EXPERT ROUNDTABLE ON

Psychological Resilience to Extremism and Violent Extremism

18, 20, 24 MAY 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the 18ᵗʰ of May 2021, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, Hedayah, and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) launched the first session of a 3-day joint organized expert roundtable on psychological resilience to violent extremism. The roundtable aimed to:

1. Identify relevant psychological factors that increase individual resilience to extremism and violent extremism;

2. Provide practical recommendations for cognitive and behavioral skills that can be incorporated into preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programs; and,

3. Prioritize areas for further research studies on this subject.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the expert roundtable, summarizing key highlights, and recommendations made during the presentations and discussions that took place during the three-day event. The sections below are presented in the order of sessions of the roundtable.

OPENING REMARKS

The expert roundtable commenced with remarks made by co-organizers, Hedayah and the ICT, supported by statements from the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (CTED).

During the opening remarks from CTED, it was highlighted that this year marked the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks against the US that resulted in the UN Security Council unanimously adopting Resolution 1373, which established the CTC in 2001, followed by Resolution 1535 which established the CTED as an expert body to assist the work of the CTC in 2004. The Committee has been dedicated to enhancing approaches through more specific and technical policies with multilayered and comprehensive measures over the last 20 years – and more recently highlighting the importance of psychological resilience in the context of violent extremism, especially when it comes to young people. There continues to be a need for engaging the youth, enhancing access to good education, and stressing the need for, and benefits of, psychological support to assist them in resisting propaganda and violence. In 2020, the Security Council adopted UN Resolution 2535, which reaffirmed the UNs commitment to building the resilience and representation of young people, underscoring the integral role of the youth for conflict prevention and resolution – stressing the importance of developing more policies tailored to these issues. It is among the first but certainly not last step in the right direction for global P/CVE initiatives.

In Hedayah's remarks it was underlined that the topic of terrorism is often associated with the Middle East. Although terrorism is a global phenomenon, it is important to address the major challenges by focusing on local discourse and customizing approaches to community and region specificities. However, a collective effort is still needed to develop a global strategy for countering terrorism that goes to the root of the problem. Countering radical religious ideologies also demands enhanced approaches to build resilience. Extremist narratives and radical preachers have hijacked Islam as a religion, manipulating it to be associated with "radicalism" and to serve the agendas of extremist ideologies. To effectively prevent and counter this, we need to assess and analyze the culture and the mindset of those who engage in acts of terrorism. Only then can we create counter-narratives for those who are radicalized based on a better understanding of the Islamic culture itself. This form of radicalization and extremist ideologies demand innovation and different approaches to highlight and focus on different environments that can and do bread

radical ideologies – as such, approaches need to be framed to account for the inherent variation among different global cultures.

The ICT added that this co-organized roundtable was dedicated to the topic of psychological resilience to terrorism and violent extremism, and that it marks the first step in developing a long-standing strategic partnership that will last for years. The synergetic expertise that has been accumulated throughout the last decade will serve to benefit the international community, the Middle East, and local communities and populations. The overall benefits from partnerships and collaborative approaches will be immense, and the collective effort of ICT and Hedayah will enhance policies to build a better and safer region, as well as world. The ICT and Hedayah are a natural fit for one another and share many important similarities – a dedication to countering violent extremism, non-governmental institutions, and a strong focus on resilience programs. Through collaboration, ICT and Hedayah have the ability to better tackle the challenges of violent extremism regionally and globally.

Finally, the opening remarks from the UNOCT highlighted the critical timing of this roundtable discussion at a time when the entire world has struggled with the rising rates of terrorism during COVID-19. The pandemic has magnified existing and emerging trends in violent extremism and exacerbated its drivers – highlighting the need for a 'whole of society' approach and strategic investments into resilience methods as an aspect of prevention. ISIS and Al-Qaida have remained resilient and continue to expand their reach, gaining ground in Africa and other conflict zones while exploiting grievances and fueling instability. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the growing threat of conspiracy theories and the transnationality of white supremacy (and other ethnically motivated extremist movements). The UNCCT has launched a Global Programme to prevent and counter-terrorism and violent extremism, helping member states and civil societies to build evidence-based policy on national resilience. These responses include the proper human rights dimension, gender-based approaches, and youth empowerment. Finally, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health has become an important factor to consider in building individual and community resilience. Continued focus needs to be on empowering young people as agents of change in the face of violent extremism and incorporating them in prevention programs. The UNOCT also emphasized the desire and need to continue building a strong partnership with Hedayah, the ICT, and other dedicated organizations around the world.

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

The goal of this roundtable is to identify the psychological factors that could make them stronger and collect practical recommendations that can be incorporated into preventing and countering violent extremism programs. To achieve this goal, the participants were invited to speak under Chatham House Rule, encouraging more engaging debates and discussions. The roundtable was divided into 6 sessions, each with a distinct subject matter. A summary of the points and discussions of that roundtable is included in the sections that follow.

DAY 1 – MAY 18, 2021

Session 1: **Psychological Motivations to Terrorism**

In this session, the first speaker highlighted the importance of assessing circumstances and individual psychological characteristics that play a role in "making a terrorist." The circumstances that relate to terrorism, generally defined as a politically or ideologically motivated act of violence, differ per situation based on several factors. In circumstances where most of an affected populations experience shared grievances, only a minority of people will be driven to extremist ideologies and resort to violence. Some of the easy to identify non-psychological individual characteristics include the individual's age and gender (e.g., young and male) – but this does not account for why some individuals become engaged in terrorism while others, with the same characteristics, do not. Instead, it is the psychological characteristics, personalities, and mental traits that can help assist with the "why" and "why not" questions. A person's mental state, personality, and characteristics are among other critical factors in the likelihood that someone resorts to terror.

