Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth

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Executive Summary

Young people are a vital source of support for many terrorist groups, with roles ranging from cooks to armed fighters. But the ways young people are recruited vary widely across contexts. In many cases, young people join terrorist groups because they are duped, trafficked, kidnapped, or forcibly recruited. Others join terrorist groups voluntarily owing to the appeal of a group-based identity; perceptions of exclusion, grievances, or cultural threats; the promise of economic stability; prospects of fame, glory, or respect; and personal connections, including family and friendship networks.

The vulnerability of youth to terrorist recruitment can be affected by a multitude of factors, including their geographic proximity to a terrorist group, economic vulnerability, perceptions of social or political marginalization, exposure to permissive social networks, and exposure to extremist propaganda. However, the relative importance of these factors varies individually and according to the local context.

Youth, both male and female, are frequently employed in support, recruitment, and combat roles in terrorist groups, though a significantly higher proportion of youth combatants are male. In Salafi-jihadist groups, such as ISIS and al Shabaab, ideology often constrains the roles available to young women to that of wives and mothers. Boko Haram is a significant exception for its extensive use of young women and girls as suicide bombers. Nevertheless, female terrorist members play essential and under-recognized roles in advancing their group's mission.

To improve the US government's response to the exploitation of youth by terrorist groups, the report recommends (1) adopting clear criteria to be used in weighing young peoples' vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment and in creating and targeting terrorism prevention programs, (2) fostering both attitudinal and behavioral change to build youth resilience to recruitment, (3) moving beyond a traditional focus on young men to confront the radicalization and recruitment of girls and young women, and (4) engaging the family as a potential site of radicalization and recruitment.

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On a busy Sunday morning, two small girls wandered among the crowd near a market in the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri. Then, suddenly, the bombs strapped to them exploded, killing one person and wounding more than a dozen others.[1] The repeated exploitation of children and youth in terrorist attacks by groups such as Boko Haram is a chilling reminder that terrorism knows no bounds.

Young people can serve as a vital source of support for terrorist groups.[2] Strategically, terrorist groups can signal both their brutality and resolve to win by using young people in attacks. Al Shabaab, meaning "the youth," reportedly has a majority youth membership.[3] Youth are also better at evading security, which serves as a tactical advantage. In conflicts featuring extensive use of small arms, young people serve as able-bodied fighters. Nearly 1 in 10 of the youth fighters who joined the Islamic State in 2013 and 2014 had previously participated in jihad, according to a report published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.[4]

Over time, the recruitment of youth into armed groups can lay the foundation for future conflicts.[5] As former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley noted in the context of South Sudan, "Conflict is planting the seeds of future hate in the next generation. . . . If we don't do something about the way these kids are being raised . . . we might be dealing with them as adults on the battlefield."[6]

This report addresses terrorist groups' recruitment of youth (ranging from small children to women and men in their 20s), the roles that youth play in these groups, and how the US government can better respond to this threat through international programming to counter violent extremism. The report focuses on terrorism prevention efforts as opposed to deradicalization or disengagement programs for youth who are already affiliated with a violent extremist group. It also focuses exclusively on youth participation in designated terrorist groups, as opposed to other non-state armed actors that actively recruit youth.

While there have been sincere and even promising efforts to address youth radicalization and recruitment by terrorist groups—as discussed below—significant gaps remain. These include effectively targeting at-risk youth in US government-funded programs and confronting the issue of radicalization and recruitment within the family.

A vigorous US government response to the exploitation of youth by terrorist groups should include:

- Clear criteria to use in weighing individuals' vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment and in designing and targeting programs to counter violent extremism,

- An emphasis on fostering both attitudinal and behavioral change among youth vulnerable to recruitment,

- An expanded effort to confront the radicalization and recruitment of girls and young women by violent extremist groups, and

- A recognition of the family as a potential site of radicalization and recruitment, as well as a source of resilience.

How Terrorist Groups Recruit and Mobilize Youth

Our understanding of how young people enter into violent extremist groups should inform our approaches to countering and preventing youth involvement in terrorism. Pathways into terrorist or violent extremist groups are extremely complex (Figure 1). Many young people are recruited by sympathetic family members or are led to believe that membership helps defend their families or communities. Others are duped, trafficked, kidnapped, or forcibly recruited.

