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Human Givens Approach in dealing with countering violent extremism

The Human Givens Approach is a set of organizing ideas that provides a holistic, scientific framework for understanding the way that individuals and society work. At its core is a highly empowering idea : that human beings, like all organic beings, come into this world with a set of needs. It is a simple approach to understanding human behavior but it is far from being simplistic. We now have a much fuller understanding of human needs. We now know that having meaning and purpose, a sense of volition and control, being needed by others, having intimate connections and wider social connections, status, appropriate giving and receiving of attention etc, are crucial for health and well-being.

And we also know that when one's needs are not met, the person will react, and the extent of his reaction will be in line with the level of deprivation. If we apply this logic to the political reality, we will find that governments in the Arab world, for example, do not meet the needs of their citizens, and therefore we should not be startled by the occurrence of reactions that could reach terrorist behavior. This theory is not simplistic, yet it straight-forwardly reflects the existent reality : Terrorist groups recruit by preying on human needs that are unmet. In that vein, extremist movements starve to fulfill some of the human needs, and they are proficient at attracting people and driving them to comply with their demands. Mass movements such as the phenomenon of violent extremism we are witnessing today, only arise in certain conditions, when sturdy social structure is in a state of disintegration. This is a good description of parts of the Arab world, and of isolated pockets of our own Western society.

We all know there is no one background profile of a violent extremist or terrorist, nor specific social, economic, cultural and psychological conditions that lead to the rise of terrorism ; the reasons often given to explain the emergence of terrorism and violent extremism, such as poverty, ignorance, social marginalization and political tyranny do not apply to all cases. Studies have shown that 48.5% of jihadi recruited in the Middle East and North Africa had a higher education of some sort, of these 44% had degrees in engineering. Among Western-recruited jihadi, that figure rose to 59%. An unpublished report by the World Bank shows no link between increased employment and decreased violence.

Moreover, there is a difference between foreign recruits' motives and local ones, as well as between Western and Eastern contexts. Three-quarters of those who become foreign fighters for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are recruited through friends and 20% through family members, and ironically, in the West, it is often when they are expelled from Mosques that they radicalize and they are recruited in fast food hangouts and soccer fields. Most foreign fighters who have joined extremist groups did so willingly, triggered by a broad array of motives such as : pursue of a heroic path, desire of adventure, activism, romance, power, belonging, along with spiritual fulfillment. As for local recruiters, driving factors fluctuate from bad governance to money enticement, to seeking revenge, ending occupation and defeating the enemy. They perceive terrorism as the sole means to reach their goals.

The first step in any countering initiative should be understanding this phenomenon, to be followed by healing social disintegration considered as the seedbed of extremist movements, and offering to vulnerable to be-recruiters positive inspiring causes to replace the suicidal ones used by extremists as pull-factor. Keeping a track policy is impossible especially in Europe, as it requires thousands of unavailable security agents.

Finally, Counter-terrorist policies which are only based on a narrow range of repressive mechanisms and military measures tend to become overly heavy-handed, producing serious negative side-effects which serve to enhance the problem rather than reducing it and push those who already chose the path of violence deeper into their imagination. Between 1968 and 2006, only 7% of terrorist groups were militarily defeated, and it is the West duty to provide financial, technical and social support to their allies in the Middle East who manage to keep ISIL outside their borders.