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Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism

Phase I Cohort Workshop 5 Report

March 2018

Executive Summary

The Carter Center (TCC) convened its fifth workshop in Switzerland on March 20-21, 2018, building on the four previous meetings of the Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism project (PVE). The same group of 20 influential Muslim religious and community leaders from Belgium, France, Morocco, and Tunisia returned to Switzerland with the clear objective of finalizing the proposals for their local PVE projects. These projects were the product of the skills learned and the experiences shared during the first four workshops. Having developed more than 60 local projects across multiple sectors, including online media, religious outreach, and youth engagement, participants decided to consolidate these diverse initiatives into overarching national projects. TCC awarded each of the four national projects a $10,000 mini-grant as seed money. These mini-grants brought added impetus to the workshop participants' strong desire to further improve the vision, goals and activities of their prospective projects.

Over the course of the two-day workshop in March, the projects presented by participants evolved under the guidance of Marsha Base, TCC advisor on design, monitoring and evaluation (DM&E), who helped sharpen the focus of the proposals. This was complemented by the contributions of other experts in the fields of political strategy and coalition-building, brand communications, and

conflict resolution in the MENA region. Having already built up trust throughout the preceding four workshops, participants were motivated by the prospect of mentoring the new cohort of religious and community leaders and, eventually, meeting them to share lessons learned. This will ensure that, in due course, TCC can step back with full confidence that the PVE projects will flourish under local ownership.

Project Overview and Lessons Learned: Broadening the Scope of Work

Houda Abadi, TCC associate director, led an interactive session on the effects of Daesh's territorial defeat and the rising tide of Islamophobia in the West. Since the group last gathered in March 2017, Daesh's media production had experienced a dramatic decline. From a peak of 30 new propaganda videos released every month in 2015, Daesh videos dwindled to 13 videos per month in 2017. In the first three months of 2018 combined, a total of 15 videos were published. The change in quantity was echoed by a change in content. In 2018, no videos exalting the social services of the so-called "caliphate" appeared. By contrast, noticeable rises occurred in the proportion of videos featuring strong religious arguments (27 percent) and espousing military operations (67 percent). Participants suggested that the shift in Daesh narratives requires an evolution in the participants' work.

To familiarize participants with the new style and substance of Daesh propaganda, participants were requested to analyze a recent video. They observed that Daesh now calls for "lone wolf" attacks as opposed to mandatory emigration to Iraq and Syria during its height of territorial holding. On a directly related issue, Dr. Abadi warned that the return of Daesh's foreign fighters to their countries of origin would pose a significant and pressing challenge to the work of all participants. A rights-based rehabilitation and reintegration program with community engagement must be designed to respond to specific local contexts and individual cases.

In parallel, there has been a normalization of Islamophobia in the U.S. and Europe. The number of anti-Muslim hate groups in the U.S. has increased for the third consecutive year, while the current U.S. administration continues to push Islamophobic policies and rhetoric. TCC places equal emphasis on responding to all forms of violent extremism as it does on countering Daesh. Islamophobia and Daesh are two faces of the same coin. To address the rising tide of Islamophobia,

TCC organized a discussion on "The Many Faces of Extremism: the rise of White Supremacy" and collaborated with the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Additionally, TCC hosted a symposium on Islamophobia in September 2017 and denounced Islamophobia in a public statement. An upcoming manual on the phenomenon of Islamophobia will emphasize its systemic nature and underline the fact that Islamophobia is not a Muslim issue, but rather a human-rights issue.

Political and Social Strategies for Change and Action

Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, former South African ambassador to the U.S. and founder of the World for All Foundation, provided further theoretical foundation for the design and methodology of projects developed by participants. He reminded them that living by the intents, or *maqasid*, of Islam is essential to navigate contemporary challenges. Rasool urged participants to become strategic leaders in order to overcome populist leaders, who rely on either nostalgic or demagogic discourse. Strategic leaders are capable of transforming a series of random, fragmented actions (tactics) into a coherent, purposeful vision (strategy). Rasool instructed participants to discuss in groups how best to respond to two major issues – Daesh's territorial loss and the growth of white supremacy – at this moment in history. Participants considered the impact, dangers, opportunities and necessary actions that are associated with both issues. Strategic leaders do not focus on the dangers but look for opportunities instead.

Rasool suggested that the current interregnum – the period of time during which Daesh adapts to the defeat of its physical caliphate and the West recalibrates its approach to violent extremism – represents a unique opportunity for participants to convey their message: "When there is less fear, the people can hear." As strategic leaders, they can take further advantage of the so-called interregnum to widen their circles of influence. Their core circle (their immediate zone of control) can be expanded to build coalitions. In turn, these coalitions can inspire individuals and groups from further afield, through the effective use of media and communications. Rasool warned participants that "in-reach" is as important as outreach. It is hypocritical to preach a message of inclusion if there is still exclusion within the community's own zone of control. As a result of this, Rasool encouraged participants to consider the strategies they have used or will use in their projects

to build across ideological divides within their own communities. Participants were also pressed to ensure in their work youth and female inclusion and empowerment.

Harnessing the Power of the Media to Build a Strong and Credible Brand

Nada Fornier, Procter and Gamble's brand communication director, provided participants with tactics for designing compelling stories to achieve social change. Effective stories rely on the "who-what-how" approach: who is being targeted; what is the content of the story; how is the audience reached? These messages can gain additional weight with the participation of so-called "influencers." Rational influencers, such as the news media, academics, and politicians, target the audience's brain. Emotional influencers – celebrities, entertainment media, and cultural icons – target the audience's heart. Fornier urged participants, who are themselves local influencers, to harness their projects to other figures and organizations with grass-roots social capital. Even very high-profile figures can be persuaded to endorse a project pro bono, if the project is relevant, credible, and timely. The presence of these influencers will ensure that their target audience will both care about and share the project's message.

