When a government fails to adequately provide for its people, terrorist groups are quick to seize the role of welfare provider. In this hard-to-break social contract, societal dependence provides militant groups with the immunity and license to operate.

In looking to a post-pandemic world, we cannot afford the cost of preventable violence. Terrorism cost the world's economy US$33 billion in 2018. This figure did not account for the social ramifications, nor the wider indirect economic impacts on business, investment and the costs associated with security agencies in countering terrorism. As the global community prepares for a new chapter in its fight against terrorism amid—and after—the pandemic, there are prudent, if somewhat unorthodox, lessons worth recalling.

## HEIGHTENED COMPETITION

For the average fighter, the "caliphate" represents an imagined community constructed over shared grievances and a promise of fulfillment. Militant groups skillfully offer disaffected young outcasts, regardless of their religious ideology, something that they are missing and willing to die for: dignity, opportunity, and belonging.

We don't seem to recognize that whether we want to or not, we are "competing" with terrorist organizations to fulfill these basic human needs.

Rather than narrowly focusing on the professed goal of establishing a caliphate, we should instead focus on their value proposition and provide a more authentic and sustainable version of the socioeconomic inclusion they allege to offer. In fact, it was precisely the disillusionment of foreign trained fighters (FTFs) with on-the ground realities, and the failure of the so-called Islamic state to deliver on its promises, that many renounced their allegiance to the group and left.

Several studies by multilateral organizations, think-tanks and military academies have revealed that approximately 65% of FTFs did not have an education beyond high school, and that almost 90% were either unemployed or engaged in low-skilled work. Many earned less than US$500 a month. In Nigeria, ISIS's West African ally Boko Haram prospered amidst socioeconomic (and other) inequalities between the underdeveloped and mostly Muslim North, and the relatively better-off and predominantly Christian South. The mere visibility of USAID programs correlated with decreased support for extremist groups, more positive views of the U.S., and the Nigerians' increased optimism of opportunity and confidence in their government.

## MILITARY INTERVENTIONS AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE OUTCOMES

The history of Boko Haram in Nigeria also offers a cautionary tale. Following a "successful" military campaign that weakened the insurgent group in Nigeria, militants dispersed and spread through offshoots into neighboring Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, increasing the number of terrorism-related deaths in those three countries by 157%. Historically, military interventions have led to the demise of just 7% of terrorist organizations since 1968. Despite a $6 trillion annual investment in counterterrorism, the number of terrorist attacks worldwide per year has increased five-fold since 2001. Meanwhile, peacebuilding organizations remain grossly underfunded—even though socio-economically uplifting programs are the foundation of prevention; in other words: building societies that are resilient to violent extremism.

Western-led military force can also reinforce an "us versus them" narrative, feeding polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims. Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda recognize—as proven by research—that discriminating against people who are struggling to culturally assimilate can make them more susceptible to extremism. Nowhere has this polarization been more pronounced than in Western countries with dominant Muslim immigrant communities. Here, the radicalized are not driven by poverty, but rather by inequality. In France, for instance, a Christian citizen with an African heritage is 2.5 times more likely than a Muslim with the same ethnic background and the same qualifications to get called for a job interview. It is no coincidence that 70% of Western FTFs and 41% of “homegrown jihadists” are immigrants from these subculture communities.

A superficial analysis may lead one to deduce that this is a problem of immigrants. It’s not. This is a problem of marginalized multigenerational diaspora enclaves in pursuit of egalitarian societies and upward socioeconomic mobility. In many cases, their limited connections and integration within mainstream society reinforce an identity crisis.

Young, second-generation cultural castaways are marooned between a Western identity that refuses to fully accept them and a motherland that rejects them. Predictably, they search for identity and belonging elsewhere. After extensively examining the interviews and personal histories of over 2,000 foreign fighters in an Al-Qaeda era-study, U.S. Army Colonel and psychologist John M. Venhaus concluded that recruits were, overwhelmingly, driven by this existential pursuit. Making immigrants feel valued and desegregated—as opposed to making them feel like strangers in their homeland—is critical to neutralizing the appeal of terrorist groups.

## SUPREMACY OF INCLUSION

Recognizing that governments are currently faced with tremendous pressures, we can look to municipalities that have already demonstrated the positive outcomes that inclusive policies can have on discouraging young residents from turning to violent extremism. Mechelen, Belgium, a city between the former ISIS hotbeds of Antwerp and Brussels, is home to 20,000 Muslims—more than Hungary and Slovakia combined. But not one single person from this city was successfully enlisted to join ISIS. Intentional policies of inclusion and opportunity have reached immigrants, who would otherwise face marginalization. Urban renewal and revitalization projects have upgraded rundown neighborhoods melding socioeconomic classes and promoting class-based integration between immigrants and the affluent.

Young people view themselves as full—rather than second class—citizens and are consequently buoyed by opportunity and hope, making them less susceptible to fraudulent offers from terror networks at home and abroad. Policing is an integral part of community stewardship, as opposed to punitive law enforcement. Mechelen may be an outlier but its model warrants consideration.

Vilvoorde had once provided ISIS with twenty-eight recruits—despite being half Mechelen's size. In 2014, the Belgian municipality adopted Mechelen's model. Two years later, the ISIS-bound departures stopped. Mechelen's Mayor Bart Somers understood that the secret to scaling violent extremist movements is exploiting grievances. As injustices mount—both perceived and real—so do security deficits. Ultimately, while coercive measures represent an important component of safeguarding human security, as former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted, "Missiles may kill terrorists. But good governance kills terrorism."