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ANALYSIS

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Abstract

While cadres of professionals have been mobilized and trained to engage with the violent extremist threat in the North Caucasus, families—those closest to the vulnerable people countering violent radicalization (CVE) work tries so hard to reach—have been ignored, blamed, and left to navigate perhaps the most difficult moment of their lives alone. This article identifies what makes families unique in their capacity to influence loved ones, addresses some common misconceptions about their role in the radicalization process, and highlights some potential challenges of family involvement in CVE. The article draws on empirical evidence from various international studies and programs and analyzes its applicability in the North Caucasus context.

Introduction

Radicalization and violent extremism have affected the North Caucasus for decades. In all the waves of violence—through the separatist movements to ISIS's recent terrorist attacks—the approaches to combatting insurgents has been largely within the control of security agencies and law enforcement. While methods had traditionally been heavy-handed, beginning around 2010 soft measures were introduced in Dagestan and Ingushetia which included liberalization of the regime towards law-abiding Salafis, efforts at facilitating dialogue between Sufi and Salafi communities, and commissions for the rehabilitation of fighters. These measures were successful and visibly reduced the outflow of young radicals to the insurgency, however, they were rolled back in the lead-up to the Sochi Olympics in early 2013. Furthermore, the introduction of some soft-measure elements did not bring about a change in the general strategy that continued to rely on heavy-handed approaches.

In the last five years or so, the fight against radicalization in the North Caucasus witnessed a fundamental shift in thinking as to how radicalism and violent extremism are most effectively combatted. Instead of fighting radicalization exclusively through investigations and counter-terror operations, CVE approaches began to engage individuals before they radicalized, while they could still be turned away from radical narratives. In some republics, various civil society groups and NGOs have gradually made a seat at the table for themselves, introducing a new toolbox of soft-power messaging and programming. However, despite the broadening of CVE actors and activities, there remains a layer of prevention that has not been sufficiently accessed or empowered: the family. Families are uniquely positioned to support countering violent extremism, yet in the North Caucasus they have not been adequately included in CVE efforts.

The authorities in the North Caucasus have come to recognize the important role of families; as such, parents and other family members have begun to receive some attention when it comes to their potential to protect their loved ones from radicalization; however, progress has been slow and superficial. This article introduces theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence in support of the argument for greater family involvement in CVE in the North Caucasus and offers suggestions for how to achieve it. Evidence is supported by analysis through three sections that focus on understanding the role of families, the misconceptions surrounding their involvement in radicalization, and the challenges that their inclusion may bring.

Why (Not) Families

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is a catch-all description that refers to non-coercive attempts to change attitudes and behaviors about using violence for political objectives. Because there is no internationally (and even at times nationally) defined standard for CVE, programs "throughout the world vary, from projects aimed at changing behavior to ones that challenge ideas and beliefs, to activities aimed at building social cohesion" (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle and Zammit 2016, 6). Despite this diversity of engagement, however, theories of resilience have almost exclusively focused on the individual and have not paid attention to contextual effects from the structures and institutions one is shaped by. Perhaps the most important context in which one exists, positionality in one's family, has been virtually unexplored. Why?

Conduct within the family is difficult to operationalize; as such, the sponsoring agencies and organizations that develop CVE have not prioritized the family space. To start, it is difficult to conduct family-centered

research in any context, much less with a security sensitive focus such as radicalization. Furthermore, each family has its own history, vulnerabilities, trauma, and interpersonal dynamics; as such, designing a family-oriented CVE program that is effective for everyone while also accommodating a range of circumstances is no small task. Most importantly however, it is not only a matter of access to the family, but a matter of timing—the fundamental challenge of all prevention work is identifying a worrisome change in behavior before it is too late. To expect families to definitively "know" when to call for help is an impossible barrier to entry. For these reasons and more, the family environment has not been a central focus of most CVE programming, with research and intervention instead focusing on more predictable and structured spheres of influence and working with community members such as teachers, imams, sports coaches, social workers, psychologists and other community and youth leaders.

Recently, "researchers and practitioners have recognized the importance of ensuring that families are addressed as a prevention target, as well as recognizing the valuable resource that they represent in preventive efforts" (El-Amraoui and Ducol 2019, 190). The incorporation of families into the cadre of CVE professionals not only expands the network of CVE actors, but it also enables a new front of CVE work that leverages the inimitable qualities of families that no governmental, civil society, or professional group can replicate.

