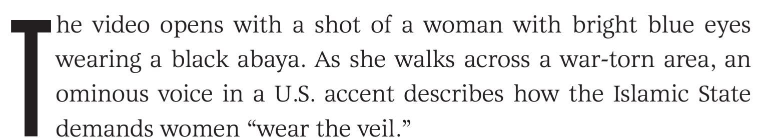
PARTNERING UP:
HOW TO WORK WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM

MANAL OMAR

UNITED NATIONS



The video opens with a shot of a woman with bright blue eyes wearing a black abaya. As she walks across a war-torn area, an ominous voice in a U.S. accent describes how the Islamic State demands women "wear the veil."

DOI: 10.1215/07402775-3813063

This is an early clip from the State Department's "Think Again, Turn Away" media strategy to counter extremism. It's one of many—there are thousands of short films, multimedia projects, Twitter accounts, and active Facebook profiles that the U.S. government has designed to stop people from joining the Islamic State or similarly minded groups.

By all counts, this campaign was a failure. In 2014, Rita Katz, the director of the SITE Intelligence Group, explained in *TIME* magazine: "Had the people behind 'Think Again, Turn Away' understood the jihadists' mindsets and reasons for their behaviors, they would have known that their project of counter messaging would not only be a waste of taxpayers' money, but ultimately be counterproductive."

A single conversation with a local expert would have pointed out the video's flaws: The woman's eyes appear to be foreign, and the use of English—especially in a voice that sounds American—ensures that the footage won't be taken seriously. Even the video itself provides a new platform to spread violent jihadi messages.

After this flub and others, the State Department eventually realized it would need partners on the ground. The U.S. and other Western governments are now turning to strategies known as countering violent extremism, or CVE. According to the White House, CVE addresses "the root causes of extremism through community engagement." Instead of fighting violent ideology with bombs, bullets, and bloodshed, the goal is to engage with local groups to prevent individuals from joining terrorist groups in the first place. In this battle, it's often religious leaders who are on the front lines, and so a successful CVE program must figure out how to work with faith-based groups.

To accomplish this, practitioners need to commit to an inclusive agenda that addresses concerns that CVE is designed only to serve Western interests. Programming should acknowledge factors other than religion that drive extremism. It should also identify ways religion can help and not just focus on the ways faith can be abused. Finally, CVE projects must build alliances with women and youths to ensure longer-term engagement and establish deeper ties with the community.

Of course, as much as this discussion should focus on multiple religions, CVE programs overwhelmingly concentrate on Islamic groups. Despite violence from Christian militias in the Central African Republic and marauding Buddhist monks assaulting Muslims in Myanmar, when CVE experts talk about religious extremism, they inevitably mean radical Islam.

As long as the only targets are Muslims, it will feed into the conspiracy theory of a "global war on Islam." Incorporating other religious extremist movements into CVE strategies not only allays this concern, but also provides opportunities to apply lessons learned from one situation to others.

FIGHTING SUSPICION WITH INCLUSION

Despite assurances that CVE is meant to be community based, given the harm inflicted under the guise of the so-called War on Terror, social justice and foreign policy activists are rightfully wary of the new strategy.

In the U.S., 27 organizations—including Amnesty International, the United States Council of Muslim Organizations, and the American Civil Liberties Union—asked the White House in April to make sure CVE wouldn't be used to restrict rights.

MANAL OMAR is the associate vice president of the Center for the Middle East and Africa at the U.S. Institute of Peace, a fellow with the Truman National Security Project, and an inaugural fellow with Foreign Policy Interrupted. She is the author of "Barefoot in Baghdad" (Sourcebooks, 2010) and is on the board of IREX and AltMuslimah.

The Obama administration appeared to have listened to their concerns and changed some domestic policies. The Department of Justice canceled its plans for Shared Responsibility Committees, where the FBI would tap mental health workers, clergy, and counselors for information regarding potentially violent individuals. Muslim Advocates, a legal defense group, described this program as having "the potential to open participants to legal risks and liability, create distrust amongst community members, and impede on Americans' civil rights."

