



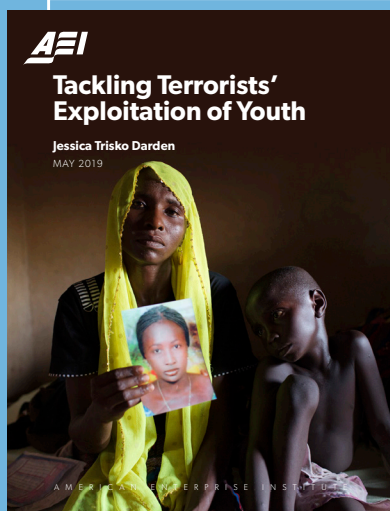
الائتلاف العسكري لمحاربة الإرهاب
ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION



International Reports

13

TACKLING TERRORISTS' Exploitation of Youth



May 2020

www.imctc.org



International Reports

Monthly Issue - General Directorate of Planning and Coordination

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Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth

This report is of enormous importance as it is issued by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), one of the most influential research centers in the United States of America. The AEI is the Republican Party's think-tank and executive workforce supplier par excellence. President George W. Bush has used more than twenty researchers from the AEI to be among the top officials and cream of crop of President George W. Bush in his Administration political positions, or elsewhere in government committees and commissions. John Bolton, the former US ambassador to the United Nations and former National Security Adviser to President Trump, Lynn Cheney, wife of former US Vice President Dick Cheney and former head of the National Endowment for Humanities, Newt Gingrich former President of the US House of Representatives and Paul Wolfowitz, former US Deputy Secretary of Defense are among several others.

The report examines the recruitment of terrorist groups of youth, the key roles they play in these groups, and methods to improve the US administration response to this threat through international programs to combat violent extremism. It focuses on the efforts to prevent terrorism, especially preventing young people from joining terrorist groups, and addresses the major gaps in US-funded programs that target youth at risk of extremism and recruitment to improve their ability to combat the terrorists' exploitation of youth.

Methods of Terrorist Recruitment

Based on vicarious and heuristic methodologies, our true understanding of how young people slip into violent extremist groups informs our different approaches to countering and preventing youth involvement in terrorism. Notoriously enough, the customized pathways engineered to attract young people to terrorist or violent extremist groups are glaringly complex. Sadly enough, myriads of young people are recruited in favor for terrorist groups by their sympathetic family members or they are simply cajoled into believing that such membership helps them defend their families or communities. Still others are duped, fooled, trafficked, kidnapped, or forcibly recruited, flipping over to the next chapter of their lives.

Outright violence echoes down for years. Since 1987, the Lord's Resistance Army headquartered in Uganda has kidnapped more than 20,000 children, while Boko Haram operating mainly in Nigeria has employed mass kidnappings, including the abduction of 276 schoolgirls in Chibok in April 2014 and 110 more schoolgirls in Dapchi in March 2018. More so, Al-Shabaab in Somalia used detention, violence, and intimidation to recruit about 1,770 young people in 2017. More than ever, Daesh kidnapped thousands of children from orphanages, schools, and even their families' homes across Iraq. For instance, over one-third of the 6,800 Yazidis that Daesh abducted in Sinjar in 2014 were children. Again, a further 800 to 900 children were reportedly kidnapped from Mosul in Iraq. To add insult to injury, young people voluntarily join terrorist groups based on a set of underlying motivation, including:

- ▶ Group-based identity search
- ▶ Group-based ideological and doctrinal appeal
- ▶ Real or illusory exclusion, grievance, or cultural threat
- ▶ Economic and financial gains
- ▶ Rising to fame, glory or gaining respect
- ▶ Personal connections, such as family and friendship networks.

Once recruited, young people become even more prone to the control, inculcation and indoctrination by terrorists, including the use of drugs and the threat of harm to their families. Boko Haram is notoriously infamous for drugging children before sending them to carry out suicide missions.

