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Family-Based Networks: Soft Policy Tools in Countering Radicalisation to Violent Extremism

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Abstract

This chapter explores the vital role played by family-based networks, not only as a facilitative function in support of violent extremism (VE) activities but also more importantly as a preventative policy instrument against radicalization and recruitment of youth into violent extremist groups. It draws from social facilitated theory that identifies family as key in dissuading young minds from violent radical behavior and proposes acceptable alternatives. Mothers have been identified to have significant moral authority that shapes behavior and influences decision among their children, while father figures are seen to be vital in building and strengthening the character, identity, and confidence. It is argued that families have the potential to build and strengthen attitudes toward non-violence, identify signs of possible radicalization to violence among their own, and prevent and intervene in the course of the radicalization process. It is concluded here that in a bid to design effective long-term counter-radicalization and de-radicalization strategies to VE, stakeholders must re-affirm the role of family-based community networks as crucial pillars in building resilient communities.

Keywords: family-based community networks, soft power, radicalization, violent extremism, resilience, Kenya

1. Introduction

It is not surprising to find that after analyzing the family history of an individual who is at risk, or susceptible to radicalization or radical extreme ideologies, that such persons would have suffered neglect from their families or absent parental figures, particularly in their early years of growth. Drawing from four, eight-member focus group discussions conducted among Muslim youth drawn from Kangemi slums in Nairobi, and from already published empirical evidence, this work aims to demonstrate how family and those within its close networks act not only as a facilitative function in support of VE activities but also more importantly as a preventative instrument against radicalization and recruitment of youth to violent extremist groups (VEOs).

It is argued that family is considered as the prime institution that transmits fundamental values and beliefs to their children in the following ways: it teaches

acceptable behavior, it provides an individual with a personal identity and a sense of national loyalty (belonging), and the child also becomes aware of ideologies associated with the authorities and learns obedience to the state or political authority. By forming basic loyalties and identifying with political systems, "the child also learns to sort people into social categories—linguistic, racial, class, tribal, occupational, or geographical. Children learn to classify people according to certain characteristics and to behave differently toward them depending on how they are classified, and the bond (or lack thereof) between the parent and the child plays an extremely important role in developing a person's self-esteem, sense of identity, personality, and emotional health" [1]. Thus, individual radicalization is not sparked just by external factors but also internally through environments in which they develop. In this case, the family plays a fertile space in an individual's growth, development, and eventual life choices [1].

2. Theoretical model

This work goes beyond implicit linear, sequential models that explain the radicalization process in support of socially based design. Specifically, this work draws from social facilitated theory, which establishes that an individual's introduction to radical ideologies and becoming extremists is often traced back to their social environment, particularly family and kinship networks. By and large, social institutions, particularly family, become instrumental in playing a facilitative function in pushing their own toward adopting violent extremist ideologies. Thus, it is determined that ideologies (and group support for them) breed around the social ecology of nested contexts and systems—including family networks [2]—and hence a relevant and most suitable point of intervention.

Bauman et al. [3] tried out different intervention measures (like the use of school curricula, vending machine control, cigarette tax increase, and age restriction enforcement on sales) as an attempt to prevent adolescent from tobacco and alcohol use and found them to have recorded dismal success away from the desired goal. Instead, they turned to families of these adolescents and evaluated their influence of their children's choices. They were of the assumption that families do have a substantial impact on their children's behavior, since characteristics of individual families were found to be correlated with the adolescent's use of alcohol, tobacco, and other abusive substances. Drawing from their findings, the influence of families after implementing the Family Matters program showed significant success in involving families in the prevention program [3].

In their results, following the assessment of the impact of family systems intervention on recidivism and sibling delinquency, Klein et al. found that the family systems approach, when equated to other conditions, yielded substantial improvements in process measures and a significant reduction in recidivism [4]. According to Bailey et al. [5], effective adaptation of design and implementation of family-centered approaches is critical in bringing about change among children in the early stages of their development.

3. Discussion and analysis of findings

The emerging question in the field of CVE is who is likely to be among the first to notice, and be willing to intercede, with individuals beginning to radicalize and having affinity with ideologies and activities associated with VE? This study argues that families and individuals close to such families are best position to detect such

signs and respond. On the contrary, other findings indicate that "the family is the last to know. They only know when the person is in trouble" [6], meaning that such individuals may want to really hide their engagements from their kin and families only get to know at an advanced stage.

