



Initiative to Address the Life Cycle of Radicalization to Violence

The Role of Families in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Strategic Recommendations and Programming Options

Introduction

At the Sixth Ministerial Plenary Meeting in New York on 27 September 2015, Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) Ministers endorsed the launch of the GCTF's *Initiative to Address the Life Cycle of Radicalization to Violence (Life Cycle Initiative)*. As part of this new initiative, the GCTF's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group was tasked to develop recommendations and programming options focusing on the role of families in preventing and countering violent extremism.

Families are vital to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). From shaping attitudes toward non-violence to serving as a "front line" actor in identifying signs of possible radicalization to violence, preventing such radicalization's onset, and intervening in the radicalization process, families represent key, often under-utilized, partners in P/CVE efforts. Yet, even as the need for family-centered CVE programming is acknowledged, engaging families presents challenges – from finding credible partners, to managing risk, and identifying the best intervention opportunities. At times, family members can also be part of the problem, especially when the parent-child relationship does not exist or is difficult. In such circumstances, a credible community figure, who has the respect of the concerned individual, could provide that supportive role and the necessary intervention.

On 23-25 May 2016, under the auspices of the GCTF's CVE Working Group, *Hedayah*, the International Center of Excellence for CVE, hosted a workshop on the P/CVE roles of families. This workshop aimed to: (1) identify lessons learned and good practices; (2) catalogue specific programming approaches to empower and support family members as P/CVE actors; and (3) create practitioner resources in this emerging field of CVE. The following strategic recommendations and programming options on the role of families in P/CVE are the result of workshop discussions, as well as a review of relevant academic and practitioner literature.¹ As families are often secondary beneficiaries of broader CVE programs – rather than primary participants – this guidance often overlaps with broader CVE good practices.

All states are encouraged to consider using these non-binding recommendations, while recognizing that implementation of these recommendations and programming options must be consistent with applicable international law, as well as national laws and regulations, taking into account the varied histories, cultures, and legal systems among States. These

¹ This review was conducted by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO). CSO presented findings of its review at the May 2016 *Hedayah*-hosted workshop. Workshop participants were provided copies of the CSO research brief, which is also available upon request via the GCTF Administrative Unit.

recommendations – with their focus on the P/CVE roles of the family – can help to broaden, complement, and support the leading counterterrorism role of national governments.

Strategic Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Prioritize strengthening family-based social networks – and particularly parental influence – to build resilience to violent extremism (VE).

Family, as a conduit of culture and belief, can play a central role in shaping attitudes toward non-violence. Social networks and peer groups in general play a profound role in facilitating, or undermining, processes of radicalization to violence. Positive social networks are important in reinforcing non-violent norms and resilience to VE. Some research has found family to be more important than other kinds of social networks in shaping individual perspectives on non-violence. Parental influence appears to be particularly important. Where parents have less impact on their children’s decision-making, they are less able to guard against radicalization to violence. In many contexts, “parent-son” relationships represent a particularly important gap. Where programming can strengthen family influence on youth, and increase links between individuals and the broader community, this may reduce the appeal of VE.

Recommendation 2: Support and empower women – particularly mothers – as prevention protagonists.

Mothers are situated at the heart of the family, and are often best-placed to identify, predict, and respond to potential vulnerabilities to VE. In many cases, women are also well-positioned to offer meaningful counter-narratives: they can humanize the impact of terrorism, or highlight the hardships, economic and otherwise, that may be imposed on a recruit’s own family if he/she leaves. The voices of women need to be amplified. For mothers to play a significant prevention role, they must be informed and empowered, within the home and the broader community. Mothers may identify an emerging VE risk, but may not have the tools or support to stop children from committing a crime.

Recommendation 3: Engage fathers and respected community males to gain access to vulnerable communities, and to shape existing cultural narratives, which VEs manipulate.

In many cultures, men act as the chief family and community leaders, and their cooperation is necessary for a family-based program to succeed. Fathers and male family members are also central in shaping notions of masculinity that VEs have proven adept at manipulating and militarizing. Fathers, brothers, and other men in the community can work to blunt such narratives – including by calling attention to the falseness of VE propaganda, or by emphasizing culturally relevant, non-violent values of protection of, and provision for, family. While there are some programs to support mothers as P/CVE actors, fathers are a missing link. The same tools and programs that help support mothers should be extended to fathers to help build their capacity and skills – including how to communicate with children.

Recommendation 4: Support the development of family commitments in VE prevention programming.