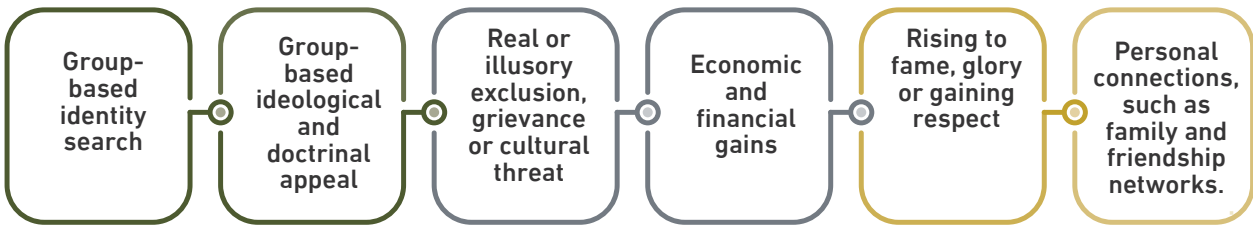
Badly affected, some people are born into violent extremist families. For instance, of 40,000 foreign Daesh fighters in Iraq and Syria, 12% were children, while 4,640 were minors. Again, more than 730 infants were born in Daesh-controlled territory to foreign terrorist fighters between April 2013 and June 2018. In the same vein, some estimates report the total number of children born in Daesh-controlled territory as high as 5,000. Given these realities, the family is the key generator of radicalization.

Fuel of Terrorist Groups

Terrorist groups employ young males and females in all capacity such as support, recruitment, fighting and propaganda. Males make up the highest percentage of fighters for Daesh and Al-Shabaab, while Boko Haram employs young women widely, especially in suicide operations. The tasks and roles are often determined by age and gender. Girls and young women perform primarily support duties, such as preparing food, collecting firewood, providing medical treatment, and maintaining camps. In 2015, two girls were arrested in Spain for establishing a Daesh-supported girl recruitment circle. Some wives of Daesh fighters often recruit fighters to join the group, and Zahra Duman, a 19-year old woman who left Australia to join Daesh in 2015, is a case in point.

Despite located far off the battlefield, the direct participation of girls and young women in terrorist groups constitutes a serious security threat. In the second Chechen war in the early 2000s, more than two thirds of the suicide bombers were women; women have a prominent presence also in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); equally important, women play key roles in the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey. Indeed, most of the suicide bombers in Boko Haram are women and girls even young women at

Drivers for youth to join terrorist groups



the age of 7 years! Daesh recruited women between the ages of 18 and 25 into an all-female unit, known as the “Al-Khansa Brigade”.

It can also be observed that family ties to terrorist group members may make young women more vulnerable to the practice of forced or early marriages, while also contributing to a sense of alienation and violent extremism. Forced marriage and sexual servitude are stigmas of many terrorist groups, including Daesh, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab. In Iraq, for instance, Daesh fighters systematically targeted female Yazidis for forced religious conversion, marriage and sexual slavery.

Factors Increasing Terrorist Recruitment

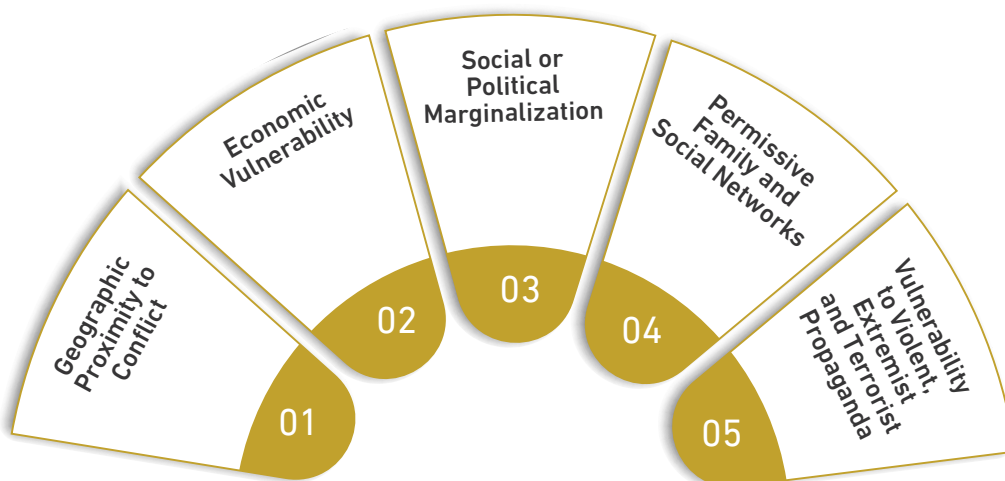
The factors contributory to increasing youths’ vulnerability to terrorist recruitment include the following key drivers:

1. Geographic Proximity to Conflict

It stands to reason that proximity to violent extremist groups is a significant risk factor for forced and voluntary recruitment into terrorist groups. Such phenomenon also drives youth involvement in political violence. For instance, frequent kidnappings and attacks by Boko Haram in response have driven youth in Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad to join armed vigilante groups. In Mali, young people have joined armed groups out of duty to defend their communities from local bandits, extremist groups and more likely local military units.