The forced recruitment of children through kidnappings or outright violence is not a new phenomenon. Since 1987, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda has kidnapped more than 20,000 children.[7] Boko Haram has employed mass kidnappings in Nigeria, including the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in April 2014 and 110 more girls from a school i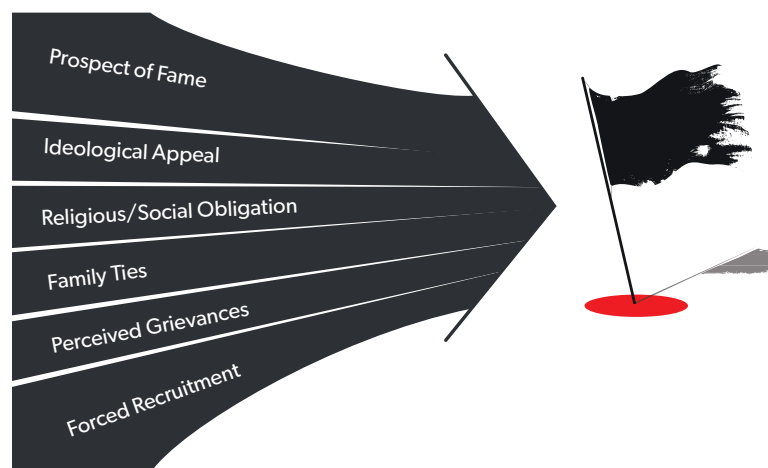n Dapchi in March 2018.[8] In Somalia, al Shabaab used detention, violence, and intimidation to recruit roughly 1,770 young people in 2017 alone.[9]

As ISIS expanded in Iraq, its members kidnapped thousands of children from orphanages, schools, and even their families' homes. Children under the age of 14 reportedly made up over one-third of the 6,800 Yazidis that ISIS abducted in Sinjar in 2014.[10] A further 800 to 900 children were reportedly kidnapped from Mosul for religious and military training.[11]

Young people voluntarily join terrorist groups based on a range of motivations, including:

- The search for group-based identity;

- The ideological appeal of the group;

- Real or perceived exclusion, grievance, or cultural threat;

- The potential for economic gain or long-term economic stability;

- Prospects of fame, glory, or respect; and

- Personal connections, including family and friendship networks.

Figure 1. Pathways into Violent Extremist Groups

Prospect of Fame

Ideological Appeal

Religious/Social Obligation

Family Ties

Perceived Grievances

Forced Recruitment

Source: Author.

Once young people are recruited, they become even more susceptible to terrorists' control and indoctrination, including through the use of drugs and the threat of harm to their families.[12] Boko Haram, in particular, is notorious for drugging children before sending them on suicide missions.[13]

A third and relatively understudied pathway into terrorism is being born into a violent extremist family. Of the roughly 40,000 foreign ISIS members identified in Iraq and Syria, 12 percent were children under the age of 18 (Figure 2). In total, at least 4,640 foreign minors have been identified as ISIS affiliates. More than 730 infants were born in ISIS-controlled territory

to foreign terrorist fighters between April 2013 and June 2018.[14] Some estimates place the total number of children born in territory controlled by ISIS as high as 5,000.[15]

In these instances, the family is the primary site of radicalization. The children of violent extremists may have a much higher attachment to ideology and require more exhaustive efforts to counter their indoctrination. Leaders' children may also serve important roles in terrorist organizations, contributing to the groups' longevity. For instance, Osama bin Laden's son, Hamza, is widely believed to be the future leader of al Qaeda.[16]

Even as we begin to grapple with the challenge posed by youth involvement in terrorism—and in particular the thousands of children associated with ISIS—the long-term risks posed by children raised in violent extremist environments remain unclear.

Why Terrorist Groups Recruit and Mobilize Youth

Terrorist groups employ young recruits in almost every capacity: in support roles, as recruiters, as propagandists, and as fighters. Individuals' specific roles are often determined by their age and gender.

Generally, girls and young women primarily perform support duties, including preparing food, gathering firewood, providing medical treatment, and maintaining camps. This is true of those who join voluntarily or are forcibly recruited. Girls and young women in many terrorist groups also take on roles that are specific to their sex, acting as fighters' wives and mothers to their children. However, these gender-specific roles are deeply intertwined with other support roles.

The very presence of young women in terrorist groups allows them to play an important role in recruiting other young women. In 2015, two young

Figure 2. Identified Foreign ISIS Affiliates in Iraq and Syria
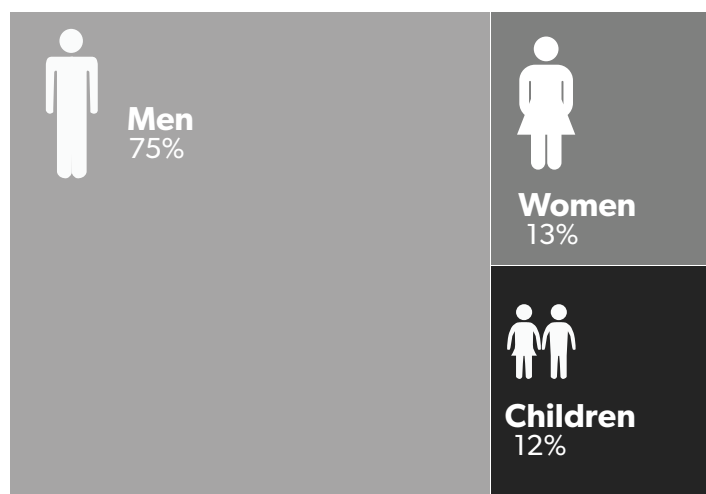
Source: Joana Cook and Gina Vale, "From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of the Islamic State," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, July 23, 2018, 30, https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/from-daesh-to-diaspora-tracing-the-women-and-minors-of-islamic-state/.

