

YOUTH

AND THE FIELD OF

COUNTERING

VIOLENT

EXTREMISM

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE

SUMMARY

IF the field known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE) did not exist, most young people still would not join a violent extremist organization (VEO). At the same time, although most youth are peaceful, the overwhelming majority of people who become violent extremists are youth — and most are male youth. The lack of clarity about the fraction of youth populations vulnerable to violent extremism makes the practice of countering or preventing entrance into a VEO an exceptionally challenging endeavor.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to investigate the youth challenge in the CVE field. It probes the role youth play in CVE and suggests recommendations for enhancing CVE’s effectiveness. The paper also examines youth with reference to violence, conflict, the state, and struggles to achieve adulthood. The analysis features interviews with 21 experts and a review of over 400 publications on violent extremism, CVE, and youth. The primary contexts considered are the Middle East and Africa, particularly what one expert called “the big four” violent extremist groups: ISIS and al-Qaeda (both of which are based mainly in the Middle East) and Boko Haram and al-Shabaab (which are located in sub-Saharan Africa).

The analysis reveals two correlations underpinning the context for youth and violent extremism. First, there is a direct relationship between nations with “youth bulge” populations and state repression. Second, state repression is linked to increases in violent extremism. In both cases, repressive states usually target male youth.

In addition, there remains a tendency to treat youth as a problem to address instead of actors with whom to engage. Governments, international institutions, and elite leaders routinely resist enacting the policy and practice reforms that today’s huge youth populations demand.

Threatened or failed adulthood (failed masculinity in particular) also emerges as an important cause of instability. Across much of Africa, the Middle East, and beyond, youth struggle and often fail to gain social recognition as adults. This can exacerbate humiliation, exclusion, and alienation for both female and male youth while laying the groundwork for pronounced tensions between older elites and struggling young people. VEOs exploit this fertile recruitment ground.

Four central conclusions emerge from the analysis for this discussion paper:

- 1 *Youth:* Although CVE is a form of inquiry and activity related to youth, a deep understanding of what it is like to be a female or male youth in areas vulnerable to VEO activity is largely missing.
- 2 *Gender:* While gender is a dynamic central force in youth’s lives and VEO recruitment strategies, gender issues often are not central to the CVE field nor to research on violent extremism. The increasing body of research on the essential roles that women and female youth play in VEOs is encouraging. However, the pronounced underemphasis of masculinity issues is disturbing, particularly given the centrality

of emasculation, shame, humiliation, and related concerns for youth and VEO recruiters — and the fact that most VEO recruits are male youth. “Gender” is also chiefly understood to refer to women while “youth” is mainly understood to refer to male youth — both distortions that underemphasize female and male youth’s struggles with adulthood, exclusion, disempowerment, and alienation.

- 3 *Governance:* Government behavior has been found to regularly sideline youthful populations and boost VEO efforts unintentionally. State repression is counterproductive in the extreme because it separates youth from governments and undercuts the viability of alternatives to joining a VEO.
- 4 *Community:* Even as communities play a central role in CVE practice, some local leaders exhibit a low tolerance for dissent and actively marginalize youth. Some youth may respond by forming their own communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations include the following:

- 1 *Make the CVE-youth connection emphatic.* Enhancing the focus on youth promises to expand the awareness and understanding of which youth enter VEOs — and of why most youth never do. The central aim should be to build and apply knowledge of what it is like to be a female or male youth in areas where violent extremists are active or that are vulnerable to violent extremist activity.
- 2 *Directly link and highlight “youth” and “gender” in research and action.* The “gender and CVE” field mixes significant advancement with perplexing oversight. Efforts to detail the vital roles of female youth and women for VEOs are crucial. However, the study of male youth is inadequate given that male youth dominate the ranks of VEOs and that exploiting masculine vulnerabilities is a VEO specialty. Emasculation, humiliation, exclusion, and alienation should be examined much more deeply. Currently, VEOs demonstrate gender expertise. In response, the underemphasis on issues of masculinity must be reversed while investigation of the essential functions of female youth and women for VEOs must expand.

- 3 *Highlight class divisions in policy and program work.* Two sets of class divisions should be investigated and used to inform policy and program work: those within youth populations and those driven by elite leaders who actively marginalize and repress certain kinds of youth — including youth vulnerable to entering a VEO.
- 4 *Ensure that CVE action emerges from what the local context requires.* Programs should be directly informed by focused research on youth-specific local dynamics. While reaching truly marginalized youth may be difficult for CVE practitioners, it appears to be a VEO specialty. Accordingly, CVE initiatives should be customized to address those youth identified by research as most vulnerable to VEO recruiters. Considering creative approaches to local programming guided by marginalized youth is recommended. Partnering with youth, recognizing the positive contributions of youth to CVE and peacebuilding, and promoting peaceful masculinities are all recommended. Never overlook the gender-specific concerns, priorities, and vulnerabilities of female and male youth.
- 5 *Remember that locally driven approaches to CVE challenges are necessary but not sufficient.* Positive engagement with youth is a potential “win-win” for governments. Repression is not. Determined and steadfast advocacy with governments should draw on expertise gained from research and CVE programming. It should center on the meaningful reform of policies and practices that repress and exclude youth. Partnerships that link government and elite leaders with youth may be nontraditional and, at first, uncomfortable, particularly for power brokers and security forces personnel. However, they also are crucial to future CVE and peacebuilding success.
- 6 *Maintain a learning environment in CVE work.* Effective CVE work is hard to do and even harder to prove. Compared to the development field, where pressure to demonstrate success often is high, the CVE field appears to be more open to learning from well-intentioned missteps. Continued encouragement of informed experimentation is urged.

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