Given the limited physical security in refugee and internally displaced persons camps, conflict-impacted populations are also placed at risk, making such camps a frequent site of youth recruitment. In the wake of the genocide perpetrated in Rwanda, millions of Hutu refugees fled to Zaire, now is the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Consequently,

Factors Increasing Terrorist Recruitment



Hutu militia leaders quickly took control of the refugee camps, using them as recruitment pools. In a similar vein, host states have facilitated the recruitment of youth into extremist groups. Iran has used its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to recruit Afghan refugee youths to fight in Syria.

2. Economic Vulnerability

The existing relationship between economic vulnerability and youth recruitment into terrorist groups is very complex, and varies in different contexts. Although some country-specific research points to a relationship between indicators of economic development and terrorist attacks, regional and international research calls into question this relationship.

Research studies have revealed that economic factors do not play a role in radicalization and recruitment. For example, a research study conducted in 2015 on Jordanians who joined Daesh and Al-Nusra Front in Iraq and Syria showed no evidence of economic compensation for new recruits; more than 80% of the Jordanian fighters surveyed were employed at the time of their recruitment as engineers and doctors. Again, the recruitment records of nearly 300 young people who joined Daesh between 2013 and 2014 indicate that most of them were students at their recruitment time.

However, economic vulnerability continues to be widely reported as a factor supporting the recruitment of young men and women into Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. Given the lack of employment opportunities and inability to pay high school fees, Al-Shabaab recruiters have extensively exploited such dire circumstances. In a recent survey conducted by the United Nations Development Program, 13% of the respondents who had joined a violent extremist group in Africa reported their motivation as employment opportunities. Although many young male fighters who joined Daesh in 2013 and 2014 were students, almost 10% of them were unemployed when recruited.

Economic vulnerability may be an important motivation for recruiting terrorists in regions or communities under great economic pressure,

and unfulfilled expectations among well-educated young people may drive extremism and joining terrorist groups. For instance, Tunisian Daesh recruits mostly came from regions with large numbers of internal migrants, with a high rate of unemployment among university graduates. A survey of 8 Arab countries reveals that unemployed individuals with secondary and university education are more likely to have more extremist ideologies than those with less education.

These findings emphasize that many US government-funded programs to counter violent extremism that classify youth as “at-risk” based on absolute measures of poverty or past involvement in criminality need to review these criteria.

3. Social or Political Marginalization

This is no exception: the youth’s feelings of exclusion from their communities whether real or illusory lead up to terrorist recruitment. Simply put, terrorist groups can position and introduce themselves as an alternative community that promises young people a sense of belonging, and an ample opportunity to participate in something greater than themselves. Many international organizations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, enhance integrating young people into decision-making processes as a method to counter such a nuanced sense of disaffection and discontent. Again, the programs funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to counter violent extremism, including civil education programs, youth leadership activities, activist and social media trainings and public forums among youth and political leaders also reveal a clear concern associated with the social or political marginalization of youth. The USAID has allocated \$37 million to help Afghan women find new or better jobs. However, three years into the program, only 2.6% of female program participants have achieved this goal.

4. Permissive Family and Social Networks

Through a variety of open and selective channels, violent extremist groups recruit their members, including family networks, peers, social institutions and educational institutions. In a research study

conducted by the United Nations Development Program, a majority of members of violent extremist groups surveyed in Africa were introduced to the group by a friend. In a similar vein, case studies of youth in Mindanao in the Philippines found that family and social networks played a larger role in attracting radicalization and membership in armed groups than any certain grievances or social and economic drivers did.

Research has revealed that many youth members of armed groups in Mali had at least one parent who was a member of a violent extremist group. In the United Kingdom, a study of 113 men and 18 women who were associated with violent extremist groups concluded that 30% of them had family ties to violent extremism. This means that weak family structures can possibly make young people more vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. Equally important, female-headed households in particular may be more prone to economic pressure, making such family members vulnerable to instability. This is evidenced by the interviews conducted with young Kenyan women, including several former Al-Shabaab members, who reveal that economic pressures coupled with poverty, unemployment or joblessness explain why many people end up in joining terrorist groups. Likewise, a comparative study conducted on gang and violent extremist group participation in El Salvador, Morocco and Jordan revealed social isolation and problems of domestic instability as key drivers.

