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Designing Interventions for Community Resilience and Empowerment

April 29—May 1, 2019

Executive Summary

Violent extremism continues to capture headlines. As recent events in New Zealand, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere illustrate, violence is increasingly seen as an option by the angry, marginalized, and disaffected. Governments continue to push an aggressive security response to some threats while ignoring others. However, state-led, security-based responses to extremism are insufficient. Empowering visionary, grassroots leaders to build resilient communities and prevent the anomie that leads to violence is critical for a sustainable response to violent extremism.

The Carter Center, through its Preventing Violent Extremism Project, has been working with grassroots religious and community leaders to advance grassroots solutions to extremism for three years, culminating with the final in a series of four reiterative workshops with a second cohort of religious and community leaders. The workshop was held from April 29 to May 1, 2019, in Tunisia, and trained participants from France, Morocco, Tunisia, Belgium, and the United States in four main areas: a) transformative leadership; b) project design, monitoring, and evaluation; c) political and social strategies for change; and d) branding and communication strategies for impact and change. On the third day, members of the first cohort of PVE practitioners joined the workshop to share lessons learned and continue to build the international network of PVE practitioners. A total of 36 grassroots activists from North Africa, Europe, and the United States took part. The workshop series has been highly successful—the Center’s network is passionate and engaged, and possesses the skills and social influence to enact positive change in their local contexts.

Transformative Leadership

Houda Abadi, an associate director in the Carter Center’s Conflict Resolution Program, opened the workshop by encouraging participants to think about their leadership styles and ways they can

refine their leadership talents for maximum impact in their local communities and projects. Abadi mapped different styles of leadership—transactional, transformative, and laissez-faire—while detailing the advantages and drawbacks of each. Emphasis was placed on building transformational leadership capacity to engage in social and political reforms, where leaders have the vision to inspire their constituencies to achieve great outcomes and, in the process, create an inspiring vision of the future. Through hands-on exercises, participants identified their own leadership styles and considered their particular strengths and weaknesses. Reflection groups were formed by country, and each defined a vision for their project. Groups articulated visions of Muslims as engaged citizens, of coexistence, of inclusive societies, and of insulating vulnerable youth from extremism. The goal over the next three days was to refine the vision and to build from it an achievable goal, identify activities that align with that goal, and create a communication strategy that would advance the vision.

Designing Interventions for Impact and Storytelling

Interactive sessions over the next three days focused on helping participants refine their vision into a fully articulated project that is specific, measurable, attainable, and time-bound. Marsha Base, the Carter Center’s advisor on design, monitoring and evaluation, provided the participants with a process and methodology for conceiving a project. After the establishment of robust goals, Base broke the participants into country groups to define their activities, identify actors with which they will need to engage, envision the expected changes resulting from the planned activities, and pinpoint underlying assumptions. Groups paired off to provide feedback on the proposed projects, and projects were adjusted, activities realigned, and assumptions reviewed. At the end of the process, each group shared its project proposal:

- United States: Using a train-the-trainers’ model, the project’s initial pilot phase will train five young Muslim leaders with strong social capital in five cities in five vision areas in one year, with potential expansion in the next phase. The leaders will be trained in social inclusion, civil rights, grassroots activism, and intrafaith relations in order to establish a diverse coalition of Muslim leaders, increase Muslim participation in American public life, and normalize Islam in the American imagination.
- Morocco: Using a train-the-trainers’ model, by 2020, the project will increase the capacity of 20 Moroccan youth activists to advocate for coexistence in their local communities through workshop trainings and community-wide consultations. The youth will be recruited for their potential reach in three pilot areas with high rates of violent extremism, and trained with the goal of spawning youth-led coexistence projects in local neighborhoods.
- Tunisia: Mothers are often the most deeply impacted when youth are led astray by extremism. They also represent a critical connection between the home and the mosque, between families and religious leaders. To leverage these relationships, the project will train 30 mothers and 30 imams in conflict management, the prevention of violent

extremism, civic engagement, and emotional support over 18 months in order to build resilience and empowerment among youth. Recruitment of mothers and imams and training activities will focus on five regions in Tunisia that had a high flow of foreign fighters to Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

- Europe: The project will develop an online consultation platform with local communities, aiming to encourage Muslims to reclaim their narratives, create synergies among different grassroots leaders, and to encourage French and Belgian Muslims, especially Muslim youth, to live their faith openly and without compromise. The consultation partners will work with youth to help them design their own projects, responsive to local needs, that will drive civic involvement and concern for the well-being of the community.

Participants noted that the exercises, while rigorous, exposed them to best practices for designing, monitoring, and evaluating peacebuilding practices for violence prevention and community resilience.

In addition to project design, expert Karianne Wardell, a private marketing and branding consultant, worked with participant groups on the basics of branding and communication strategy. Each participant completed a series of individual exercises that forced them to define their target audiences, determine their audiences' motivations and interests, and develop a brand and communication strategy for their project. Participants learned how defining a coherent brand can influence an organization's ability to generate funds, resources, audiences, and visibility. For example, all workshop participants—imams, civil society activists, youth leaders—engage with their constituencies via social media. Wardell tasked these leaders to reflect on their timing and current media assets, identify which segments of their audience engage with each outlet and why, and devise a communication and strategy plan for each outlet. The exercises were detailed and cumulative, designed to make their projects more impactful.