But whatever modicum of goodwill that President Barack Obama earned by hearing out civil society groups, President-elect Donald Trump obliterated it. Khaled Beydoun, a law professor at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, told me that Trump's "rhetoric during the campaign eroded any opportunity to build the strategic partnerships needed for the CVE model."

Muslim groups are understandably concerned about Trump misusing CVE programs. Sahar Aziz, a professor at Texas A&M School of Law, told me, "Trump's advisers unabashedly treat the Muslim community as collectively suspect. They are likely to focus resources on heightened scrutiny and prosecution of Muslim civil society organizations and leaders."

She added, "If CVE remains, however, there is less doubt that it will be a tool for spying on Muslim communities to further the adversarial approach to counterterrorism that has predominated since 9/11."

Even before Trump, many local groups around the world assumed Western governments were using CVE policies to impose their own values and beliefs. Aari Najmuldeen Mohammed Jabari, the founder and president of Iraqi Society for Relief and Development (INSAN), told me, "The project of Countering Violent Extremism through its recent version seems [part of] a radical hegemony of the internationally powerful countries such as the U.S. on the countries of the Third World."

If potential partners are afraid that CVE is just new terminology for imposing the same old Western political programs and commercial interests, then how can we begin to build trust?

Central to CVE theory is the idea that communities, and especially their religious leaders, need to feel ownership over these projects. The best way to do this is to help them develop their own solutions. If the policies are perceived as driven by the West, achieving widespread community involvement is nearly impossible.

"THINK OF CONGREGATIONAL BASEMENTS AND SOCIAL HALLS AS INCUBATORS OF INNOVATION."

One example where this has worked is in Uganda. After a pair of al-Shabab bombs killed at least 74 people at the Kyadondo Rugby Club in Kampala, on July 11, 2010, survivors established the Uganda Muslim Youth Development Forum (UMYDF). The organization's goal is to combat the messages of those who hijacked Islam to justify the attack. The UMYDF has reached 10,000 Muslim youths, giving them the tools and confidence to push back against extremist ideology. The group is supported and funded by the U.S. Embassy, but because the UMYDF has a strong vision and a mission that resonates in the community, no one accuses its members of being "puppets."

Ahmed, a UMYDF team leader, told the U.S. Institute of Peace that his goal was to "help bring out the true image of Islam and Muslims, and to ensure that Muslims are able to speak

out and to participate in the public sphere without fear of state or public persecution."

Ahmed and UMYDF can do what a U.S. government-created Twitter handle cannot: Credibly provide peaceful alternatives to the narratives of violence created by extremist groups.

RELIGION IN CONTEXT

Contesting violent, twisted interpretations of religion is important, but it's not sufficient. Programs must pay attention to multiple drivers of extremism and develop a diverse network of community supporters. Susie Hayward, the director of Religion and Inclusive Societies at the U.S. Institute of Peace, told me, "the discussion about the intersection of religion and VE vacillates between two poles—becoming a tedious debate about whether it has nothing or everything to do with religion."

The reality is in the middle: Religion is used to recruit people and to legitimatize, incite, and justify violence, but it is only one factor of many.

Rehema Zaid, a program coordinator with Integrated Initiatives for Community Empowerment (IICEP), emphasized the need to understand religion in its wider social context. Much of Zaid's work with Somali refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, has been in informal settlements like Majengo, where terror organizations actively try to recruit young people.

While the religious aspect can't be ignored, Zaid explained that in Majengo, violent extremism emerges "out of economic reasons; the community feels deprived, marginalized, and robbed of what is theirs—especially land resources. Yet every government of the day comes but leaves them worse than they are. The youth are therefore mobilized to forcefully claim their resources."