A recent study on lone actors showed that 2/3 of participants in the study were diagnosed with forms of psychotic disorders, suicidal tendencies, and/or severe personality disorders. Stemming from the results of this study, and others like it, comes the necessity to further understand the reason(s) behind acts of terrorism. Is it motivated by the desire to kill or to die? And, if it is motivated by the desire to die, then, why die while killing others? Two concrete findings arose. Firstly, suicide was a big driver of carrying out acts of violence. A terror attack can be an outcome or reaction between someone's individual mental state and a political and/or social situation combined. In general, the wish to die and wish to kill dwell together in the same person. Secondly, an answer seems to reside in the public legitimacy gained from acts of terrorism. For

many terrorists, approval from the public and the community's endorsement of violence justifies individuals' terroristic actions. Larger public legitimacy means that there is less need for psychological factors to contribute to the process of radicalization. The study also shows that the proportion of suicidal factors was higher among lone wolves/actors than among individuals recruited by terrorist organizations to carry out suicide missions. However, the findings in this study were specific in terms of place, population, and situation – thus, there is a need for studies in other places too.

The next speaker presented a research study with 350,000 participants that used a meta-analysis methodology to consider the different push factors of radicalization – including perceived injustice, the so-called quest for personal recognition and significance, low integration, in-group connectedness, in-group mentality, and more. The strongest predictors of violent extremism were identified as this identity fusion and in-group connectedness. According to medical tests, the feelings of social deprivation, exclusion, and discrimination are registered and felt in the same part of the brain as physical pain – the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). The ACC will light up and flare for both physical pain and social exclusion, meaning that the feeling of social pain can equate to those of physical pain. Some other relevant psychological factors that were found include obsessive passions for an ideology or a cause that results in a focus on one particular goal while neglecting all others.

In addition to these psychological elements are the 3 "N's" of radicalization: needs (the quest for significance), networks (other people who believe in the same narrative and shift to collectivism in the quest for significance), and narratives (the ideology of the group, including values and beliefs, which provides the means to significance – the framework for justifying violence collectively). The ideology embedded in violent extremism tells the members what they should be doing to feel like they matter. Most radical ideologies have 3 core elements: grievance, culprit (someone who is responsible for the grievance), and method (terrorism) to eliminate the culprit. The network component is highly important since the study showed that roughly 66% of people that join extremist groups are through peers. As well, ideological narratives that support and legitimize violence create frameworks in which the probability of members using violence is much higher.

There is a difference between the triggers for individual participation and the triggers resulting in a wave of attacks perpetrated by a group. On the group level, the trigger is often external circumstances such as political events – for instance, a wave of violence triggered by negotiations

and peace talks between rival groups. On the individual level, the triggers are often an interplay between personality characteristics and external factors triggering the act of violence. These external triggers can be both political and personal – also depending on the personality of the attacker.

How to address the 3N's: In light of the fact that the 3N's often come in a package (that meaning they are difficult to distinguish/separate from one another), it is a complex problem to evaluate and solve. Generally speaking, needs should be addressed first, followed by the networks and then the narratives. Elements to assist the needs component can include psychological counseling, sports, and cultural counseling. The needs should also focus on providing individuals with alternative ways to address their grievances and/or political concerns. In terms of network, the focus should be placed on reconnecting with appropriate people with personal connections and positive influence – seeking outside counseling can be an effective method of doing so. Lastly, the response to narratives needs to focus on the trauma of individuals, the ideology of the group, and discussions on the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of violence and terrorism. It is important to keep in mind that needs should always be addressed first and focused on building a human connection, to show empathy and care for individuals, thereby securing their trust. After roughly 6 months to a year, depending on the case, the networks, narratives, and counter-messaging can begin to be addressed.

These strategies should be carried out in cooperation between a variety of important players, including governmental social workers, prison guards, and clerics. The important element in all these is personal encounters and treating them as people (i.e., with humanity and compassion instead of approaching them as a problem that needs solving). Although some research has been done to show that prisoners who form a sort of bond with the prison guards deradicalize much faster than those who do not – more research still needs to be done to better understand who else needs to be involved in the process.

There have been several cases in which suicide bombers changed their minds. For instance, out of 60 cases of suicide bombers, 36% of them deserted at a certain stage – most often the individual was recruited around one month beforehand and dropped out within the last 24 hours of their planned attack. The rationality for carrying out suicidal attacks differ: 20% of them have extreme suicidal tendencies and 20% have middle ground suicidal tendencies (together equating to 40%). In reality, suicidality does not mean individuals will kill themselves immediately, so the time between the recruitment and the moment of the attack, usually one month, serves to test their

intention of completing the suicide mission or abandoning it. Another reason why some individuals abandon suicide missions is due to the perpetual growth of fear in proximity to the materialization of the threat – meaning people grow increasingly afraid as time winds down, especially in conflict situations.

Recommendations and Main Takeaways

1. Several psychological factors are involved in the process of radicalization and we need to consider them to develop policies to effectively counter targeted narratives.

2. Additional empirical research is needed on how the radicalization process itself unfolds over time – more specifically on studying and testing the psychological factors that contribute to radicalization, to what degree each factor impacts the process (which is most and least impactful), and how the various factors are intertwined with each other throughout the process of radicalization.