women from a Spanish exclave in northern Africa were arrested for forming an ISIS recruitment ring that specifically targeted their peers.[17] Wives of ISIS fighters were often tasked with recruiting additional fighters to join the group.[18] Zehra Duman, who was 19 years old when she left Australia to join ISIS in 2015, used multiple online platforms and accounts to encourage others to join ISIS and offered to assist other women seeking jihadi husbands.[19] In March, Duman was discovered with her two children in the Al Hawl refugee camp in northeast Syria.[20] Hoda Muthana, another young, female, English-language recruiter from the United States, was also identified in Al Hawl.[21]

Despite their distance from the battlefield, the direct participation of girls and young women in terrorist groups can still present a significant security threat. During the Second Chechen War in the early 2000s, more than two-thirds of suicide bombers in Russia were women.[22] More recently, female combatants have been reported in ISIS, al Shabaab, and Boko Haram, in addition to groups with more long-standing female participation, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the

Understanding the Role of "Jihadi Brides"

Girls and young women often face additional pressures stemming from gendered social roles and exposure to sexual and domestic violence that make them susceptible to terrorist recruitment. In addition, typical drivers of participation in violent extremism, such as family pressure or a sense of religious duty, may operate differently when applied to females. Pressure from male relatives—fathers, brothers, or husbands—is often identified in the personal histories of female violent extremists. Losing close relatives, and especially ones with a guardianship function, may also increase girls' vulnerability to terrorist recruitment.

Family ties to terrorist group members and sympathizers, including marriage, facilitate young women's recruitment and radicalization.[31] The practice of forced or early marriages can make young women more vulnerable to coercion within the family while also contributing to a sense of alienation, both of which are linked to participation in violent extremist groups.[32] Sexual and domestic violence (both in and outside the context of marriage) can also drive young women toward violent extremism.

Forced marriage and sexual servitude are hallmarks of many terrorist groups, including ISIS, Boko Haram, and al Shabaab. In Iraq, ISIS fighters systematically targeted female Yazidis for forced religious conversion, marriage, and sexual slavery.[33] At the same time, many foreign females who joined ISIS participated in voluntary marriages. Marriages and remarriages, whether voluntary or coerced, within terrorist groups play an important social role in bonding members. Remarriages mean that women and children continue to be provided for by the terrorist group, which builds loyalty and helps prevent defections.

The long-term implications of marriages within terrorist groups remain an open question. In the case of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, where forced marriages were prevalent, only 5 percent of those marriages continued after the individuals were demobilized from the group.[34] Similarly, in Nepal, many marriages within the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist armed group, which waged an insurgency against the central government, dissolved due to social pressure after the group demobilized.

Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey.[23] Women and girls as young as age 7 make up the majority of suicide bombers in Boko Haram, and roughly one in five is a child.[24]

Although women's roles in ISIS were initially confined to the domestic sphere, this changed over time. ISIS recruited women between the ages of 18 and 25 into a specialized, all-female unit, known as the al-Khansaa Brigade, which used violence and intimidation to enforce shari'a law.[25] Recent reports of ISIS women victimizing other women and children in refugee camps in Syria suggest that similar tactics continue, even after the group's loss of territory.[26]

While boys and young men also operate in support roles, a significantly higher proportion of youth terrorist fighters are male. This can be attributed in part to different group ideologies. Groups with a Salafi-jihadi ideology tend to have lower levels of female participation than other types of terrorist groups and restrict most combatant roles to males.[27]

In some instances, boys may be treated as more expendable by terrorist groups and used as human shields to spare fully trained, adult fighters. ISIS, in particular, has made spectacular use of boys as fighters, alongside adult men.[28] Boys have featured extensively in ISIS propaganda, with their last will and testament videos disseminated as propaganda.[29] In Afghanistan, the Taliban has used abducted children—primarily boys—to plant improvised explosive devices and carry out suicide bombings.[30]

Addressing Youth Vulnerability to Terrorist Recruitment

Currently, 58 non-state armed groups in 15 countries are recruiting and using children.[35] The exploitation of youth by armed groups remains extensive in countries affected by violent extremism, even though it is a war crime for any armed group to recruit or use children under the age of 15.[36] ISIS's ability to recruit young people was unprecedented, with youth fighters identified from at least 34 countries (Figure 3).[37]

Factors that increase youths' vulnerability to recruitment by terrorist groups include (Figure 4):

- Geographic proximity to conflict,

- Economic vulnerability,

- Social or political marginalization,

- Permissive family and social networks, and

- Exposure to violent extremist propaganda.