Aware that many proposed projects envisaged the creation of an online platform, Fornier warned participants that most consumers of online media do not access directly a website by typing the website's address. Rather, they access websites through links, Google or social media. She therefore urged participants to employ keywords to promote their websites; this will boost the site's ranking on search engine results.

Messages will also circulate much more widely if they are positive – hope sells. This was vividly illustrated to participants through their analysis of two different campaign videos. The first documented a young women's project against FGM in East Africa. Despite the sensitive subject matter, it was dealt with in a positive manner and the video buttressed a strong storyline with statistics. Participants were impressed that the campaign was achieved with very modest resources, in large part because it responded to a clear need and demonstrated flexibility and pragmatism. The second video focused on a UNHCR appeal for support for Syria. However, this video presented an altogether different version of an otherwise familiar and desperately tragic story: This

story was laced with notes of optimism and powerful images touching the subconscious, thereby inspiring the audience.

Design, Monitoring & Evaluation (DM&E) and Project Proposals

Marsha Base, TCC's DM&E advisor, helped participants refine their mini-grant proposals by creating robust goals, planning activities, and developing mechanisms to evaluate and report success. Base reminded participants that she would simply act as the "guide on the side" – the direction and drive for the projects would come from the participants themselves.

The establishment of robust goals began with the participants' seeking to capture the essence of their vision. The vision was honed until it became a SMART goal (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bounded). Base then offered advice as participants devised activities to support their vision and SMART goals. They deconstructed their project activities into primary activities, the key actors (supporters and/or opponents) of the activities, the expected changes resulting from the planned activities and the underlying assumptions.

Belgium Project Proposal

On a per capita basis, Belgium has the highest number of Daesh recruits. The "1,000 Youth for Positive Change" project targets youth – as a force for change in the present and the future and to inspire and immunize their peers from Daesh propaganda and Islamophobia. The goal is to have trained 1,000 young men and women by 2020. The 1,000 youth can be reached through a "training of trainers" model. Youth will be taught how to collaborate with civil society organizations, politicians and other actors in their local communities. They will gain technical media training and be empowered to deconstruct hate discourse. Pre- and post-training evaluation forms will allow progress to be gauged. Qualitative monitoring will result from focus groups. Quantitative monitoring will result from tracking the unique views and activity on online discussion platforms.

France Project Proposal

"A Society For All and By All" project is a three-pronged approach tackling Islamophobia and Daesh terrorism. It consists of: 1) symposia in Annecy, Roubaix and Brest; 2) development of websites and social networks; and 3) support for Muslim converts and their families. These activities will be based on the following three pillars: 1) inform participants and local communities on the reality of Islam; 2) train participants with the necessary tools; and 3) act and offer real-world solutions.

Morocco Project Proposal

The group's vision was the restoration of hope and harmony, achieved by nurturing productive young people who possess respect for others. The Moroccan participants aimed to train 30 young men and women ages 25 to 40 to become leaders in civil rights and religion. This cohort, in turn, after one year's training, will each train 10 youth, for a total of 30 leaders and 300 empowered youth. Through an online platform, the training will provide the tools to understand religious texts and develop communication and social media skills. The Moroccan group confidently stated that TCC's mini-grant would be supported by financial pledges from local partners. The presentation ended with an assurance that they have greater local credibility and will therefore have a significantly deeper impact on the ground.

Tunisian Project Proposal

Tunisia was the first country to succeed in a democratic "Arab Spring" transition. However, many soldiers, civilians and tourists have died as well at the hands of Daesh in Tunisia. To prevent young men and women from joining extremist groups and to rehabilitate returnees, "The Will to Live" project proposes to develop an e-platform to foster increased collaboration and information-sharing among youth. Tunisia ranks tenth in Africa in terms of number of internet users.[1] The participants noted that Tunisian youth are more connected and mobile than ever before. For

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[1] https://www.wamda.com/2013/04/12-key-statistics-on-how-tunisians-use-social-media-infographic

instance, 68% of Facebook users in Tunisia are youth,[2] and this represents a valuable resource. Feedback and testimonials from the online platform will be used to plan carefully targeted community initiatives to immunize marginalized communities against violent extremism.

Conclusions and the Way Forward

The participants' new-found DM&E skills helped accelerate the transition of their PVE projects from visions into actions. Participants will provide TCC their revised project proposals in the near future, so as to gain access to the mini-grants. In the medium term, Phase 1 participants can look forward to a joint workshop and symposium with the new cohort in 2019. This represents an opportunity for outreach – with civil society organizations, the media, and representatives of certain governments – as well as "in reach," as participants can continue to forge bonds with Muslim individuals who possess the same strong commitment to establishing peace within their local communities.

There is a need for an inclusive community approach to preventing violent extremism. Current efforts are largely based on aggressive security measures, but TCC's research finds that this approach is counterproductive and places additional pressures on already marginalized and at-risk communities. Similarly, attempts to prevent violent extremism must address all its forms: Extremism knows no nationality, color, or religion. It is essential to engage with communities and institutions across political and religious divides, including conservative communities. The fight against violent extremism is a fight for human rights and social justice.

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[2] http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/UserManagement/PDF/ASMR6_En_Final.pdf