Yvonne Akoth—the founder and director of Impart Change, a Nairobi-based organization that uses art to champion sustainable peace and promote violence prevention—said CVE programs are not working in urban Kenya, because they're not taking other factors into account: "A major cause of youth radicalization in my area is poverty and high rates of unemployment. This is also accompanied by the need for youth to provide for their families. Once youth at risk of being radicalized are empowered with knowledge and information, a source of income or livelihood needs to be provided. CVE programming will not work effectively in my area unless an alternate source of income is provided for vulnerable youth."

The situation is similar in Nigeria. Imrana Alhaji Buba, a coordinator with the Youth Coalition Against Terrorism, implements CVE programming funded by the U.S. and U.K. He told me that young people in areas targeted by Boko Haram recruiters often "complain about unemployment, corruption by government officials. ... So apart from organizing peace education programs, we started to offer skills acquisition training for unemployed youth and link them with appropriate government agencies to give them capital." He said after his organization began this training program, terrorist groups in northeastern Nigeria have been less successful in convincing young villagers to join.

In at-risk communities, it is not just religious messaging that motivates youths to enlist with extremist groups, but also social and economic challenges that leave them with few alternatives. This is why countering these narratives alone is not enough—and why programs that address issues like joblessness can yield measurable results.

RELIGION AS A FORCE FOR GOOD

With violent images of the Islamic State, al-Qaida, or Boko Haram so often dominating Western media portrayals of Islam, disproportionate international attention has been fixated on the destructive aspects of religion. But to foster goodwill locally, practitioners need to highlight the constructive role religion can play.

In a speech given at the Pillars Fund Leadership Summit, Brie Loskota, director for the Center for Religion and Civic Culture (CRCC) at the University of Southern California and co-founder of the American Muslim Civic Leadership Institute, focused on the need to explore "the ranges of what religions do—from the very good and transformational to the incredibly destructive."

When secular civil society groups single out corruption among religious leaders or describe religion only as a mechanism to normalize human rights violations, it alienates people of faith. But if we're vocal about the successes of religion and demonstrate appreciation for what positive religious partnerships have achieved, then it will be easier for communities to work from a position of engagement rather than one of defense.

"A less fashionable story is the ways in which religions provide motivation and activation for social change," Loskota said. "Much is made of the power of the garage to be the site of innovation in the tech industry—guys huddled in their buddy's garage or their mom's garage soldering parts, assembling circuit boards, and iterating products until they build the Microsofts and Apples of the world. ... Think of congregational basements and social halls as the incubators of social innovation."

Rather than looking overseas, Loskota described victories in her home community in Los Angeles. When clergy from black churches in south Los Angeles and San Fernando Valley synagogues exchanged pulpits following the riots in 1992, new collaborations formed that spurred faith community development corporations to give hundreds of millions of dollars in economic assistance to poor areas of LA. Guest preaching and choir visits continue to this day, maintaining those ties and helping the communities understand each other. The emergence of faith-based nonprofit development corporations have allowed churches do more than just provide spiritual guidance; increasingly, they're starting housing and job programs, too.

This is mirrored in conflict zones around the world. When faith communities from different religions share stories of pain, it can begin a healing process and help build trust. It can also encourage religious leaders to push their followers out of a binary us-versus-them view of the world.

At about the same time as the LA project, the CRCC released a report that concluded religions are often most influential in times of social upheaval. "Because it is in those moments that people are searching for ways to understand who they are, ways to make sense of the world as it unfolds in all its uncertainty, and ways to connect to something larger than their selves," Loskota explained.

"FACILE RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT GOES STRAIGHT FOR THE CLERICS —OFTEN MEN."

ENGAGING LEADERS

Once international and local actors recognize that religion is only one driver of conflict and celebrate the positive influence of religion within society, then they are ready to engage religious leaders in a meaningful partnership.