3. In instances where the potential terrorists' community conveys popular support for the cause(s) that drive terrorists to violence, the individual psychology and personality of the suicide attackers become a less important factor because the act would be perceived as brave and heroic in the eyes of the terrorists' community. In other words, the more popularity terrorist causes receive in a community, the less important personal psychological factors become. As such, it beckons the question of how the community narratives, in cases where terrorism garners high levels of popularity and support, can be changed away from providing society-level moral support and heroic validations for suicide attacks.

Session 2: **Psychological Factors of Resilience to Violent Extremism**

In this session, the speaker presented a case of a Malaysian woman, who was able to convey a humanizing story for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to encourage and legitimize terrorism and violence as a response to the injustices occurring around the world. This recruitment to ISIS is based on three stages: identification of the problem, for example, the ongoing global injustices against Muslims; identification of the actors responsible for the problem; and the presentation of an active solution. The actions legitimized in these scenarios are ones that call for violence and violent extremism. Thus, the narrative proposed by ISIS is to abandon

normal lifestyles and engage in terrorism and violence in order to avenge those responsible for injustices against Muslims.

In order to strengthen resilience to these kinds of threats and narratives, it is important to foster an understanding of the difference between killing for a cause and dying for a cause; encouraging the willingness to build bridges, to not conform to violence for network-sake, and to forgive others. Differentiating the killing and dying for a cause and explaining it to them as "this terror organization wants YOU to KILL for a cause, not die for a cause," opens a window to disrupt the process. It is also important to promote the message of "the ends do not justify the means." The other key factors for building resilience are the power of empathy, and understanding the benefits of diversity and diverse viewpoints among human beings. When it comes to the practical skills and tactics for building resilience to violent extremism, the most important elements are non-violent strategies and critical thinking in order to teach young people to ask difficult questions such as whether or not violence works. It is also helpful to show young people that terrorist groups have their own agenda and interests, and we need to expose these lies and critically elaborate on why this is the case.

In particular, it is important for the younger generation to have positive mentors (namely focused on local contexts) and inspirational figures (these can be international sources/individuals). It is also helpful to amplify the voice of victims and former terrorists/extremists, who can also serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for the younger generation – finding common ground on share stories, experiences, and previous grievances to help guide vulnerable youth. A way to achieve this is to reclaim social media, as terrorists and extremists have had the ability to control it in recent years. Given the vast use of social media, it is an important platform to reach out to young people. Young people need to be encouraged to produce online narratives, and to redefine concepts and terms that have been manipulated by extremists– for instance, honor and bravery embedded in acts of terror and violence (both of which are blatantly false).

One of the participants noted that the process of radicalization for lone actor terrorists can be explained using the "bathtub model" analogy. This model references the "bathtub" as the mind of the terrorist, in which the bath is filled with different sources of water representing different inputs from psychological and personal grievances and frustrations. The walls of the bathtub represent the maximum level of frustration that a person can accumulate before becoming full and overflowing – which references the ongoing maturation of a terrorist's decision to carry out an attack.

Regarding the narratives, it is important to provide people with alternative discourse to the idea that terrorism and suicide bombing are honorable, brave, and courageous. Young people especially can be convinced of this narrative, as many do not have critical thinking abilities yet, so the narrative that there is no honor in killing defenseless people needs to be promoted. There is also a need to address the ecosystems that allow for terrorist ideologies to flourish, that is the environment in which people evolve. However, to disrupt this ecosystem, trust between different people must be established prior to introducing counter-narratives. Lastly, there is a need to address the romanticization of jihad and the concept of suicide bombers as warriors/heroes. Instead, the idea of peace and unity should be romanticized. Finding common ground between diverse people and communities can be one way of fixing the ecosystem, overcoming differences, and promoting critical thinking.

For approaches to critical thinking, the emphasis should be on promoting individual research on both sides of the coin – meaning that research should encompass organizations/individuals that someone likes and does not like, then learning ways to critically evaluate those findings independently. Furthermore, the approach of "let me tell you why you are wrong" will be counterproductive, it breaks trust and distances actors. Providing a supportive environment and trying to find a common ground will yield more beneficial results. Lastly, emphasis should be placed on providing inspirational sources that vulnerable young people may be lacking (since the targets of terrorists are often children alone and/or lack family/father figures).

Recommendations and Main Takeaways

1. Suicide bombing and the ISIS-ized way of "jihad" needs to be de-romanticized through careful assessment of existing ways of reaching out to individuals vulnerable to it.

2. Identify ways to introduce critical thinking into the lives of young people, without breaking their trust, so they can discover methods of independent thinking and feel empowered by their own capabilities – instead of falling pray to extremist narratives and falsely believing violence is empowering.

3. Through a careful assessment and selection process, identify relevant actors to deliver messages/narratives to youth. These individuals should be able to reach out to these children and provide a positive voice, without an authoritative tone.

Session 3: **Building Psychological Resilience through Rehabilitation and Reintegration**

In this session, the first speaker spoke about the ongoing issue of how to reintegrate former inmates back into the community, given the fact that they may have been radicalized within the prison system. The pool of inmates most vulnerable to radicalization inside prisons are: criminal offenders who turned their activities into violence; frustrated individuals who feel ignored, discriminated against, or neglected (thus seeking significance); and inmates, typically petty criminals, who seek the feeling of belonging. As such, prisons are vibrant environments where terrorists and extremists seeking to recruit more members by intentionally preying on vulnerable individuals and expanding their network. Violent extremists may start grouping people regarded as vulnerable and tempt them by promising support outside prison – as well as employ tactics of threats, such as threatening the family of the inmate, to radicalize, and recruit individuals within prisons. The mixing of inmates, more specifically violent extremists with regular inmates/petty criminals, tends to breed radicalization and once it begins it is more difficult to counter – as such, it is better to prevent it from happening rather than trying to cure it.