Geographic Proximity to Conflict. Proximity to violent extremist groups is a significant risk factor for both forced and voluntary recruitment into terrorist groups. The best illustration of this is the mass kidnappings executed by Boko Haram. This phenomenon also drives youth involvement in political violence more generally. Frequent kidnappings and attacks by Boko Haram have driven youth in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad to join armed vigilante groups in response.[38] In Mali, young people have reported joining armed groups out of a sense of duty to defend their communities from local bandits, extremist groups, and local military units.[39] The boundaries between various armed groups have blurred in places such as Libya, where self-defense groups have

Figure 3. Countries Affected by Terrorist Recruitment of Youth

Local recruitment of youth by terrorists

Source of ISIS youth fighters
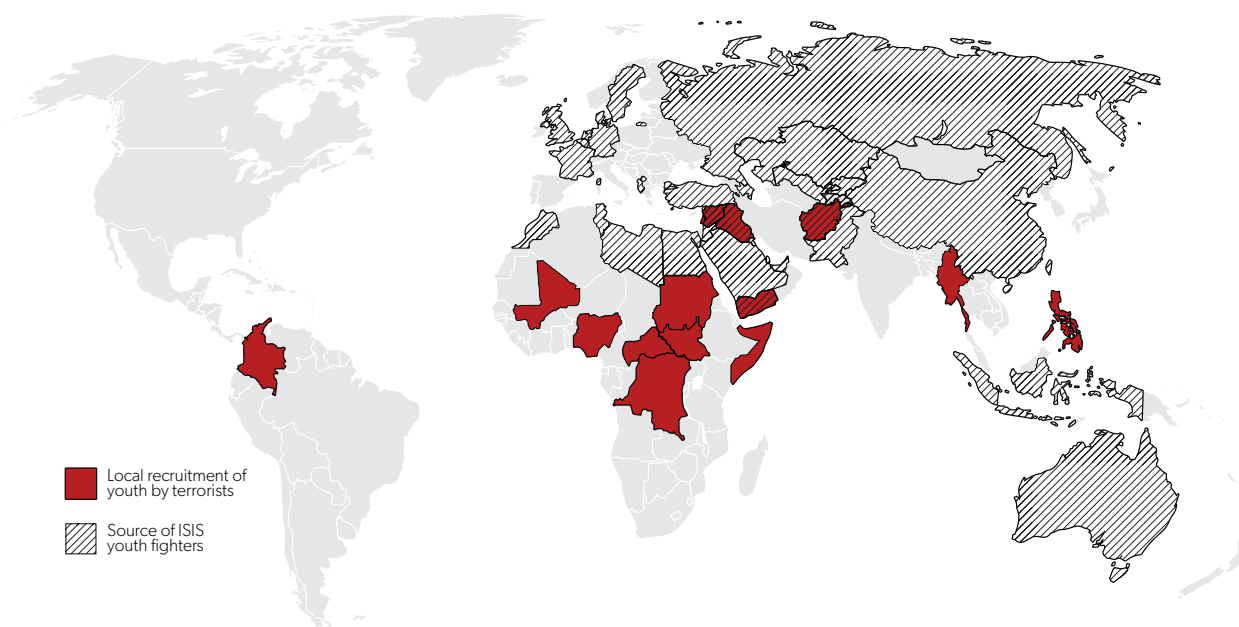
Source: UN General Assembly, Security Council, "Children and Armed Conflict Report of the Secretary-General," May 16, 2018, 38–42, https://undocs.org/s/2018/465; and Dakota Foster and Daniel Milton, "Children at War: Foreign Child Recruits of the Islamic State," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 11, no. 6 (2018): 14.