5. Vulnerability to Violent, Extremist and Terrorist Propaganda

Many efforts are closely made to mitigate the impact of terrorist propaganda in the media, but it is important to remember that educational institutions may facilitate extremism. For instance, Al-Shabaab in Somalia used schools to recruit children, and Daesh followed suit in using a sophisticated system of education-based indoctrination, by operating 1,350 schools with more than 100 thousand children in Iraq and Syria. In Malaysia, for instance, six school teachers were arrested for spreading Daesh propaganda in late 2018.

It should be especially noted that introducing critical thinking skills into school curricula is

also seen as an important method to reduce the vulnerability of youth to propaganda. In Pakistan, USAID trained more than 18,000 teachers in teaching methods tailored to enhance critical thinking skills. Meanwhile, the USAID programs included training teachers, religious leaders and government officials from Kenya and Somalia in integrating countering violent extremism strategies into the classroom. In Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger, it funded training courses in which 2,413 religious leaders participated in interfaith dialogue, tolerance and conflict resolution.

Reducing Violent Extremism Among Youth

The National Strategy for Counterterrorism made by the Trump Administration in 2018 acknowledges the significance of nonmilitary tools in combating violent extremism, although such programs are currently few and distant. For example, a radio program in Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger helped reduce perceptions that religious violence and political violence were justified. Elsewhere such as Afghanistan, a mix of cash and vocational training helped reduce recipients' willingness and readiness to provide support to the Taliban.

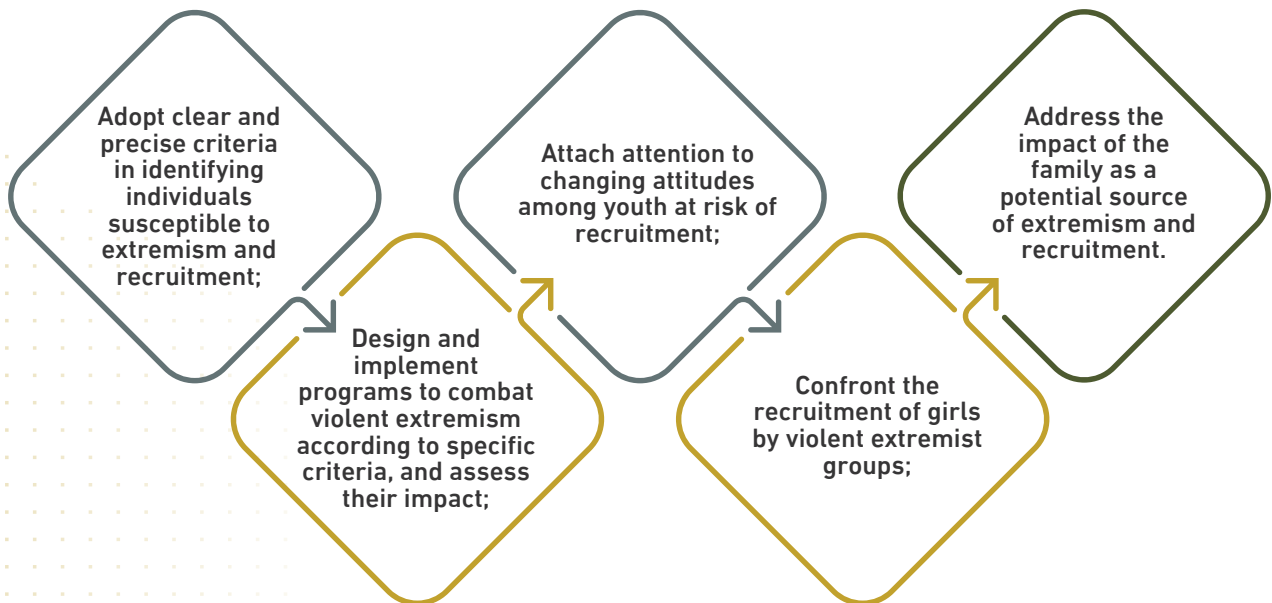
The report called on US officials responsible for programs and initiatives to undermine the exploitation of terrorist groups for youth to highlight the following goals and recommendations:

A. Adopting clear criteria to identify youths' vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment

The US government-funded programs to counter violent extremism among youth have attached a special attention to males between 15 and 30 years old. However, some participants may stretch well into adulthood or below boyhood. The continued inclusion of adults in youth programming is not an efficient response to children's increasingly growing participation in terrorist groups. In addition, focusing on age alone does not provide enough information to develop suitable counterterrorism and prevention programs.

