Leveraging Soft Power in U.S. and International CVE Efforts

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Since 2001, the US has relied on kinetic 'capture and kill' count-terrorism approaches – with very little focus on leveraging our soft power to prevent violent extremism. As a result, the scourge of terrorism has persisted and there are indications that ISIS may now be increasing its presence beyond Iraq and Syria – into Yemen and Afghanistan.

Efforts to decrease the ISIS appeal and degrade their ability to recruit will require coordinating efforts across multiple US government agencies, our international partners and local communities here in America.

At the international level, the US government should leverage more diplomatic pressure with its allies in the Middle East to make sure both their political leaders and the state religious institutions are debunking the myths of the ISIS propaganda—particularly its false claims of statehood, militant Jihad, and legitimate religious rule. Though the US has successfully added several of these nations in the coalition for limited military campaigns against ISIS, their support is also essential in the "Arab street" to effectively reduce the pool of foreign fighters. In addition, we should encourage their ministries of religious affairs to better monitor the mosques and other faith-based institutions to ensure that they are not supporting militancy abroad. Moreover, those states that have sponsored religious leaders to travel abroad and guide diaspora communities, or who have established Islamic centers overseas, should ensure that these individuals and their institutions are promoting positive values such as social harmony and civic engagement.

Another international diplomatic effort could include a broad public awareness campaign that alerts the general public to the dangers of terrorist recruiters online and encourages safe internet use for youth. The extent of recruitment online and the scope of this problem warrant such an approach and could be modeled after other successful international efforts such as AIDS awareness campaigns, which included big budget media firms to garner publicity and featured top level celebrities and political support.

Here in the US, policymakers need to dedicate resources and attention to the development of public-private partnerships that address the major risk factors to radicalization. This would require funding and institutional support from local and federal governments to implement programs that foster civic engagement, reduce intolerance, decrease alienation and marginalization of Muslims, acculturate immigrants better into our society, and reduce feelings of relative deprivation.

At the community level, we need to expand initiatives to educate communities about the threat of ISIS, their recruitment tactics, warning signs of vulnerable individuals, and how communities can respond. The National Counterterrorism Center's 'Community Awareness Briefings' (CAB) are a good starting point, which could be expanded to include a 'train-the-trainer' component so that local leaders can eventually deliver the CAB. This would empower community leaders and give them ownership of responding to this threat.

In Montgomery County, WORDE in collaboration with the local law enforcement, County government, and faith community leaders, has developed an intervention model that focuses on educating the wider circle of trusted adults who may come in contact with a potentially vulnerable person and equipping them to intervene and refer that person for services before they turn to violence. In our experience, community briefings on ISIS have been particularly instrumental in educating social services professionals, teachers, school counselors, parents, community leaders, and other local stakeholders about the scope of this threat. Similarly, online safety seminars have been vital in informing communities about extremist websites or social media apps.

In addition to replicating and scaling these efforts, the Muslim community needs to do more within their mosques and other social gatherings to ensure that individuals can seek guidance on their culture and faith from 'trusted sources' in-person, rather than online. This is particularly important for younger generations who are prone to turn to the Internet, where many extremist opinions and voices are the strongest.

In Chicago, for example, a Muslim community recently developed a public awareness campaign to provide youth with alternatives to googling Islam, by creating a safe space in the mosque to address their questions and concerns. It is important to note, however, that the mosques may not always be the ideal place if there is a cultural disconnect between young Muslims and the mosque leadership, or if the mosque is considered 'too conservative.' Informal settings such as *halaqas* (discussion groups), may be a viable alternative, and can also create a network of "peer mentors," which are very important as an intervention mechanism.

We also need to better utilize international religious scholars who are on the frontlines, countering the radical narratives. This could be achieved by increasing media coverage of international scholars who are already countering the narrative. In Pakistan, Mufti Raghib Naeemi, whose father was killed in a suicide attack in 2009 for condemning the Taliban, delivered one of the first major fatwas against ISIS. Unfortunately, his fatwa received little press here in the US – and we missed a critical opportunity to impact the diaspora.

Other ways to counter the ideology would be to connect the anti-extremist international scholars with local community leaders in the US so they can learn how to refute recruiter's complicated narratives. One way to accomplish this is through our state department exchange programs, which draw in international religious leaders and counter-extremism practitioners. Ideally, major scholars who have issued rulings and *fatwas* against ISIS should meet and train community leaders on how to counter the extremists' narrative. Moreover, US experts could be invited to train Muslim communities abroad. Part of this effort should include these scholars clarifying what mainstream Islam *does* stand for, not just what it is against. Unfortunately, extremist rhetoric has shaped so much of Islamic discourse over the years that the moderate majority had lost its voice until now as it is forced to respond collectively to the rising threat of violent extremism. This provides a great opportunity to develop consensus on some unifying themes for mainstream Muslims to rally behind, such as upholding the legacy of the Prophet Mohammed in fairness and mercy, defending personal freedoms, and respect for diversity - as well as emphasizing the importance of good moral character.

Finally, it is important to recognize the role the President can play, by giving prominence to this issue. The White House CVE Summit this month is a critical opportunity for the President to outline how preventing violent extremism will become a national security priority. Clarity on which agencies will take the lead, along with which funding sources will be available to carry out the aforementioned recommendations will be vital. In addition, this is a timely opportunity to frame this issue to the American public, to cultivate further public support of this important agenda. The President should be clear and strategic by explaining the low volume-high impact nature of this threat, and underscoring how a single act can undermine the social fabric of our country. It must be a whole of government, whole of community approach that does not stigmatize Muslims; but instead, draws them in as a critical resource and partner in the global fight against violent extremism.