In September 2015, religious leaders and practitioners from faith-based traditions gathered for meetings under the umbrella of the Network of Traditional and Religious Peacemakers. Participants outlined several effective ways to collaborate. One key recommendation was to engage religious partners at each stage of program development. Too often, religious ac-

tors are simply handed prescriptions or talking points devised by United Nations agencies. Input from religious leaders during early phases is essential both to gain local insight and to create a sense of community ownership.

None of that, however, will matter if you choose the wrong partner. Selecting religious leaders to engage with requires case-by-case consideration of their position in society, Buba argued. "Because of the obscene nature of Boko Haram attacks, only a few religious leaders are willing to collaborate with us. And the two dominant religions in Nigeria—Islam and Christianity—have many sects in Nigeria. It is difficult to identify trusted religious leaders that can collaborate with us without sabotage."

In April, participants at a meeting in the U.K. on religion and CVE raised a crucial issue about identifying alliances: "Often the leaders with the most credibility in countering violent messages are religiously conservative and highly critical of Western policy—which can make Western policymakers reluctant to engage with them. By the same token, liberal, pro-Western voices often lack credibility among the very communities at risk of recruitment to violence. Focusing exclusively on figures with whom governments feel comfortable limits what can be achieved," the conference report said.

Geneive Abdo, author of the Middle East Strategy Taskforce report "Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism," shares this concern. She points out that centers of religious learning affiliated with the state are often regarded as official mouthpieces and therefore less credible. On the other hand, some of them possess strong institutional infrastructure and enjoy enduring reputations for their scholarship. CVE-related engagement with such entities must balance the value of their reach with the constraints of their perceived association with the government.

"Be careful to look for religious groups that speak within communities and not those so far outside the bounds." Loskota cautioned. "Religious groups are able to change, be flexible, find new areas of emphasis, yet even with external pressure, they resolve things through internal processes that may take time. That time is well-invested, because through the internal crucible of religious wrestling, grounded, authenticated truths emerge."

Letting trusted partners undergo these processes can help outcomes acquire greater legitimacy with the community.

WOMEN AND YOUTH

But when working together to combat violent extremism, it is also important not to forget about the target groups themselves. Involving women and youths is essential in this fight.

Given the young ages of so many radicalized individuals, it makes sense to try to engage them through their peers. IICEP's Zaid told me young people are her organization's best messengers: "These youth have come out to be the change agents in the community. Having learned the ills of violent extremism, they are now out dissuading their fellows of the same. A section of them have been able to address crime before it reaches the government administration. The youth artists in the area have coined their performances with peace messages."

In addition to youth, many experts stress the necessity of reaching out to women, who are critical in shaping their children's perspectives. Yvonne in Nairobi told me: "Women in my community are playing a more active role in the lives of their sons and daughters by ensuring they nurture them in a way that prevents them from joining terror groups through guided values. This has been as a result of organized women forums in the community."

Zaid also told me that women in Kenya are a valuable source of information about their communities: "In our case, women have been able to relay important information with regards to

the militia and all their sympathizers. When influenced, they can hide information which will later be detrimental to the society. ... The women in our program have been able to inform us of the trends of VE in the community (e.g. instances of recruitment and returnees from Somali). This has enabled us to tailor our programs to respond to such trends."

Finally, in *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding Illuminating the Unseen*, USIP's Hayward points out that failing to include women in CVE programming reflects a narrow view of who holds religious influence. Hayward warns, "facile religious engagement goes straight for the clerics—often men—and is based on a misunderstanding about how religious communities, ideas, institutions, etc. are formed, run, and shaped." In the end, not only does this approach lead to inefficient policy, but it also helps extremists achieve what they want: the marginalization of women.

The international community can't defeat Islamic State propaganda directly, but it can support environments where religious actors push for change themselves.

UMYDF's Ahmed said, "I do not just talk peace, I live peace, act peace, and, through these efforts, partner with others to create opportunities for young people across all faiths." Ideologues are perverting religion to advance their agendas, and it is community members like Ahmed—not Western media campaigns—who can best advocate for peaceful solutions. To counter extremism, the messenger matters as much as the message. ●