To minimize the risk of prison recruitment and radicalization, there needs to be an emphasis on staff awareness and training. For one, petty criminals and violent extremist inmates often lumped together and mingled in prison. Although it may not appear as though the process of radicalization is occurring on the surface, violent extremists may be quietly recruiting vulnerable individuals. Guards and other prison staff require training on how to identify the indicators of radicalization so that it can be spotted and prevented before continuing further. Correctional systems as a whole – regional and national level prisons – need to be trained on identifying the trends occurring below the surface level to stop the process of radicalization. Furthermore, there should be better systemic cooperation with other law enforcement agencies.

There is also a need for enhanced personal classification of each individual in prison. That is to say that guards/staff should be trained on how to identify and characterize the intentions of different prisoners, recognize connections between prisoners, distinguish between the protentional recruiters and the more vulnerable inmates, monitor those individuals practically, and actively separate the potential recruiters and vulnerable inmates from each other. Tight monitoring and taking active measures within prisons can be an important and effective way of preventing radicalization. It was also highlighted that prison guards are susceptible to

radicalization by prison inmates too. This can occur through indoctrination, as well as through threats and promises of support to prison guards. An appropriate system of response should be in place to ensure radicalization in prisons does not spread.

The potential problems and gaps in effective deradicalization and rehabilitation processes highlight the need for a more comprehensive policy. These should include interventions based on the specific needs of inmates and cooperation with local communities to ensure the continuation of the rehabilitation process outside of prison. In addition, inmates need to be willing to admit that they did something wrong, followed by assurances that their criminal behavior will be left in the past – showing a genuine willingness to reintegrate into society and contribute to the betterment of their community.

A comprehensive policy for deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration, therefore, needs a multidimensional approach including the municipal, regional, and national levels – as well as family, friends, and the general community. It is also imperative to be able to recognize and identify potential trigger points that lead such individuals to re-offend and commit acts of violence – including calls for certain actions from groups they (previously) followed and frustration as a result of personal experiences. Once these become identifiable to a variety of actors involved, they have the potential to intervene and prevent the individual's reengagement with extremist views and acts of violence. This monitoring and evaluation can also support the development of toolkits that are used to assess whether the individual is indeed deradicalized, rehabilitated, and ready to be reintegrated back into society.

There have been some successful realizations of psychological interventions to prevent recidivism and trauma. To reduce risk and vulnerability, programs should focus on the interplaying social factors which emphasize deepening the ties between families and friends, as well as to the community. Further, successes have been seen when the focus is placed on protective factors such as building greater self-esteem, supporting mental health traumas, developing coping skills, and enhancing their education/vocational expertise. Highlighting the importance of gender dynamics and sensitivity is also vital since the psychological needs between genders can be different in some cases (e.g., some of the issues that women have with agency and voice within a terrorist group are different from those of men).

Some other strategies to minimize the risk of inmate radicalization and prison radicalization in general include:

a. A need for a correctional intelligence system inside the prison connected to the larger regional and national intelligence apparatus. Systematic cooperation with other agencies will have major implications for the environment outside the prison and vice-versa at times. There must be a reciprocal relationship between the prison intelligence system and other intelligence organizations;

b. A radical individual has to be classified based on who s/he is, her/his affiliation, and her/his origin – making sure that placement of the individual tailored to the individual;

c. Identify vulnerable individuals, change wings, and other options by tight monitoring of problematic individuals;

d. A more comprehensive doctrine for rehabilitation should be developed and it must also include vocational, spiritual, sport, family, and specific needs of a radicalized prisoner;

e. After-care release and rehabilitation programs are very important to ensure that disengagement from radicalism continues outside the prison; and,

f. It is also vital to engage the community leadership and by extension, engage with the broader community to actively engage the released individual. Supporting moderate leaders and helping them get their message out loud and clear. Multi-dimensional cooperation models including cultural, religious, municipal, regional, national, and international stakeholders must be developed.

The second speaker highlighted that very few programs actually involve psychological support for PVE initiatives focused on deradicalization and rehabilitation, namely due to a lack of qualified practitioners. In fact, the gaps in the measurements, risk assessments, and evaluations have made it difficult to monitor progress in this field – in particular, this is due to a lack of control groups that can be studied (ethically) to determine important factors and processes. There has also been a poor record in sharing the best practices found between facilities and practitioners in the field – especially lacking on the topic of psychological factors that contribute to psychological resilience. Furthermore, very little research has focused on the factors contributing to psychological resilience and on the efficiency of existing programs. In particular, there is a belief that a one-size model cannot account for different environments and circumstances around the world. This issue highlights a lack of cultural sensitivity as programs created in the global North are usually not applicable to the global South.

Reintegration programs must consider the different beneficiaries or target groups, for example, commanders, wives of commanders, soldiers, children of terrorist actors, and victims. In order to reintegrate them successfully, programs must include needs assessment for each group and community assessment to verify that the society receiving individuals is prepared to reintegrate them fully. It is also important to address trauma with cognitive therapy (on both the individual and group level), engage the local religious leaders, and develop programs that focus on both mind and body (which can include sports and values).