However, I argue that it is unlikely that members of the family remain in the blind spot since they are the first to encounter the at-risk individual when they begin to change their behavior, unless the individual physically detaches and relocates from his/her familiar location. It is important to acknowledge that family members may want to remain in denial in an effort to save themselves from public embarrassment. Vidino and Hughes [7] have argued that before individuals made initial attempts toward radicalization, there must have a family member, or at least a friend close to the family, who witnessed the individual embarking on the journey toward VE. Williams et al. [6] are of the view that from the start, family members are the first to notice change of behavior in one of their own but often remain reluctant to dissuade them from the choice of violence due to fear that this might negatively affect their relationships.

Although volumes of literature and empirical evidence have been published about how individuals are recruited into terrorist networks and activities, little research has focused on the role of family-based community networks (FBCNs), not only as a facilitative function in support of VE activities but more importantly as a preventative instrument against radicalization and recruitment of youth to violent extremist groups (VEOs). In a case in point, a respondent in the focus group discussion (FGD) expressed that the major reason he had joined gangs, commonly hired by politicians to cause violence, was the inability of his family to provide for his needs (house rent, clothing, food, and other basic needs). Another respondent indicated that after he completed high school, he was forced to suspend his pursuit for higher education to allow younger siblings to complete school. This pressure from family increased his vulnerability and desperation. Respondents agreed that high demands for survival on jobless youth, created by family's financial inability to support their children to acquire critical skills, remain a critical push factor toward violent extremism. However, the phenomenon of material lack is not to be generalized, since most of the militant individuals have in fact originated from middle-class families, with college-level education, and often had jobs in both formal and informal sector [2]. Other results [8] have shown that among young people with affinity to terrorism, students from middle-class families were particularly involved.

Families are argued to be the most defining element in character formation. In fact, as teenagers attempt to find their space and create their identity, away from family frames, they become vulnerable to being recruited into VEOs. The decisions they make eventually are shaped by their family background, whereby those who may have lived a neglected childhood, or lived in families or parents with unhealthy conflicts and tensions, may seek affirmations outside the family ties. In the end, any chance to engage in an extraordinary group or activity is attractive for this group of youth, particularly those that do not enjoy support from their kin [9]. The case of Kemunto, one of those believed to have been the instigators of the deadly attack that left 21 people dead at 14 Riverside Drive in Nairobi, is illustrative. She, a Muslim convert, came from a broken family and an absent father who was rarely home due to drinking problems [10].

According to the observation made by Sikkens et al. [11] in their case study research, more than 70% of youth that had joined radical violent groups came from families that had been afflicted with divorce, health and mental health problems, and extreme financial constraints. In this case, this undesirable condition may have played a role in the radicalization process. In their case study, they cite expression from Daniel—not real name—a Muslim who had disengaged from an extremist group, saying:

My mother has had psychological problems all her life, and my sister required a lot of attention and care. She had to run the household all by herself, and so she was hardly able to get a handle on the situation.

In line with the foregoing, Spalek [12] posits that families are viewed as surprisingly able to play two conflicting roles in the field of countering/violent extremism (C/VE), both "as potentially being risky, as well as potentially being a source of protection and rehabilitation." This is not to purport that the wider society, away from the family networks, have a little role to play in de-/radicalization. This study is designed to explore how FBCNs reorient and instill behavioral change among the youth as they chose to join or detach from radicalization to VE and terror-related activities. A growing body of research links parental influence to radicalization.

To this end, Hoeve et al. posit that "lack of support, supervision, harsh disciplining, inconsistent parenting, delinquent family members, and problems within the family would enhance the chances of young people developing deviant behavior" [13]. However, little is known of the extent to which the role played in bringing up a child may influence radicalization and de-radicalization to, or from, violent extremism [11]. On the other hand, it is believed that sound parental support for the child goes a long way toward the enhancement of their moral development. Proper parental guidance assists children to establish prosocial moral internalization [14].