Family commitments can play an important role in prevention, in part by “raising the costs” of participation in VE. According to some research, breadwinners are less likely to radicalize to violence. Obligations to a spouse, children, or elderly parents/other family members can “anchor” individuals to peace. This should not be overstated: family commitments are, in many cases, not in themselves sufficient to prevent violent radicalization. Nevertheless, research has found that even where individuals subscribe to VE beliefs, and have an opportunity to act on those beliefs, their family obligations may outweigh their emerging ideological commitment. As such, deconstruction of VE narratives is not enough to decrease susceptibility to radicalization to violence and recruitment; social construction of positive, alternative narratives is necessary to empower families.

Recommendation 5: Capitalize on the role of family relationships to rehabilitate and reintegrate VEs.

Family can function as a “pull factor” in getting VEs to give up violence, and a family-based approach has been a key feature of VE rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Commitment to family, or a desire to start one, can be an important motive in disengaging from violent extremism. While disengagement is a process, not a static event, family connections appear to be an important factor in shaping outcomes and creating “cognitive openings” through which former VEs can reassess their commitments. Some disengagement programs emphasize binding former VEs to their families and larger communities. Those who lack close family ties are encouraged to build them. In some cases, upon release, former prisoners have been assisted in finding a wife, as well as identifying and being provided housing and employment. Domestic and communal attachments that promote non-violence appear to be among the more effective buffers against participation in VE.

Recommendation 6: Focus on building family member awareness of violent radicalization signs and prevention techniques.

Families are often insufficiently armed with the knowledge or tools to prevent VE radicalization, and face the risk of being stigmatized, blamed, judged, shamed, job losses, and taboo when engaging in dialogue. While in some cases parents are the first to recognize the early signs of radicalization to violence, they are not always equipped with the skills to address the political, psychological, sociological, and ideological issues. Meaningful education efforts to support parents might address: (1) the warning signs of radicalization to violence; (2) child development, particularly how the onset of adolescence makes young people more susceptible to VE; (3) VE use of technology, particularly social media; (4) active and fruitful community debate; and (5) media options to discuss these topics (e.g. online/radio/television/group forums). There also need to be safe channels for parents to report early signs of radicalization to violence, and an infrastructure of experts able to deal with vulnerable youth before they become a security risk.

Recommendation 7: Promote interaction between families and authorities, particularly security forces, to enhance information-sharing, cooperation, and collaborative opportunities for prevention.

Families can be encouraged to work with authorities on preventing violent radicalization and recruitment. In some environments, lack of faith in formal authorities disincentivizes family-based prevention efforts. The securitized nature of counterterrorism approaches often diminishes the willingness of families to report risks to authorities, or to seek help when their children are falling under the influence of VE recruiters. In some instances, communities, or segments thereof, may view collaborating with authorities as counterproductive or even dangerous. For information sharing to be effective, and for such information not to be misused, trust has to be developed between families, local communities, and local authorities. In areas where there is a strong presence of community leaders, a wider range of people can be reached through a more comprehensive approach to supporting vulnerable individuals. A comprehensive approach requires linkages with social actors and institutions and includes civil society.

Recommendation 8: Reduce social isolation of the family – particularly women and children – to strengthen resilience to VE.

The ability to resist VE is multilevel in character. It is a property not only of individuals, but of families and communities, requiring common values, strong social networks, and shared problem-solving mechanisms. Yet, in many communities, women and children's access to the public sphere is limited. This social isolation limits interactions with authorities, including law enforcement, and reduces opportunities for families, particularly mothers, to share information with other families outside the home. This undermines constructive identification of radicalization and therefore prevention efforts. Where such isolation dynamics prevail, VEs enjoy greater flexibility to move and the means and opportunity to reach potential recruits without detection.

Recommendation 9: Tailor family-level interventions to local cultures and anchor such activities in local partnerships.

Given their sensitive nature, family-level interventions can unwittingly endanger participants and may play into the hands of VEs – feeding recruitment and radicalization to violence narratives. Where such interventions are seen as intrusive, guided by outsiders, and a threat to the local values, they may contribute to the appeal of VE recruitment narratives. Identifying credible local partners – and engaging actively in consultative program design and implementation – is thus even more of a priority.

Recommendation 10: Make family-oriented P/CVE interventions multifaceted, long-term, flexible, and tolerant of short-term failures.

While a whole-of-community approach is becoming a hallmark of CVE approaches, it is particularly effective in supporting families as P/CVE protagonists. Linking parents, teachers, social workers/counselors, religious leaders, police, and young people in sustainable ways pools the necessary perspectives and experience for effective prevention work. For example, social workers and religious leaders can use the information they learn to help families be active, informed participants in the care of their relatives – in particular, by orienting them towards their relative’s specific needs, challenges, and frustrations; without this support, family members may be counterproductive in their approaches.