Some of the key challenges, also the considerations to minimize risks (as mentioned above), in rehabilitating criminals back into the community where they were triggered to engage in violence and join extremism groups are:

a. Returning to the society or ecosystem – there is a need to build trust between different actors to get them involved and ensure the continuation of the individuals' deradicalization even after they leave the prison system; and,

b. Programs need to link between the various levels – there is a need for municipal, regional, and national levels to work together and to engage with communities and prepare them to take in the individuals who have been undergoing the process of deradicalization to prevent recidivism.

Lastly, programs need to include various psychosocial therapies to deal with terrorists. Rehabilitation and reintegration programs must include exploring the meaning and purpose of the individual, religious engagement, and elements of psychological first aid. Religious engagement is very important since a part of the reason why an individual becomes a terrorist is that they tend to believe that they are being true to their religion. A program must be psychologically based, emphasizing both the mind and body. The focus should also be on how the individual can transform from 'the old me to the new me.'

Recommendations and Main Takeaways

1. There is a need to increase the number of qualified practitioners that can recognize and address the psychological factors relevant to radicalization in prisons. The gap in qualified psychological practitioners, including the measurement and evaluation of the individual psyche, needs to be emphasized and strengthened going forward. Although several tools are now being implemented for the assessment, and risk assessment of prison vulnerability more broadly, more need to be developed.

2. Current systems of program development for rehabilitation and reintegration programs are heavily influenced by the 'global North.' Hence, there is a critical need to research the needs of the 'global South' to produce culturally appropriate programs and factor in the needs of the local population. This is also related to the first need—where there are gaps in the number of qualified practitioners in the 'global North,' this is even more so the case in the 'global South.' In this regard, building local capacity is critical to avoid a situation where qualified practitioners are external to the local culture.

3. Gender dynamics and difference in recruitment and radicalization, with follow-on deradicalization and rehabilitation between men and women needs to be further researched and applied in relevant programs.

4. While applied in some programs and regions, there is a need to standardize the approach of having a post-prison reintegration system, working with communities as well as the individuals on decreasing the chance of recidivism after their prison release.

Session 4: **Resilience to Hate Speech, Violent Extremism, and Terrorism**

In this session, the speaker covered some of the main aspects required to improve digital resilience to violent extremism. Firstly, the speaker highlighted the importance of a strategic communication framework and approaches required, followed by the means leveraged to communicate and disseminate the content to the audience, including three key components of tone, form of speech, and effectiveness of the speakers. Secondly, it is important to understand the target audience of counter-narrative messages – distinguishing between target audiences such as terrorist supporters, recruiters, members of a terrorist organization, sympathizers, potential recruits, or the general society. Better knowledge of the target audience will create more possibilities to tailor content to specifically address their needs. Approaches for strategic communication in the field of CVE/T can learn from those derived from general marketing and leverage them, including:

a. Remaining conversational – the message should not seem like a lecture, not necessarily about presenting facts/data, not meant to place blame or wrongdoing on people; instead, it should focus on getting people involved;

b. Remaining authentic – the message should not seem overly constructed and evidently financed;

c. Including visuals – visual content has a roughly 60-80% high reach than non-visual;

d. Keeping it simple – the content should not be too complex since it would disinterest the target audience; instead, using simple posts helps to generate better conversation; and,

e. Making sure it is timely – it is crucial to time communication strategically, to get the target audiences attention to the particular context needed and demonstrate why they should care now.

On social media, it is important to engage people in conversations, thereby turning passive engagement into two-way conversations. This approach does require an investment of time and long-term commitments to develop strategic communication and engage in building counter-narratives (which are highly complex to do and are not one-offs which work the same for every situation and over lengthy periods of time). This requires a consistent approach that follows up with and adapts to changing circumstances to continue engaging with people through the content.

The first consideration to be mindful of when developing strategic communications is a "confirmation bias." This points to the personal bias that can arise wherein the content creator see what they want to see – meaning that the content designed is seemingly effective in their own perspective but may not be the case for other people, most importantly the target audience. The second is a "severity bias" – in which the brain wants to match the cause and effect with the level of severity (for instance, conspiracy theories being matched with the same level of severity as the pandemic itself).

One of the impactful strategies for strategic communication is to maintain authentic voices. This means that public and private partnerships develop interactive approaches (e.g., sustain internet citizenship, provide online/offline youth training, enhance peer-to-peer networks, etc.), distinguishing between fact v. fiction online, building on narratives, and enhancing approaches on how to engage further online.

It can also be effective to have redirect methods enhanced – meaning that specific search terms (ones related to extremist content) redirect individuals to specific disengagement organizations on Facebook (or other social media platforms). This approach has begun to be implemented in real life and has shown an increase in the number of people who reached out to seek help. Consistency will also be key for effective approaches going forward, which is something that social media and private sector companies have to plan for in advance.

Platform analytics can also provide valuable data that is accessible within short spans of time and for free. For instance, ad tools can be specific with data and can get to larger audiences based on its effectiveness (often with little money used), "redirects" can target a previously developed list of terms that can be refined with NGOs to test for false positives, and it is possible to control the rates and frequency for how the content surfaces.

Other tools that can enhance strategic communication methods include the use of slogans. Cognitive openings and slogans which are easy to follow can help to engage viewers easily – sometimes simple slogans and catchy phrases can generate a lot of meaning amongst the audience (e.g., "je suis Charlie"). Pre-planned responses can also help to assert immediate counter-narratives – ergo, diffusing adverbial threats by turning passive online consumption into a two-way conversation and activism (e.g., "point taken, but have you heard this narrative..."). This emphasizes the point that algorithms should avoid provoking reactions to minimize the likelihood of cognitive closure. It also raises the ethical problem of "what can be done v. what should be done," especially when considering various relevant aspects such as online human rights, privacy, or confidentiality.