Figure 4. Vulnerabilities for Terrorist Recruitment
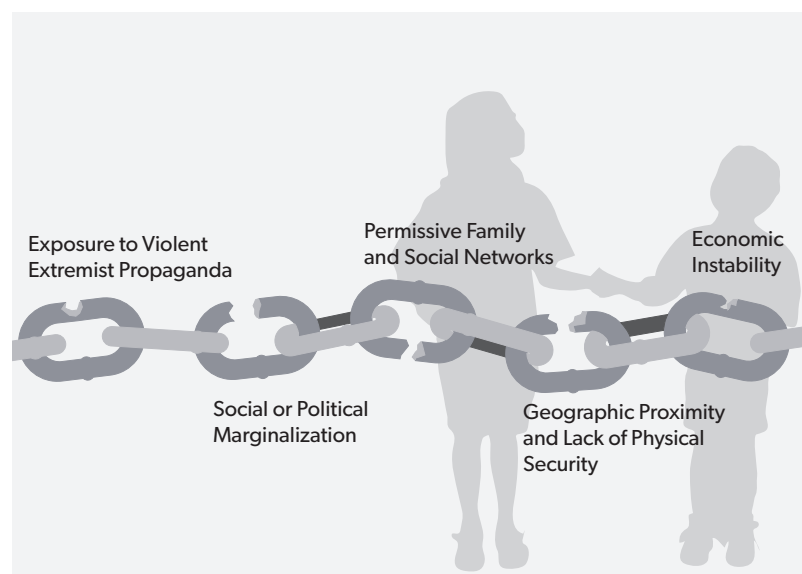
Source: Author.

aligned with violent extremists to improve local security conditions.[40]

Conflict-affected populations are also placed at risk by the limited physical security in refugee and internally displaced persons camps, which have made camps a frequent site of youth recruitment. Following the Rwandan genocide, millions of Hutu refugees fled to neighboring Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), where physical security and local government capacity were extremely limited. Hutu militia leaders quickly took control of the swelling refugee camps, using them as recruitment pools.[41] In other instances, host states have facilitated the recruitment of youth into extremist groups. Iran has used its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to recruit Afghan refugee youths—some as young as age 14—to fight in Syria as part of a Shi'a proxy group, the Fatemiyoun Division.[42]

These dynamics indicate the central importance of physically securing civilian populations as a way of disrupting terrorist recruitment. This is especially true of soft targets such as residential schools.

Economic Vulnerability. The relationship between economic vulnerability and recruitment is complex and varies across contexts. Although some country-specific research indicates a link between economic development indicators and terrorist attacks, subsequent cross-national and survey research calls into question the potential relationship.[43]

In the Middle East and North Africa, studies have consistently indicated that economic factors are not a motivation for radicalization and recruitment.[44] A 2015 study of Jordanians who joined ISIS and al-Nusra Front in Iraq and Syria found no evdence of economic compensation for new recruits. Indeed, more than 80 percent of the Jordanian fighers suveyed were employed at the time of their recruitment—some as engineers and doctors.[45] The recruitment records of nearly 300 youth who joined ISIS between 2013 and 2014 indicate most were students at the time of their recruitment.[46] These individual-level findings mirror country-level research that finds complex relationships among economic status, education, and participation in terrorism.[47]

Yet economic vulnerability continues to be widely reported as a factor supporting the recruitment of young men and young women into Boko Haram and al Shabaab. Insufficient employment opportunities and an inability to pay high school fees have been exploited by al Shabaab recruiters.[48] In a recent United Nations Development Programme survey, 13 percent of respondents who had joined a violent extremist group in Africa reported doing so for employment opportunities.[49] Although a plurality of young male fighters who joined ISIS in 2013 and 2014 reported being students, almost 10 percent were unemployed when recruited.[50]

It may be that economic vulnerability remains an important driver of terrorist recruitment in regions or communities under greater economic pressure.[51]

Nearly half of former Boko Haram members in another survey stated that they owned a business and that many join the group because of its promise of financial support.[52] In effect, membership in Boko Haram was perceived as a step toward a better economic future.

Unmet expectations among well-educated youth may drive radicalization and recruitment.[53] For example, Tunisian ISIS recruits were more likely to come from areas with relatively high levels of internal migrants and high unemployment among university graduates.[54] Migrants and highly educated individuals may have higher expectations of upward mobility that can fuel disenchantment when opportunities fail to materialize. Similarly, a survey of eight Arab countries indicates that unemployed and underemployed individuals with secondary and tertiary levels of education are more likely to hold extremist views than those with less education.[55]

These nuanced findings suggest that many US government-funded programs intended to counter violent extremism that classify youth as "at risk" based on absolute measures of poverty or past involvement in criminality may be misallocating program resources to relatively low-risk individuals.

Social or Political Marginalization. Individuals' feelings of exclusion from their community or society (whether real or perceived) play a role in terrorist recruitment. Terrorist groups can position themselves as an alternative community that promises young people a voice, sense of belonging, and opportunity to participate in something greater than themselves.[56] Many international organizations, including the World Bank and the United Nations, emphasize integrating young people into decision-making processes as a way to counter this sense of disaffection.[57] Programs funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to counter violent extremism—which include civic education programs, youth leadership activities, activist and social media trainings, and public forums between youth and political leaders—also reflect a clear concern regarding the social or political marginalization of youth.[58]