Apart from parents, siblings, especially between male brothers, play an important role in the de-/radicalization process. Particularly in large families, younger siblings look up to their older siblings as role models. According to Kumar [15] the late terrorist attacker Amrozi Nurhasyim came from a very big family and was inspired by his elder brother Mukhlas, with who they conspired to commit the Bali attack in 2002. Other cases in point include the Paris attacks in 2005, the Boston Marathon attacks in 2013, and the 2014 Mpeketoni massacre, among others, which were planned and carried out by siblings. Sisters too have their own share of influence in radicalization to VE. For example, two of the three attackers at a police station in Mombasa were identified as biological sisters.

In a bid to prevent Australian youth from joining VEOs or traveling to become foreign fighters in countries at the center of terror insurgency like Syria and Iraq, a program sponsored by the Norway Action Plan against violent extremism organized conversations between parents and young people who conducted themselves in a manner that demonstrated signs of radicalization [16]. In Berlin, a program that gained international reputation is "Hayat." This is a CVE initiative established in the last decade by the Center for Democratic Culture. The sole aim of this effort was to respond to the more contemporary threat of foreign youth fighters traveling to countries at the center of terrorism and VE. Over time, the program has brought together families and communities of youth who had become part of, or intended to join, VE groups in foreign countries. Families and communities are oriented to the process of identifying signs of radicalization among the youth and were facilitated to create an environment around individuals at risk and dissuade them from being further involved [17]. Above all, the initiative provided a 24-hour counseling hotline to members of families with such youth at risk of joining VEOs and sometimes brought small groups of families together to share experiences [18]. In 2015, the Extreme Dialog project (sponsored by the Kanishka Project under the management of the Institute of Strategic Dialog) was launched. They used family members of those involved in VE activities to deliver messages against VE and terrorism as their main strategic approach.

Noting the influence that family-based community networks have on individual and social relationships, governments across the world are beginning to focus their attention on families as a critical point of intervention. Notably, research has shown that the overwhelming majority of individuals continue to radicalize through the

influence of close social or family relationships [19] and just as importantly, that personal relationships provide the primary vehicle for disengagement [20]. At the backdrop of the foregoing, part of the $13.4 million dollars allocated by the Australian government for CVE intervention was designed to enhance support for families by strengthening their capacity to perform the intervention work. According to Haris-Hogan et al. [16], this was a move away from generic community interventions to a more individually focused and purposeful response strategy to the problem of radicalization to VE.

In the last decade, governments across the globe have increasingly shifted focus from broad-based CVE interventions and are introducing individual specific approaches [7]. In 2012, the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee of the US Senate had made recommendations to the executive branch to establish a system to address the fate of radicalized individuals who were yet to be mobilized to violence. This was proposed as an alternative approach to security agencies besides arrest. In the proposed plan, they suggested to bring key actors, such as family, who would be co-opted to dissuade at-risk individuals and disengage them from being radicalized into VE.

The US government needs to develop options within constitutional and statutory constraints for situations in which federal law enforcement, such as the FBI, comes in contact with an individual who is radicalizing. It is not law enforcement's or the intelligence community's role to seek to change an individual's beliefs protected by the First Amendment, as opposed to focusing on criminal conduct. An individual's family, friends, and local community and religious leaders are best suited to dissuading the individual from criminal activity as well as rolling back the radicalization. The US government needs to resolve the extent to which federal law enforcement can share information concerning radicalized individuals with family, friends, and local community and religious leaders [21].

In the US government, more senior administrators seemed to have been convinced by this proposal. It is recorded that a year after the Boston Marathon bombing, Lisa Monaco, the deputy to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, addressed this topic on her public lecture at Harvard University:

Parents might see sudden personality changes in their children at home—becoming confrontational. Religious leaders might notice unexpected clashes over ideological differences. Teachers might hear a student expressing an interest in traveling to a conflict zone overseas. Or friends might notice a new interest in watching or sharing violent material. The government is rarely in a position to observe these early signals, so we need to do more to help communities understand the warning signs, and then work together to intervene before an incident can occur [22].

To this end, Vidino and Hughes [7] argued for the establishment of a well-crafted system of interventions that provide options for families, communities, and law enforcement agencies to develop workable alternatives to prosecution of at-risk individuals or in the path of radicalization to VE.

In tandem with the foregoing, Williams et al. [6] consider public institutional approach as one component of developing CVE design interventions, such as law enforcement agencies, school systems, faith-based organizations, social service agencies, psychological services, and more. They argue that the second component is comprised of individuals [also known as gatekeepers], such as family members, who are willing and able to connect potentially at-risk persons to relevant institutions for professional assistance. Family members and those within their close networks most likely detect signs among at-risk individuals as they embrace radical ideologies and refer them to institutions that dissuade them from pursuing the path toward violence.