As a matter of fact, not all young people are equally at risk of extremism or recruitment by terrorist

Report Recommendations



groups. People who participate in a program funded by the US government in a given country may be the least vulnerable. In Tunisia, for example, the USAID programs have focused on young people at risk of drug use or criminal activity, possibly based on some analyses that have revealed the association between criminal activity and violent extremism across Europe; however, the strength of such relationship varies depending on the context. As such, US government-funded programs may target unsuitable youth due to a poorly limited understanding of local contexts.

Focusing on vulnerable individuals in communities that lack physical or economic security can narrow the scope of programs funded by the US government, and allocate activities to meet the specific needs of high-risk individuals.

B. Designing and implementing programs to combat violent extremism according to specific criteria, and assessing their impact

Efforts to counter violent extremism can have positive impact in attitudes towards the use of violence, such as increased support for political violence, or increased dissatisfaction with local conditions, if as few as possible programs are implemented that address locally identified risk factors.

The inability of program implementers to offer compelling and cogent evidence of attitudinal or behavioral change is due largely to the fact that most programs fail to collect data on direct indicators of radicalization.

The program implementers' inability to provide compelling evidence to change attitudes and behaviors is largely due to the fact that most programs fail to collect data on direct indicators of extremism, and researchers have found that less than 5% of studies report results. Researchers found that less than 5% of studies reported outcomes.

C. Confronting the recruitment of girls by violent extremist groups

The US policy to counter terrorism has largely failed to address the widely known fact that female fighters are active in most violent extremist groups and that young women voluntarily join these groups for a spate of reasons. Since the end of the Cold War, more than 70 armed rebel groups have female members, and evidence indicates that girls and women are more likely to join armed groups that embrace terrorist tactics.

The US government-funded programs to prevent terrorism ignore the real threat that girls pose, simply because they attach most of their attention



to male youth, as young women are token participants. The State Department recently took a step in the right direction in accordance with the US strategy to support women and girls at risk of violent extremism and conflict in 2019. The strategy explicitly acknowledges that efforts to address the harmful impact of violence, extremism, terrorism and conflict are more feasible and sustainable when led by women and girls. How will the State Department implement this approach? The answer to this leading question remains gray.

D. Addressing Family Impact

Families play a major role in violent radicalization, or towards preventing radicalization. About 8% of members of African extremist groups have been recruited by a family member. Parents have demonstrated their willingness and readiness to directly involve their children in terrorist operations, as evidenced by the recent terrorist attacks that have involved entire families in Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Programs to counter violent extremism across the United States and Europe tend to focus on families

as a source of resilience to violent extremism, rather than a potential risk. Between August 2017 and March 2018, more than 2,500 parents participated in one of the programs funded by the Department of Homeland Security that funded weekly training for migrant families with children believed to be at risk of extremism, and the Heartland Democracy Center in Minneapolis organized workshops to engage immigrant and refugee parents in youth violence prevention.

A State Department-funded a pilot program called Ending Terrorism Through Youth Service Action Locally. This program assessed 600 Tunisian youths across two communities on a set of 12 risk factors, including weak parental supervision, peer influence, peer radicalization and family radicalization. One year into the program, the spread of family extremism was reduced by 84%, and peer extremism by 22%.

In sum, the report emphasizes that the policies and practices to counter violent extremism have yet to put the vulnerability of youth both males and females to terrorist group recruitment at the

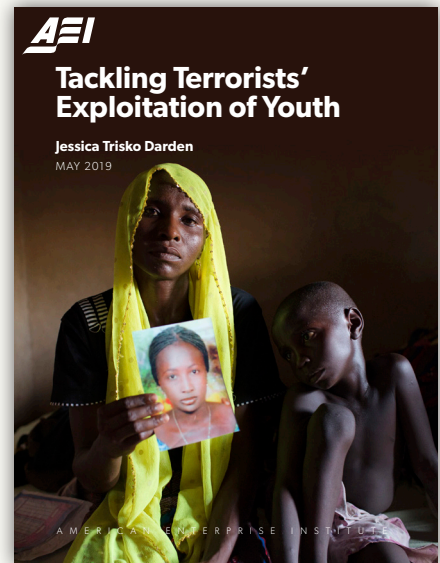
forefront of their efforts. They have to seriously think creatively about the roles of families and family life in fostering violent extremism. If the United States is to improve its efforts to counter youth radicalization and recruitment, it is important

that US government-funded terrorism prevention programs abroad account for the nuanced drivers that contribute to youth vulnerability, relying on rigorous data and analysis to target those most at risk.

The Author

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