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Subject: Putting cities at the center of countering violent extremism

Some thoughts from Eric Rosand and Ian Klaus (Brookings) about how cities can be more productively included in CVE framework development. See particularly ideas for including municipal reps in national planning and building an innovation fund to spur action

It happens on the pavement: Putting cities at the center of countering violent extremism

In March alone, at least nine cities across three continents were hit by terrorist attacks. Municipalities—from megacities to tertiary cities—continue to bear the brunt of such attacks: in the short term, they provide first response and take essential security measures; in the longer term, they suffer from the fallout of intercommunal tensions and economic slowdowns, which can last for years and spread beyond the target city.

Yet, post-attack discussions tend to be dominated by what *national* governments can do to prevent future attacks—whether through enhanced border security, law enforcement, intelligence, or military measures; or though intensified efforts to resolve underlying conflicts; or through more cooperation with foreign governments. This is understandable given the resources of national governments and their long-standing monopoly on force and foreign policy. Nevertheless, a small but growing number of cities and other local authorities are realizing that they have an essential role to play in countering violent extremism (CVE) as well.

Urban trend-setters

There is nothing new about cities coming to the realization that they need to act in the face of global challenges. Mayors and city-networks such as the C40 Climate Action Leadership Group have vocally engaged on the global stage to counter carbon emissions. Cities have frequently shown themselves to be generally more nimble and less averse to risk-taking than their national counterparts. Mayors operate under intense expectations to "get things done," but when it comes to the threats of transnational violent extremism, what does that mean?

Much like with climate change and other global challenges where cities are becoming increasingly active stakeholders, cities are serving as laboratories for developing and testing innovative initiatives to prevent violent extremism from taking root, designed and implemented in collaboration

The comparative advantages of local authorities are manifold: They are best positioned to understand the grievances that might make their citizens vulnerable to terrorist recruitment; to identify the drivers and early signs of violent extremism; to build trust between the community and local police; to develop multi-agency prevention efforts that involve families, community leaders, social workers, and mental health professionals; and to develop programs that offer alternatives to alienated youth who might otherwise be attracted to violence.

Recognizing these advantages, local leaders are developing strategies and programs to address the violent extremist threat at each stage of the radicalization cycle. Cities across Europe have been at the forefront of these efforts, with Aarhus, Denmark often cited as a model. The approach of Aarhus involves both prevention and care, relying an extensive community-level network to help young people returning from Syria an opportunity to reintegrate in Danish society (provided they haven't committed a crime) and mentoring to try to dissuade people from traveling to the conflict.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, the county authorities are involved in a community intervention program that includes training for faith leaders, teachers, social service providers, police, and parents on how to recognize the early signs of extremism in underserviced immigrant communities.

In Montreal, a $2 million, multi-disciplinary "anti-radicalization center" provides mothers who suspect their children may be vulnerable to radicalization or recruitment with resources that don't involve contacting the police. The center focuses on training people how to identify the signs of radicalization and researching the drivers of radicalization in Montreal and what works to prevent its growth.

Cities are dynamic actors, in part, because they have no problem borrowing from each other. Inspired by the Montreal initiative, Brussels opened a prevention-focused, anti-radicalization center, which—like the Montreal center—keeps the police out of the picture unless necessary to confront an imminent threat.

In Australia, both Victoria and New South Wales have set aside funds to support local NGO-led interventions that target individuals who may be radicalizing and build community resilience.

In Mombasa, Kenya, Governor Hassan Ali Joho is working with the regional parliament and local civil society groups to develop a county-level CVE strategy that includes a heavy focus on providing youth with positive alternatives to joining al-Shabab.

Except for Mombasa, nearly all municipality-led CVE efforts are taking place in the global north. Throughout the world, mayors and other local leaders are not part of national-level conversations about how to prevent future attacks. If national governments insist on viewing national security issues like violent extremism as being the exclusive policy domain of the capital, they will miss crucial opportunities to address a threat that is increasingly localized.

Part of the challenge is that, much like on other global issues, municipal authorities operate within the policy and bureaucratic frameworks of national governments. Those governments can enable or, just as frequently, impede effective local action. Thus, there is often a ceiling for local actors. Raising or breaking through the ceiling is particularly difficult in the security space, given the monopoly that many national governments want to maintain over issues of national security—even while recognizing the need for local solutions.

Flattening the CVE policy space

The good news is that in countries where local authorities can innovate and lead, energy around city-led CVE efforts is increasing. Cities are sharing lessons learned and challenges, with city-to-city networks like with the Strong Cities Network (SCN)—which held its first summit earlier this month in Antalya, Turkey—sprouting to facilitate cooperation.

Yet, a significant majority of SCN members are in countries where national governments already acknowledge local authorities' key role in CVE. With a few exceptions, cities from large swathes of the globe—including in regions where the problem of violent extremism is most acute, like the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Asia—are not enabled to contribute to efforts to prevent violent extremism from taking root in their communities.

CVE discussions in general should highlight ways in which national policymakers have enabled effective local CVE activities, as well as roadblocks and solutions. These discussions should also be brought into multilateral platforms such as the U.N. Global Counterterrorism Forum.

A number of other steps could be taken to enhance vertical cooperation on CVE. For example, countries could involve municipal-level representatives (not simply the national ministry responsible for engaging with such authorities) in developing national CVE plans and provide such authorities with a role in implementation. National governments that already do this could start including representatives of cities in security and broader foreign policy dialogues, particularly with those that continue to resist their involvement. CISA 009280

National governments should incentivize local authorities to work with their communities to innovate in this issue area. ==A public-private innovation fund could be established to support city-led CVE projects in countries where political will exceeds resources; those international donors committed to supporting local solutions to global challenges and increasing the involvement of local authorities in national security conversations should invest in such a fund and, more broadly, in building the capacity of city-level officials and practitioners in the CVE sphere.==

None of these steps is likely to be an elixir—after all, the notion that national security issues should be handled exclusively at the national level is deeply entrenched. However, taking these steps can generate gradual improvements in vertical cooperation on CVE issues, much like we have seen with international and inter-agency counterterrorism cooperation involving national governments over the past decade.

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