When family members learn that one of their own is being radicalized and moving toward VE, they do not always intervene, at least publicly, for fear of victimization by security agencies and ridicule from members of the community. According to the 2005 Prevention of Terrorism Act [23], immediate family members of suspects of terrorism were imposed with restrictions, to a great extent translating them to being "guilty by association" [23]. In such a hostile policy and legal environment, families with individuals engaged in VE live their lives under immense pressure and fear of being victimized.

Some researchers have made efforts to find out the major reasons that make individuals detach themselves from radical ideologies. One such initiative was the Community Awareness Briefing (CAB), a forum where individuals were allowed to narrate their stories and provide meaning to their experiences. Many indicated that their decision to disengage from VE activities was pegged on the fact that family members and friends they had left behind were being traumatized by their absence [7].

4. Role of mothers in (countering) violent extremism

This study considers a gendered perspective in understanding the process of (countering) violent extremism. Sikkens et al. [24] advocate that mothers have significant moral authority that shapes behavior and influences decision in a young person. In their case study, they refer to Katie's—not her real name—mother who took her daughter with her in her involvement with animal activism, an attitude that her daughter gradually absorbed:

I can be short and clear about that: I got my ideals from my mother. It cannot be any other way, you learn your ideals from your parents. First you have them [ideals] as a child, but over the years I discovered that they are ideals that I 100% agree with. And I just got involved, especially when my mother joined a group of animal activists. In the beginning, I was too young and stayed at home, but I knew that my mum was carrying out actions, and later on I joined her.

Apart from the direct influence from parents as demonstrated above in the radicalization process, indirect influence also exists [24].

While advancing a gendered approach to CVE, Guru [23] contends that, of the family members, women are better positioned to help in de-radicalization of members of the family by dissuading them from engaging in violence and forge stronger ties and protect individuals from becoming victims of VE and terror agents. Drawing recommendations from PAIMAN, an initiative in Pakistan that brought both mothers and youth as an effort to moderate extremism there, Veenkamp and Zeiger posit that "mothers voices, particularly mothers of victims of terrorism and of perpetrators on violent extremism, were powerful narratives that could be harnessed for promoting peace and countering the narrative of violent extremism" [25].

Uddin, Guru [23], believes that women are a "source of moral authority ... key to unlocking ... disillusion." It is believed that the mother-child relationship in human development is highly defining, for an individual's panoramic view of their environment [9]. Similarly, as evidenced in the findings of an initiative managed by Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) dubbed "Mothers for Change," due to the strategic positioning of women within the family unit, they stand a better chance to respond to ideologies of violent extremism in their families and subsequent communities [26]. According to Hearne [27], such approaches have worked in Morocco and Saudi Arabia. In his study, Brown [28] purports that "mothers and grandmothers" of at-risk individuals in the UK have been used and have become critical actors toward the implementation of CVE policies.

Attendees in the conference labeled "Women Without Borders/Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE)" in 2010 held in Yemen observed the point that the preparedness of women to identify and respond to signs of extremism among their family members varies significantly depending on their academic qualifications, local awareness, and geographic remoteness. It was reported that mothers, especially those with little or no formal education, find it difficult to pick up warning signs, as they may take it that their children are merely becoming more religious and often consider the change to be commendable [26]. This categorically limits the ability of parents to intervene before individuals escalate deep into VE activities.

While citing agency among women in conflict resolution, Sebugwaawo [29] posits that mothers, due to their effective art in convincing and soft power approach, stand a good chance to act as agents of change in their kin, dissuading them from radicalization and any form of violent extremism. Women understand too well the effects of conflicts and have immediate sense of what to be done to families of the victims. In fact, women are more integrated in their communities than men, and therefore they have stronger perception of problems experienced by their children [29].

5. Role of father figures in (countering) violent extremism

Veenkamp and Zeiger argued that the role played by fathers in both recruitment and prevention of VE cannot be ignored or dismissed. They posited that, in many cultures, the father-son relationship is defining particularly when sons become of age. Empirical literature has shown that in the cases where the father figure is absent, feelings of resentment and isolation become evident. These may at times "contribute to a young person's vulnerability to recruitment into violent extremism" [25]. In South Asia, research has been published to support this claim. In the province of Swat, Pakistan, for example, about 65% of militant boys identified between the age of 12 and 18 had absent father figures [25].

