Tackling Violent Extremism

Over the decade and a half since the 9/11 attacks, calls for more international counterterrorism cooperation have become a stock element of political leaders’ speeches. Following each successive terrorist attack, leaders have underscored the need for greater collaboration among military, intelligence, law enforcement and criminal justice officials to counter increasingly transnational threats. These calls have been echoed at the multilateral level, with the UN and regional organisations adopting resolutions reiterating the need for intensified interstate co-operation and outlining steps that national governments should take to address the threats facing them.

There has also been a corresponding effort to strengthen multilateral mechanisms, particularly since 2010, to allow for more practical co-operation among countries. In fact, one of the under-reported counterterrorism advances over the past decade has been the extent to which the international counterterrorism architecture has been updated to allow for more dynamic collaboration. Today, there are now mechanisms to allow an array of national practitioners – for example, criminal justice officials and parliamentarians from around the world – to share expertise and build trust.

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Minding the Gap: A Multi-Layered Approach to Tackling Violent Extremism

Eric Rosand

The creation of the Global Counterterrorism Forum was a success for the international community’s counterterrorism efforts, but was it enough?

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The lack of a sui generis international platform to enable the sharing of expertise and to build bridges among national-level policy-makers and practitioners in order to address civilian counterterrorism requirements was seen as an obstacle to the pursuit of these objectives.

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To fill this gap, in September 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hosted the launch of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), an informal, action-oriented space made up of 30 founding members. This provided a forum where G7 and Muslim-majority countries could speak frankly about counterterrorism challenges and build the trust necessary for the development of innovative solutions.

Although largely operating beneath the radar and costing less than $1.5 million a year to sustain, the GCTF’s impact has been significant. Drawing on expertise from government and non-government practitioners alike, it has developed a library’s worth of practical guidance to help national practitioners and policy-makers do their jobs more effectively. For example, the GCTF’s 2012 Rabat Memorandum offers investigators and prosecutors modern tools to handle terrorism cases, while adhering to international human rights standards; the Rome Memorandum, produced in the same year, provides a road map for the development of programmes to rehabilitate and reintegrate terrorist offenders into society. This guidance is now being tailored to fit national and regional level implementation efforts and for the development of programmes for terrorist fighters who have returned home.

There are now at least ten such tools. Nearly all have been endorsed by the UN, and they are increasingly being used as the basis for training and other capacity-building assistance – focused primarily on national government practitioners. This work is taking place in Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia and is sponsored by a diversity of donors, including the US.

However, it was soon recognised that in certain contexts projects carrying the ‘US’ hallmark, or that of any other Western nation would, by definition, have limited impact. Instead there was a need for durable multilateral platforms to support training on the different GCTF guidance documents. GCTF members subsequently joined together to create two such platforms: an international Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) training centre, Hedayah, in Abu Dhabi, and a complementary counterterrorism centre in Malta, The International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law, for training criminal justice officials, particularly from countries in the MENA region. These new centres are governed and funded by a mix of countries (including those with Muslim-majority populations) and have attracted strong political and financial support from a broad range of countries. Although still works in progress, both platforms will lead to better-trained and networked practitioners over time, thus producing security dividends for everyone.

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Sub-national stakeholders need their own platforms to facilitate networking at the local, national, regional and global levels. This would enable them to learn from each other and collaborate without giving national governments or intergovernmental bodies control over a co-operation agenda that is no longer limited to national security actors. These platforms can also help press national governments to create the necessary legal and policy space to enable greater involvement of sub-national actors in addressing increasingly localised threats.

In fact, new platforms are being developed to facilitate the sharing of challenges, best practices, and information among sub-national stakeholders. Since June 2015, new global and regional CVE networks have been launched which focus on bringing cities and local researchers together. New regional platforms to connect youth, women, and other civil society players have also been launched.

The challenge, however, is in scaling up and ensuring the sustainability of these initiatives in the future. Governments and intergovernmental bodies, including the GCTF, need to address the problem of how to energise such initiatives and mobilise funding for them without micromanaging or undermining their credibility. Governments also need to continue to create space within national counterterrorism strategies and the traditional state-driven multilateral system for sub-national actors and other non-traditional stakeholders. If these stakeholders can have their voice heard at the national and international level and they are provided the opportunity to showcase the unique contributions they can make in preventing violent extremism from taking root in their communities, then they may be able to persuade many countries that the issues of national security do not belong exclusively to national security officials.

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*in the architecture of multilateral counterterrorism by creating opportunities for other countries to share the financial and leadership burden with the US on a range of issues. This strengthened architecture, which now includes a more dynamic UN component, is focused first and foremost on building co-operation among – and the capacities of – national governments, reflecting the political and counterterrorism priorities of the time when the GCTF was launched.

Since then, terrorist threats have become more localised and a new gap has arisen: in sub-national multilateral co-operation. As highlighted in the UN Secretary General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, the response to this type of terrorist threat has changed, expanding beyond traditional national-level actors to include local government and civil society stakeholders, and moving further upstream to include more emphasis on prevention at grassroots level.

Although these sub-national stakeholders are occasionally involved in the work of the GCTF or the traditional multilateral forums, they are not given a voice in determining priorities or shaping agendas. More fundamentally, these forums are not suited to facilitate and sustain co-operation among local actors – such as mayors, researchers, teachers, social and healthcare workers, psychologists, and religious, youth and other community leaders – because these spaces are appropriated by the interests and needs of national governments. Despite increasing recognition that local actors are critical to preventing violent extremism, this problem remains.

As a result, while representing a significant improvement over what was in place in 2009, and having succeeded on so many levels, existing structures are unlikely to be sufficient to meet the requirements of preventing and countering violent extremism over the long term. Ultimately, sub-national and non-governmental actors working on discrete pieces of the agenda cannot just be included in state-driven multilateral bodies when it is convenient for national governments.

Instead, the GCTF and other elements of the international counterterrorism community can and should do more to reach out to local actors. This can be achieved by highlighting the need to involve local actors in a meaningful way in national counterterrorism discussions that have generally been limited to national-level officials. In addition, resources should be mobilised to support the strengthening of sub-national capacities.*