Gender discrimination can worsen social or political marginalization. Some USAID initiatives to counter violent extremism have sought to address this by organizing gender-neutral programs. However, such programs frequently fail to achieve gender parity among participants. In Burkina Faso, a youth leadership training on how to create personal Twitter and Facebook accounts had only one female participant, suggesting a serious disconnect between USAID's female empowerment goals and its programming.[59] In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, USAID has had greater success attracting young women to participate in female-only programs to counter violent extremism.[60] However, such programs may reinforce existing social norms that place women at a disadvantage. USAID's Peace Through Development II programming in Chad included majority-female trainings on tailoring, catering, and food service. Young men, on the other hand, were highly represented on trainings in engine repair, welding, and refrigeration and air-conditioning maintenance.[61]

The economic marginalization of young women, a key focus of USAID's Promote program in Afghanistan, has proved difficult to address. USAID budgeted approximately $37 million to assist Afghan women in finding new or improved government employment, but after three years, only 55 of the participating women (about 2.6 percent of the program's target) had succeeded.[62] Such gender-based discrepancies may only magnify young women's sense of injustice and, by extension, their vulnerability to terrorist recruitment.

Permissive Family and Social Networks. Violent extremist groups recruit through a variety of channels, both open and selective. Selective recruitment often occurs through family networks, peers, or social institutions (including educational institutions).[63] The United Nations Development Programme found that a majority of surveyed members of violent extremist groups in Africa were introduced to the group by a friend.[64] Case studies of youth in Mindanao, a region of the Philippines that witnessed an ISIS siege in 2017, found that family and social networks played a larger role in guiding

radicalization and membership in armed groups than any specific grievances or social and economic factors did.[65]

Family ties to terrorists have too often been overlooked in both the West and abroad. Although few analyses of family ties to violent extremism exist, research demonstrates that many youth members of armed groups in Mali had at least one parent who was a member of a violent extremist group.[66] As ISIS consolidated its territory in Syria and Iraq, entire families traveled from abroad to join the group.[67] In the United Kingdom, a study of 113 men and 18 women connected to jihadism found that 30 percent had a family tie to violent extremism.[68] The importance of family ties was also demonstrated in the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and the 2015 mass shooting in San Bernardino, California.[69]

Weak family structures can make young people more vulnerable to terrorist recruitment.[70] Female-headed households in particular may be more susceptible to economic pressure, making them especially vulnerable. Interviews of young Kenyan women, including several former al Shabaab members, reveal that economic pressures such as poverty and joblessness help explain why many end up in the terrorist group.[71] Some Kenyan women reported following their husbands who had already joined al Shabaab in Somalia to avoid the destitution faced by female-headed households in their villages.

This evidence echoes studies of youth participation in gangs, which find that family instability and domestic violence are risk factors for gang involvement.[72] A comparative study of gang and violent extremist group participation in El Salvador, Morocco, and Jordan identified social isolation and problems at home as key drivers. In El Salvador, the breakdown of family structures was the most commonly cited driver of violence.[73] Escaping domestic violence was also a major motivation for many young women in FARC, some of whom joined the Marxist insurgent group in their teens.[74]

Family can also be an important source of resilience against violent extremism. In the southern Philippines, where extremist recruitment is driven by family and social networks, some parents have succeeded in convincing their children to leave violent extremist groups.[75] Past USAID violent extremism risk assessments have highlighted the central role that families play in young people's lives and indicated the need for incorporating families into terrorism prevention efforts.[76]

Vulnerability to Propaganda. Youth are often seen as especially vulnerable to terrorist propaganda. While efforts to mitigate the impact of terrorist propaganda are often focused on media, it is important to remember that educational institutions may facilitate radicalization.

Al Shabaab is known to use Quranic schools to recruit children.[77] ISIS used an exceptionally sophisticated system of education-based indoctrination. It operated 1,350 primary and secondary schools, which delivered the group's message to over 100,000 children in Iraq and Syria.[78] Beyond Iraq and Syria, ISIS supporters have established extremist madrasas to radicalize young supporters. In the Philippines, madrasas were a common influence directing youth toward violent extremism.[79] In Malaysia, six ISIS-linked madrasa teachers were arrested for spreading jihadist propaganda in late 2018.[80]

Efforts to improve youth resilience to radicalization include programs that amplify moderate religious leaders' voices and foster coordination between educators and religious leaders.[81] For instance, USAID has funded youth-focused radio programming designed to spread messages of peace and tolerance via radio dramas. As part of USAID's Peace Through Development II initiative, 2,413 moderate religious leaders from Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger participated in trainings on interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance, and conflict resolution.[82]

Introducing critical thinking and media literacy skills into school curricula is also seen as an important way to reduce the vulnerability of youth to propaganda.[83] Efforts to teach youth why violent extremism is wrong are seen as one of the most effective measures to prevent terrorism.[84] Media literacy was a focal point of USAID efforts in Kosovo, where countries such as Saudi Arabia have provided financial backing for conservative religious

education programs.[85] In Pakistan, where similar concerns about Saudi-funded religious education exist, USAID trained more than 18,000 educators in teaching methods designed to enhance critical thinking skills.[86] Meanwhile, USAID programs saw teachers, religious leaders, and government officials from Kenya and Somalia discuss methods for integrating countering violent extremism strategies into the classroom.[87]