Lastly, it was emphasized that the most effective campaigns are ones that leverage peer-to-peer networks (for example, Creators for Change). It was also noted that collaborations and partnerships between different agencies, organizations, and networks are possible and can have benefits. Although some platforms or actors have not developed their credibility yet, it is possible (and recommended) that a partnership is formed with a credible partner which serves to strengthen approaches and mutual networking.

Recommendations and Main Takeaways

1. Research the parallels and useful lessons from general marketing when developing strategic communications. As with marketing, it is important to know your consumer/target audience and identify relevant techniques to reach them in the most effective way.

2. It is important to stress the need for and effectiveness of digital literacy programs, especially for the younger generation who are very active online and the most at-risk to fall prey to extremism. Training on how to differentiate fact versus fiction online helps to build critical thinking skills and resilience to extremist radicalization.

   a. Given the rapid technological innovations and the savviness of youth online, it is very important to continue learning and enhancing digital literacy programs.

3. An additional strategy that has been effective thus far involves using algorithms to redirect users away from violent extremist content to content that credibly refutes extremist content and recruitment materials. Some social media and internet platforms have begun to develop and implement this strategy, which has been instrumental in containing extremism. This should be developed further and encouraged for other private sector actors, technology companies, and social media platforms to implement.

Day 3 – May 24, 2021

Session 5: **Lessons Learned from Crime and Violence Prevention**

In this session, the speaker provided some examples and lessons learned from the European context on the crime and violent extremism nexus. Despite the fact that Europe is diverse and each country faces its own issues with terrorism, evidence has eluded to the fact that foreign fighters across Europe have contributed to attacks around the continent (for instance, a Belgian jihadist had a, now known, role in the Paris attacks in 2015). What is most important though is to better understand the ecosystem in which an extremist evolves before committing any acts of violence or terror. Here, the speaker underlined the importance of addressing the ecosystem and environmental source of extremism (meaning the publication of extremist discourse, hate speakers, influential leaders prompting extremism, social identity collapse among vulnerable communities, etc.) – failing to do so will fail to yield results in preventing radicalization. This will include addressing the political environment in which a number of actors have the opportunity to continue feeding the young, ergo more vulnerable generations, with extremist content and narratives.

It is also apparent that there is a connection between organized crime and terrorism/extremism. For instance, roughly 80% of the people who played a role in the Paris attacks of 2015 were associated with petty crime and gang activity prior to their engagement in terrorism (thereby, demonstrating the nexus between crime and terror).

The speaker defined the toxic ecosystem as the network and environment in which people evolve, serving as the primary place where extremism narratives thrive and expand. In the recent past, the biggest worry was jihadist narratives, and although this remains true today, the next major avenue of concern – far-right extremism – has already begun to manifest itself and will likely proliferate in the future. This includes the dangerous dynamics that are forming as a result of and in response to religious-based extremism, as well as the general immigration that has given rise to the far-right's "replacement theory" and The Great Replacement narrative.

When it comes to the toxic ecosystem, it is important to recognize its overwhelming influence over other factors. This means that the education of the youth, for example, will not alone reach the intended goal to prevent and counter extremism (although it is a necessary component). This is because radicalization to extremism and individual adherence to dangerous ideologies has not been the result of a lack of educational content alone; rather, it has often been a result of the accumulation of influences in the toxic ecosystem outside of schools and education systems.

When discussing the terrorism and violent extremism trends in modern-day society, there has been growing consensus on the glaring similarities arising between far-right/neo-Nazi terrorists and violent religiously-inspired terrorists (especially those in the West). When comparing the manifesto of the far-right Christchurch, New Zealand, shooter with radical religiously-inspired manifestos, the similarities are highly evident – these include, but are not limited to, strategic verbal references, the narratives of hate, ideological black and white in their perceptions of the world, and calls for an uprising (of various sorts). There is also a noticeable resemblance in the ecosystem dynamics that foster terrorist and extremist ideologies between the two opposing ideological forms of violence – practically taking the same form, just with differing ideologies.

Effective counter extremism programs and efforts require a joint, collaborative approach between academics, law enforcement agencies, and practitioners to find the best way for young people to build their resilience and to tackle the toxic ecosystem set up and proliferated by extremist groups on all sides. This can be achieved through dialogue platforms where knowledge and insights are shared. Notably, it is necessary to draw the lines on where prevention and intervention differentiate, delineating the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in this process.

A proposed solution can be seen in the general "Canal Plan in Europe" which seeks to deal with the ecosystem (including the ideology element, the push factor, and the organized crime activity) – targeting different aspects such as gun trafficking, drug trafficking, fake papers/counterfeit documents, micro-financing of terrorism, etc. Besides tackling these types of relevant factors in the ecosystem, the public needs to be educated about them and see concrete results for the approaches to gain credibility.

Recommendations and Main Takeaways

1. Advocate for a multifaceted approach for dealing with the ecosystem which breeds extremists. There is a need for a joint collaborative effort between political actors, law enforcement agencies, academics, and practitioners to build trusting partnerships and develop evidence-based approaches and studies.

2. Continue to monitor and research the nexus between crime and radicalization, assessing not only religiously inspired groups, but also those falling under far-right ideologies.