Wardell and Base were joined by Marwan Muhammad, former director of the Collectif Contre L'Islamophobie en France and founder of L.E.S Musulmans, a grassroots consultation project designed to elevate the voice of the French Muslim community and link the disparate Muslim communities in France with resources, technical skills, and communication tools. The consultation platform L.E.S Musulmans functioned as a case study. Muhammad shared how this initiative allowed them to explore the cultural, social, and ideological diversity of Muslims in France, reclaim their narratives, prioritize their common needs, and respond to Islamophobia. Muhammad also emphasized the importance of research and data in understanding the problem an organization aims to solve, and of building "antifragility" into the design—the ability of the project to benefit from adverse conditions. As a guided exercise, Muhammad and Wardell facilitated a crisis simulation case study where participants were asked to come up with a crisis response communication strategy that transformed a current crisis into an opportunity for strengthening the

organization. Participants agreed that the interactive exercises were intense but incredibly helpful in allowing them to refine, proof, and ultimately strengthen their project proposals.

Bringing the Cohorts Together: Networks Designed for Sustainable Impact

The second cohort of PVE practitioners marks the final cohort in the Center's PVE project. On the third day of the workshop, members of the first cohort joined for introductions and exercises, and to provide advice on the second cohort's revised project proposals. Moving forward, the first cohort will serve as mentors and colleagues for the second cohort, building and expanding a network of practice and ensuring the sustainability of their work in the absence of direct Carter Center involvement.

Members of the first cohort also shared important lessons learned in implementing their own projects. The first cohort group from Morocco, for example, noted how the closing of political space around the issue of extremism forced them to be flexible and creative in their project design. They quickly pivoted from the original project design and instead developed a media literacy and conflict resolution program for youth, recruited over a dozen young leaders, and executed a training workshop using materials and topics adapted from their Carter Center capacity-building workshops. Those youth are now recruiting their own group of youth leaders to train.

Another success story that one of the Moroccan participants shared—and attributed to the Carter Center's efforts—was the case of a mother in Ceuta whose daughter left for Syria and resisted her mother's efforts to persuade her to return. After meeting with Abadi, the mother joined an advocacy organization in Ceuta and persuaded her daughter to return and surrender to the justice sector. Currently, the daughter is incarcerated in Madrid, and the mother has custody of her grandchild. The three Belgian members of the first cohort also developed a project for youth to foster anti-discrimination activism. Reflecting on their work with the Carter Center, members of the first cohort noted that the trainings they received “internationalized their approach to extremism” and that the tools they gained allowed for greater impact in their work.

Beyond building skills and sharing lessons learned, the most valuable aspect of bringing the two cohorts together was seeing the shared sense of purpose among the groups and watching it expand as they began working together. Abadi disclosed during the final session that she is leaving the Center. The participants were saddened at the news—all agreed that a valuable and unique community was built over the last three years. Relationships were formed and coalitions cemented, and as projects are implemented, the impact of this community of practice will continue to echo in communities across North Africa, Europe, and the United States.

Two participants from Tunis, a professor and an imam, noted that, though they live in the same city, they would never have met or worked together on prevention had it not been for this project.

A community leader remarked that she is opposed to PVE on principle because of its negative impact on Muslim communities in the United States, but that the program's design and methodology, its concern for all forms of extremism, its ability to bring together faith and community leaders across political and ideological divides, and its commitment to centering Muslim voices persuaded her to work on these issues. Several participants also expressed their gratitude to the Center for speaking out publicly against Islamophobia. At the conclusion of the workshop, participants created a private online discussion platform that incorporates the two cohorts for information sharing, networking, and ongoing collaboration. Participants feel well prepared to work together, carrying on the work of prevention both within their communities and across geographic and ideological borders.

Conclusions

The three years of the Carter Center's engagement on PVE issues shows that the grassroots contributions of religious and community leaders are essential to a long-term solution to violent extremism. Social justice, inclusive societies, economic opportunity, and good governance at all levels are critical to sustainable peace and long-term prevention.

The Center will transition out of the PVE project and will place its network of PVE practitioners at the forefront by convening a closing workshop with current cohorts to pitch their local projects to government representatives, foundations, and donors. The closing workshop will serve as a catalyst for ongoing dialogue, promote engagement, and bridge the divide between government representatives and grassroots leaders. This event will further solidify the rich community of practice and enable workshop cohorts to take ownership, source funding, and scale up, resulting in multiple, autonomous, and locally adapted PVE initiatives.

Extremism prevention is not separate from the work of social justice or a robust respect for human rights. When change comes, it will come from below, and from grassroots leaders working outside the headlines. The expanded network of practitioners in the Center's two PVE cohorts are deeply committed to the prevention of all forms of violent extremism in their local contexts and to the broader effort of peacebuilding within their communities.

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