Improving Efforts to Reduce Violent Extremism Among Youth

The Trump administration's 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism acknowledges the importance of nonmilitary tools, including international development and prevention programs, in combating violent extremism.[88] Although high-quality evaluations of such programs are currently few and far between, several have identified promising results.[89] For example, a radio program in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger that spreads messages of peace and tolerance helped reduce perceptions that religious violence and political violence were justified.[90] Higher levels of exposure to peace and tolerance radio in Mali, Chad, and Niger were associated with increased support for Western efforts to combat terrorism.[91] In Afghanistan, a combination of cash and vocational training helped reduce recipients' willingness to provide support to the Taliban.[92]

Room for improvement nevertheless remains. Expanded efforts to undermine the exploitation of youth by terrorist groups should emphasize the following objectives.

Adopt clear criteria and data-based approaches to identify youths' vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment and to improve program targeting. By and large, US government-funded programs to counter violent extremism among youth have focused on males between ages 15 and 30. However, some participants' ages stretch well into adulthood: One youth-focused USAID social media

program in Niger included individuals who were 36 years old.[93] The continued inclusion of adults in youth programming is not an effective response to children's growing participation in terrorist groups. Boys and girls as young as age 7 have participated in violence linked to ISIS and Boko Haram.

Furthermore, focusing on age alone does not provide enough information to develop appropriate terrorism prevention programs. Across Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Somalia—countries that have been the focus of such programs—there are more than 34 million males between the ages of 15 and 30.[94] The reality is that not all young people are equally at risk of radicalization or recruitment by terrorist groups. In fact, individuals who are most likely to participate in a US government-funded program in a national capital may be among the *least* likely to be at risk.

In Tunisia, an outside evaluation found that USAID's Tunisia Transition Initiative failed to actually target at-risk youth in its programs.[95] Instead, programs worked predominantly with youth at risk of either drug use or criminal activity. While some analyses have identified a connection between criminal activity and violent extremism among European jihadists, the strength of the relationship clearly varies by context.[96]

Inappropriate targeting of participants in US government-funded programs can be due to a limited understanding of local contexts, a failure to properly identify or screen individual participants, or inadequate security or resources to implement programs in areas where risk is higher (e.g., beyond national and regional capitals). And while many youth engagement activities—such as planting trees, cleaning markets, and painting classrooms—are intended to build a sense of civic identity among participants and foster engagement with their community, such efforts do little to address the real vulnerabilities that at-risk youth face.

By focusing on vulnerable individuals in communities—those who lack physical or economic security—we can narrow the scope of US government-funded programs and tailor activities to high-risk individuals' specific needs. USAID's guidance on inclusive development highlights the value of this approach by urging programs to study the scope and impact of

marginalization across communities.[97] The US Institute of Peace's Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States similarly advocates for the tailoring of countering violent extremism efforts to local contexts.[98]

Expanded use of data-driven targeting, including the use of social network analyses and other analytic tools, will improve program design and effectiveness. Social network analyses have already proved useful in identifying individuals at risk of joining street gangs and in facilitating public health messaging.[99] Identifying factors specific to the radicalization and recruitment of youth in a particular environment will help minimize the risk that the most vulnerable individuals are inadvertently excluded from programming.

Evaluate the impact of programs and the durability of their effects on youth attitudes and behavior. International efforts to counter violent extremism can have a mixed impact on attitudes toward the use of violence.[100] Given the potential for negative consequences (such as increased support for political violence or increased dissatisfaction with local conditions), programs should be as narrow in scope as possible. This means focusing on specific, locally identified risk factors and vulnerabilities. Targeted programs focused on the immediate challenge of behavioral change are more likely to generate positive outcomes.

The inability of program implementers to offer compelling evidence of attitudinal or behavioral change despite years of funding for countering violent extremism programs is due largely to the fact that most programs fail to collect data on direct indicators of radicalization, such as the use of or support for political violence. In an expansive review of existing studies, researchers found that less than 5 percent of studies reported any outcomes (as opposed to commonly noted outputs such as the number of participants).[101] Programs more commonly report on community indicators of social cohesion or community resilience, which rely on surveys of individuals' trust in the local police, attendance of local community meetings, or beliefs about interethnic marriage, for example.[102]

Pretesting and pilot programs can help refine program design while also providing vital contextual information. Experimental survey tools that directly measure attitudes regarding violent extremism and minimize the misrepresentation of respondents' attitudes should be adopted to correct for current shortcomings.