3. It is also important to keep in mind the notion of a continuum – people change and evolve, and if someone is not radicalized now, it can still happen later on – and so, screening needs to be performed continuously. As well, we need to learn how to respond and to prevent while keeping in mind the continuum of ecosystem evolution and how it impacts individuals.

    a. People who are of interest but have not become active yet continue to evolve day by day in their ecosystem because they are under the influence of their ecosystem (ideology strengthens day by day if it fully surrounds you) – meaning we need to target and disrupt this cycle.

Session 6: **Lessons Learned from the Education Sector and Child Development**

In this session, the first speaker presented lessons on how education can be used in the field of CVE. Education as a tool for the prevention of extremism needs a critical approach, but this alone will not be enough to address and tackle the problem. The employment of "deep critical thinking" is about how thinking interacts with emotions and values – focusing on dissolving the "us v. them" narratives that pose as a risk factor for extremism. It is also important to perceive some validity in differing viewpoints and values among individuals, especially younger people. Some of the important lessons learned from experience and points to address going forth are:

a. Avoiding bias and the stigmatization of cultural and religious groups (including the appearance of bias) – an approach looking at the structure of thinking helps to overcome bias;

b. Connecting the needs, values, and emotions of people impacted;

c. Avoiding information-only approaches – these feature very little behavioral evidence for change and instead often provokes reactance;

d. Avoiding creating psychological reactance – heavily pressuring the acceptance of certain narratives and view onto others can cause the opposite effect and consequentially strengthen the reverse narrative (in this case extremist narrative), so rather than creating an opening, it intensifies the desire for defense;

e. Encouraging the use of meta-cognition – a method that allows you to "see your thinking" and leverage it;

f. Using reflective meta-awareness – intentionally using sense perception, emotion, social interaction, and living in the "lived situation" to help fully contextualize perceptions and comprehend what the 'lived situation feels like;'

g. Broadening the decision-making process to better manage emotions – which serves as a second step to the reflective meta-awareness, as it helps to avoid the perception of others as threats (a non-verbal sensory method appropriate when there are trauma impacts);

h. Using schools as a node in the broader ecosystem. Schools can be a neutral and positive environment where exchanges between children, parents, teachers, community leaders, and other relevant figures, takes place which can offer various perceptions and narratives to diversify information (more well-rounded views); and,

i. Using hard-to-fake, predictive measurement, and gold-standard research design – to show behavior change cross-culturally and demonstrate improved educational performance to incentivize governments to invest.

It is also important to connect violent extremism throughout various education systems, not just in school, including those of communities and prison/rehabilitation centers.

One successful approach that has been used both in terms of education and in rehabilitation and reintegration is the concept of improving Integrative Complexity (IC). IC thinking has been used to predict whether a person could become violent or not. It concerns how complexly people perceive the social world to be; simply put, whether it is seen as black or white, or with shades of grey. IC coding predicts outcomes of behavior: if IC goes up, violence lessens and social harmony increases, if IC drops, then conflict and violent behavior increases. It is an effective tool that can be used for P/CVE activities.

Terrorists and extremists strive to portray the "black and white" and "us v. them" analogy, especially to younger people, in an attempt to create and reinforce polarization in society. The narratives can include an "all right" versus "all wrong" analogy, which is essentially a blame narrative that takes shortcuts - e.g., "only my viewpoint is right." The "in- group" versus "out-group" narrative forwards the idea that "you are either with my group or against it" – which inherently triggers a call of emergency, or call for action (i.e., engagement in violence). This narrative utilizes basic instinctive shortcuts to reach people and promises the result of victory.

Hence, this mentality can easily lead to adopting extreme narratives and potentially contribute to the legitimization of violence.

It is important to realize that human beings process meaning with their head thinking and their heart thinking (sense, emotions, body, etc.) – heart thinking has a reputation of being irrational, when in reality it is multilayered and adds complexity. These two ways of processing thinking are in dynamic tension with each other and under extreme threat in response to their inherent tension – the head's logic often opposes the heart's feeling and vice versa, as rational v. emotional thoughts often clash. Moreover, head thinking has the tendency to decrease when the limbic reactions increase.

One of the strategic goals going forward will be the need to invest in teacher training and address the issue with "rote pedagogy" – an approach in teaching through memorization of certain content to the point of information retention. Addressing this style of teaching presents few narratives countless times, thereby blocking critical thinking avenues, can help to provide a culturally conceptualized education of subjects like history. Simply put, diverging from rote pedagogical teaching encourages young students to understand information, not memorize it, relate new information to prior knowledge, and actively participate in the learning process – if this style of learning and thinking is not available in schools, single narratives would likely become the only known information to the younger generation.

The second speaker began by highlighting the need to build resilience in schools because schools may be a place where radicalization can occur. School prevention needs to be a wholesale approach that looks at all children and young people, not just ones we think might be vulnerable. As such, schools need to be a neutral place and one where students can feel safe.

When schools are not neutral, or some aspects of it are not, it could contribute to psychological and sociological trauma, which could potentially relate to radicalization to extremism and violence. Some of the contributing factors include racism, inequality of educational outcomes, bullying and humiliation (by teachers and students alike), the normalization of violence and revengeful punishments, gendered violence, extreme nationalism, and/or exclusionary religiosity. Some of these triggers are not easily recognizable and not all individuals at risk can be identified beforehand due to the vast amount of potential triggers which could arise.