This kind of work takes time to design, implement and render results; policymakers, in particular, need to remain cognizant of this longer time horizon. Interventions may, depending on the case, be tolerant of failure and able to adapt. Admission of programmatic failure and demonstrable reorientation should be viewed in a positive – not a negative – light.

Programming Options

Following are options that can be considered in designing and implementing programs supporting families as P/CVE protagonists. These options are drawn from a range of regional contexts, and are only illustrative; indeed, they would need to be adapted for any new context before implementation.

Building Parental Capacity

- Organize community events to raise parent and family awareness of VE. Topics might include VE ideology, VE use of social media, and VE recruitment tactics. A dialogue approach to engaging parents may be helpful in building comfort with these issues.
- Develop an easy-to-use guide and other materials for parents to use as they engage their children in conversations about VE. Using different terminology or framing the issues differently (e.g. “building resilience” versus “countering violent extremism”) may help such efforts.
- Focus training for women as wives, mothers, community figures, and other relevant roles to recognize signs of, and adopt techniques to prevent, radicalization. Create socially acceptable and safe spaces for such training. Emphasize skills such as listening, communicating, empathizing, and persuading children. Incorporate female-focused, home-based, income-generation activities into such programming; these activities can have significant second-order effects by giving women the confidence to engage on VE issues.
- Train parents in how to recognize and deconstruct VE narratives. Include how parents address grievances that youth – and indeed their surrounding communities – may share, and that VEs exploit. Emotional appeal and experiences are a powerful source of VE recruitment. Family members may need to avoid arguing on the basis of facts when trying to engage with youth showing signs of radicalization to violence.

Community Support for Families

- Provide social workers with additional professional education in how to recognize and respond to possible signs of radicalization among youth. Emphasize how to communicate with and engage a young person's parents and/or family as part of the counseling process.
- Build P/CVE awareness of religious leaders – particularly in concert with other community actors – as they provide guidance to families as sources of resilience to violent radicalization. Develop or expand cadres of female spiritual advisors who may be more appropriate or effective to reach out to women as wives, mothers, and community figures. Facilitate networks of religious leaders, social workers, educators, and local law enforcement officers in the context of multidisciplinary approaches to supporting families in their P/CVE roles.
- Set up and staff a telephone helpline for parents, family members, and others to receive advice on how to respond to what may be signs of radicalization to violence among family members. Publicize helplines as a trusted resource for parents and families, which may require establishing them at non-governmental organizations. Staff helplines with multidisciplinary teams.
- Support or expand the recruitment of female law enforcement officials, and train them to engage with women and girls in communities at risk of radicalization to violence and recruitment into VE.

School-Based Approaches

- Strengthen school-, and particularly teacher-, engagement with parents on VE issues. Create new, or use and share existing, information products on radicalization to violence and prevention for parents and families; such products should reinforce CVE-relevant approaches in schools.
- Support older students as leaders and role models in CVE-relevant activities with younger students; these activities can both directly address VE themes or engage students in active, stimulating, positive alternatives.
- Feature school-based presentations by "formers", their siblings, and their parents. Facilitate follow-up dialogues among students and their teachers. Devise appropriate and constructive ways students can engage their brothers/sisters on these issues.

CVE Communications

- Deploy specific training for parents and families on internet safety. Include topics such as cyber bullying and online gambling to avoid stigmatization of youth as automatically associated with VEs. Inform parents how to observe, guide, and intervene constructively in their children's internet and social media habits.
- Design, create, and disseminate knowledge of social media applications engaging and assisting siblings and peers in identifying and preventing radicalization to violence. Build in compelling positive alternatives that older siblings can use with their younger brothers/sisters.
- Develop or support documentary or short dramatized films about the radicalization and recruitment of young people emphasizing the dynamics within, and negative impact on, their families. Focus on the experiences, and include the voices, of key family members of terrorists, including, for example, suicide bombers and “foreign terrorist fighters”. Show the films to families in community settings, and hold dialogues with these families about the issues and how to respond. Working with family members as public CVE advocates needs to be done with sensitivity, and only where family members feel comfortable and safe in speaking out.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration

- Provide social, psychological, and other forms of support or opportunities for the family members of incarcerated VEs as relevant and appropriate.
- Facilitate informal family peer groups among VE family members. Encourage social or recreational activities among them as a way to build camaraderie between, and provide support to, these families – as well as to build trust with authorities.