Following the foregoing, Bjørgo and Carlsson [30] have argued that many young people are lured into violent radical groups in their search for substitute families and father figures: in most times, many individual youths who opt to join extremist groups have wanting relationships with their families and with their father figures in particular. In this case, extremist groups paint a lucrative environment where young people could satisfy their urge for mentorship.

Findings from a research undertaken by Botha [1] in Kenya on assessing youth vulnerability to radicalization and extremism indicate that when young people experience a sense of abandonment, or lack of identity, this phenomenon does contribute significantly to making them susceptible to a father figure or urge to fit in a group that assures them protection and sense of being wanted. Further, they found that many young people that were susceptible to the Al-Shabaab network in Kenya did not have a father figure while growing up. In his study, Botha concluded that lack of a father figure is by no means a precursor for radicalization, but the gap created by such an absence of a father figure is telling [1].

It is worth noting that as compared to mothers, the role of father figures in CVE has not been significantly explored. Many scholars agree that there exist many programs that empower women as agents of de-radicalization, but little attention is paid to the critical role played by father figures, or absent father figures in the radicalization process. Botha points to the fact that in the profiles of those implicated with acts of terrorism in Kenya, an absent father figure was a recurring phenomenon [1]. Results from the FGD showed that more often than not, children heads of families usually feel the pressure to engage in criminal activities or accept offers of economic favors from extremists.

The theme on absent parents in VE literature is evidently a recurring phenomenon. While assessing the relationship between an absent parent and joining a violent extremist group, Botha [31] found that the phenomenon about an absent father figure resembled those of J. Post in his study of 250 West German terrorists (from the Red Army Faction and the 2 June Movement). Results of that study indicated that 25% had lost one or both parents by age 14, whereas 79% had strained family relationships—and more intriguing was the fact that 33% had a particularly negative relationship with their fathers. She [31] further posits that many respondents among the Allied Democratic Forces (44%), Lord's Resistance Army (38%), al-Shabaab (18%), and Mombasa Republican Council (31%) had been raised without a father figure. Rashid Mberesero, a Tanzanian national and a terror convict, who was sentenced to a life imprisonment by a Kenyan court in July 2019, grew without a father for 20 years, after his parents separated following persistent marital misunderstandings. Even after the two, father and son, reunited, they quickly fell out after the father made attempts to force him to convert from Islam to Christianity [32].

However, this phenomenon may not be generalized since majority of the respondents who joined these organizations had father figures present growing up. She [31] concludes that this is not to insinuate that experiencing rejection or a lack of belonging will not contribute to make a young person susceptible to seek other father figures or enhance the need to belong to a group to experience acceptance and a feeling of belonging. It is critical to note that these feelings can be experienced even in situations where both parents are present. In tandem with the foregoing, participants in the FGD observed that young people, particularly those who converted to Islam after the age of 18, were rejected by their families and in most instances preferred to join other [predatory] groups in which they were received and accepted. Results of findings by Ndung'u et al. [33] indicate that children of absent fathers who had left to fight for Al-Shabaab, or had been killed while fighting for the cause of the extremist group, were vulnerable to extremist preachers. The study indicated that clerics would pay school fees for these children in support of the mothers, who, together with their children, in turn become vulnerable to their teaching.

6. Conclusion

The strongest thread in this work indicates that family plays a crucial role (whether positive or negative) throughout any individual's life, particularly in the early years of their growth and development. Results from this study indicate that individuals at risk of radicalization to VE emerge from families that are too large, or broken, separated, in which father figures are missing, or, if there, emotionally strained. Family-based community networks have a role to play in teaching children acceptance, tolerance, and respect for members of the society. Thus, creating opportunities for strong economically stable families, with emotionally present parent/father figures, is not only critical pillars for building an equitable social policy but also arguably a sound national security policy too. It is important that policymakers design policies with relevant strategies and tools toward addressing radicalized individuals within their family and community settings. Law enforcement agencies shall need to adopt a paradigm shift in their approach and embrace soft power approaches, apart from punitive measures through law enforcement agencies, to countering individuals in the process of radicalization in a bid to create self-sustaining communities.

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