Confront the radicalization and recruitment of girls and young women while recognizing they face additional vulnerabilities, including forced marriages and trafficking. US counterterrorism policy has largely failed to address the fact that female combatants are active in most violent extremist groups and that young women voluntarily join these groups for many of the same reasons as young men.[103] Since the end of the Cold War, more than 70 armed rebel groups have featured female members, and evidence suggests girls and women are more likely to join armed groups that adopt terrorist tactics.[104]

By focusing primarily on young men, US government-funded programs to prevent terrorism ignore the very real threat young women pose. A better understanding of the diversity of young women's motivations for participating in terrorism would place them at the center of efforts to counter violent extremism. Instead, young women are often token participants in programs or receive entirely separate, gender-specific streams of programming that can serve to reinforce their marginalization.

The State Department recently took a step in the right direction with the 2019 US Strategy to Support Women and Girls at Risk from Violent Extremism and Conflict.[105] The strategy explicitly acknowledges that efforts to address the adverse effects of violent extremism, terrorism, and conflict are more effective and sustainable when women and girls lead those efforts.[106] But how the State Department will operationalize this approach remains unclear.

Without compelling information otherwise, terrorism prevention programs should bring together boys and girls and young men and young women to foster healthy social relationships. Policy should also recognize that girls and young women face an additional

set of vulnerabilities to terrorist recruitment that may need to be addressed through specialized programmatic efforts.

Address radicalization within the family and other family-based vulnerabilities. Families may play a much greater role in radicalization and recruitment than has previously been acknowledged. The finding that 8 percent of recruits into African extremist groups were led into terrorism by a family member is only the tip of the iceberg.[107] ISIS, and the thousands of foreign terrorist fighters that joined the group, demonstrates the central role that families play.[108] Some parents of foreign ISIS recruits inadvertently supported the terrorist group by sending money to their children in Syria. In some instances, this amounted to thousands of euros.[109] The number of young children found in ISIS's last Syrian stronghold of Baghuz reflects the group's ideological emphasis on the importance of populating the caliphate. Parents have also proved willing to directly involve their children in terrorist operations, as recent terrorist attacks featuring entire families in Indonesia and Sri Lanka demonstrate.[110]

Programs to counter violent extremism in the United States and Europe tend to focus on families as a source of resilience to violent extremism, rather than as a potential risk. Between August 2017 and March 2018, more than 2,500 parents participated in Department of Homeland Security–funded programs.[111] In one program, the Seattle Police Department hosted weekly trainings for immigrant families with children believed to be at high risk of radicalization. The program provided parents with information on the city's administrative, legal, and educational systems.[112] In another example, the Heartland Democracy Center in Minneapolis organized workshops to engage immigrant and refugee parents on youth violence prevention.[113]

Family engagement programs need to be developed for an international context. But rather than seeing family members only as potential informants on their children, US government-funded programs abroad should also be prepared to engage parents as potential contributors to terrorist recruitment and radicalization.

A State Department–funded pilot program called Ending Terrorism Through Youth Service Action Locally (ETTYSAL) serves as one example. This program assessed 600 Tunisian youths across two communities on a set of 12 distinct risk factors, including weak parental supervision, peer influence, peer radicalization, and family radicalization.[114] One hundred high-risk youth between the ages of 14 and 23 were paired with local counselors who engaged directly with them and their families to identify and mitigate high-risk behaviors. After one year, the program reduced the prevalence of family radicalization by about 84 percent and peer radicalization by about 22 percent.[115] Although ETTYSAL is only a small pilot, it provides an innovative model that could be replicated in other contexts.

Conclusion

The involvement of youth in armed conflict is not a new phenomenon. However, programs to counter violent extremism abroad have yet to put the vulnerability of youth to terrorist group recruitment at the forefront of their efforts. This is especially true for girls and young women, whose participation in terrorism prevention efforts has lagged behind that of their male counterparts.

Policy and practice need to take the roles of young people, both male and female, in terrorist groups seriously and think creatively about the roles of families and family life in fostering violent extremism. If the United States is to meaningfully improve its efforts to counter youth radicalization and recruitment, it is key that US government-funded terrorism prevention programs abroad account for the nuanced factors that contribute to youth vulnerability. These include geographic proximity to conflict, economic vulnerability, social or political marginalization, permissive family and social networks, and exposure to violent extremist propaganda through educational institutions and media.

US government-funded programs in this area should draw on rigorous data and analysis to target those most at risk in any given community, rather than relying on unproven assumptions about vulnerable individuals. Targeted and tailored programs should provide concrete evidence of changes in participants' attitudes and behaviors and, especially, whether those changes prove durable over time. Through such efforts, the United States can begin to improve its track record in tackling the ongoing threat posed by terrorists' exploitation of youth.

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