When dealing with grievance and oppression, it is important to understand that it is not just a perception, but it could also have real consequences. Given the fact that young people are not at

the forefront of political solutions and do not always have the means to impact change, engaging in violence or joining a violent movement is seen as a form of empowerment.

In order to build the resilience of young people, it was suggested that there is a need to use three components – 'interlocking gears' – to manage the grievances they experience:

a. **Critical thinking** – encouraging young people to be comfortable with ambiguity and to question recruiters and their narratives. However, the dilemma is where to stop the questioning of things and 'who decides' where it stops;

b. **A rights-based approach** – the everyday pursuit of 'rights' in school (including the knowledge of their own rights), fosters respect for other's rights, and awareness of individual entitlement. Additionally, knowledge of rights gives individuals a base for tolerance (what they will and will not tolerate from others, such as gender-based violence), and knowledge of rights is key to countering the narratives of violent extremism; and,

c. **Building self-confidence** – groomers and radicalizers always want to exploit vulnerable and fragile young people (lacking confidence and self-identify) and to build confidence through their extremist narrative, which can be effective in situations where schools fail to build the confidence of youth. Schools should facilitate building positive self-confidence in young people, and creating a safe space for dialogue with and between children.

It is important to recognize that schools cannot tackle the big political issues, which may trouble young people on their own. However, it can work to ensure that it does not harm the youth psychologically – for instance, addressing the often habitual, negative reactions to issues through habits of questioning, fosters a rights-based response (to others, to themselves, and to events), and finds different ways to tackle young people's needs.

Recommendations and Main Takeaways

1. Young people have huge needs including fulfilling a duty, excitement, self-importance, and different sorts of triggers. However, it is complicated and difficult to know all the triggers through education alone. As such, we need to include education in our approaches to P/CVE activities, but education and school environments will not provide the "answers" on their own.

    a. The issue is broader than pedagogy – further consideration needs to be given to how schools communicate the hard subjects like political debates, addressing how to consider, for instance, actions in the name of religion vis-à-vis societal conventions. In

other words, how to differentiate inanimate cognitive beliefs from real-life conventions and harms – e.g., violating someone's human rights in the name of religion and more.

2. Higher education also needs to be addressed because it perpetuates a cycle where the ones being schooled in higher education will later be the ones teaching in primary and secondary schools. As such, a beneficial and responsible school system should include the capability of the educators themselves – given that educators are responsible for the learning process of the younger generation, it is imperative that educators are fully informed and prepared on how to deliver positive learning experiences.

Conclusion

This 3-day roundtable event has addressed many important issues relevant for psychological resilience to extremism and violent extremism. The speakers presented a number of problems and gaps in research and approaches, and also highlighted the positive progress made and successful efforts to build the psychological resilience of young people to violent extremism. Most importantly, the speakers offered an array of insightful recommendations for future policies, ones that can strengthen the global effort to prevent and counter violent extremism.

Some of the noteworthy takeaways and recommendations to highlight in concluding this event include:

1. The 3 "N's" of radicalization – needs, networks, and narratives – are important factors in joining extremism and adopting radical ideologies that consist of 3 core elements – grievance, culprit, and method (solution of terror).

    a. In deradicalization, needs should always be addressed first by focusing on building human connectivity, showing empathy, reconnecting with family, emphasizing the inefficacy of war and benefits of peace.

2. There are different individual and collective triggers that could drive people towards endorsing extremist narratives, joining terrorist organizations, and carrying out violent attacks, such as committing suicide missions.

    a. Suicide missions can be disrupted between the planning phase and the actual commitment of an attack – a process that often takes over a month.

    b. Building youth resilience requires empathy, introducing inspiration figures, amplifying the voice of victims and former extremists to provide guidance, and establishing positive mentors locally.

3. Prisons are used by extremists to radicalize and recruit vulnerable inmates/petty criminals by offering prison protection, social group and identify affirmation, financial incentives, and/or threaten their safety or their family.

    a. Providing enhanced guard/staff training to recognize early signs of recruitment, separating extremists from regular criminals, and having a trustworthy and strong warden, are a few ways to minimize risks.

4. Deradicalization and rehabilitation approaches remain weak in their consideration for differences between the global South and the global North, as well as lacking some accountability for gender dynamics.

   a. Research on the specific needs of women v. men and South v. North require more attention to produce better programs that factor in gender differences, cultural dynamics, and local population needs.

5. Young people are highly active online and vulnerable to extremist targeting for radicalization and recruitment.

   a. Solutions need to enhance youth digital literacy, understand how to frame counter-narratives, target the right audience, design redirect algorithms from extremist content, and implement effective ad tools.

6. Extremism is born out of a toxic ecosystem – the environment where hate preachers, recruiters, extremist groups, and other charismatic actors allow for toxic ideologies to target vulnerable and young people.

   a. This requires effort from multi-disciplinary actors by balancing law enforcement, politicians, academia, and other community members to solve a multi-faceted problem with evidence-based approaches.

7. Education is connected to the toxic ecosystem, as young people need assistance to learn critical thinking skills to build resilience against psychological and physical exploitation that leads to violent extremist narratives.

   a. There must be more investment in teacher training, combining critical thinking with self-confidence building (through activities like debating), and rights-based approaches to teach resilience to extremism.

The problems and solutions require a long-term investment into P/CVE programs with multi-disciplinary approaches and policies to challenge the narratives of extremists and give young people the tools they need to question and reject extremism themselves. Further, the global community needs to continue investing in research to innovate our approaches as time changes – including the growing realm of social media radicalization and extremism.