Inimitable Qualities of the Family

Individuals both influence and are influenced by their families; individuals change and grow within a family context as do the relationships between parents, children, and siblings. In regard to radicalization, there are several important factors that can make families a unique and irreplaceable resource and connection. To start, the family often has personal and frequent access to the vulnerable individual in the home. Whereas traditional CVE efforts often have an air of officiality, especially in the North Caucasus where lectures are often delivered by staid police officers, educators or imams, the home can allow families to connect in a less structured and formal setting. The other inherent strength of families is the continuity that they share with the vulnerable individual. Individuals are vulnerable to radicalization for very personal reasons, "to divert an individual on this path, it is crucial to understand their environment, as well as their individual psychology" (UNESCO 2019). Only families can possess a deep history of a person—they know what they have experienced, the traumas in their life, and what their aspirations may be. The North Caucasus history of insurgency and war has left many families with deep trauma that has been passed through gener-

ations—these memories and legacies influence an individual's composition in intimate and subtle ways.

Families have an emotional attachment that professional groups cannot imitate. In the North Caucasus, mothers in particular have a long record of going to great lengths to fight for their children's lives and security. Most importantly, families are instrumental in shaping attitudes of their children. While countering violent extremism implies that the radicalization process has already started and must now be reversed, families have an opportunity to foster resilient attitudes in the home to prevent radicalization from ever taking root in the first place. A 2015 study by the RAND Corporation named "What Factors Cause Youth to Reject Violent Extremism?" found that family plays a greater role than friends in shaping attitudes toward nonviolence (Cragin et al. 2015). While peer groups may influence the radicalization of young people, it is the influence of the family that affects their willingness to engage in violence. While current CVE programming works primarily with individuals who have been identified as at-risk, by enabling the family, specifically parents, to act as CVE actors, resilience can be fostered within the children before any vulnerabilities emerge.

Families undoubtedly play a unique role in the lives of their loved ones. They are educators, guides, confidants, and helpers; they raise the next generation and are reservoirs of legacy and promulgators of values. North Caucasus societies have very thick and rich kinship networks, especially in Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan, which have the highest birth rates in Russia. Families are big and often reside together in kinship enclaves in villages and towns; respect for elders is pronounced and carries a high social value. Yet for all their inherent potential, families have been underutilized in CVE work or utilized in the wrong fashion. Particularly in Chechnya, there are some significant misconceptions to the role of families in the radicalization process that have led families to be regarded with suspicion, blame, and mistrust, and even be subjected to violence.

Across the North Caucasus, the primary target for family programming are those with radicalizing youth—those who have plausibly demonstrated an ideological openness and perhaps even behavioral adherence to extremist narratives. The methods used across the republics are largely the same uncreative lectures; they emphasize what parents *should* do but they do not actually teach parents the information and skills that would make them effective sources of counterinfluence. Despite a similar conversational approach to family involvement in CVE, the tones that authorities strike across the republics range from ineffectual to detrimental. In Chechnya, the standard format for engaging families involves sporadically gathering parents together and having author-

ities lecture them on why and how they should "control" their children better. These lectures often strike an accusatory tone, suggesting that the parents are to blame for the decisions of their children. Internet security is often a significant emphasis of these lectures, as is the importance of developing in the younger generation a proper "spiritual and moral education." In Ingushetia, official CVE rhetoric directed at parents is softer and more approachable, however, the substance of the family programming remains largely ineffectual. Specifically, policies in Ingushetia have focused on urging parents to convince their children of the error of their ways; authorities have emphasized the possibility for those fighting in extremist groups to return to a peaceful life if they reject radical sentiments and repent. Although these programs ostensibly offer generous and nonpunitive support for involvement in violent extremism, levels of trust in the republic remain considerably low.

Common Misconceptions

A significant barrier to expanding the role of families in CVE is the misconceptions and suspicion that many people have about the role of families in radicalization. For many of the same reasons that were mentioned above as to why families can be strong positive source of counterinfluence, those same factors can be cause for suspicion. Take for example the strength of emotional attachment: while on the one hand the fact that families share deep emotional attachment with a vulnerable person can make them work tirelessly to ensure their safety, that same logic can be extended to suspect that families will also conceal the radicalization of a loved one in order to protect them.

However, suspecting families to be accomplices overlooks the fact that "Families are often the people most impacted by acts of violent terrorism and recruitment to extremist ideas. They are the first hit with loss and pain after a terrorist act and feel deep pangs of shame and guilt when a loved one becomes radicalized" (Rafiq 2018, 8). The Kadyrov regime in Chechnya is particularly prone to this fallacy; families of (suspected) radicals are often held accountable for the behaviors of loved ones and are often forced to publicly condemn their behavior and disown them, and in extreme cases family members can also have their homes burnt down by the regime, be exiled, subjected to torture or taken hostage (CAPC 2019).

Before suspecting families to be complicit in the radicalization of a loved one, it is important to note that the signs of radicalization can be far from obvious; it is wrong to assume that families that failed to spot the early signs of extremism are inattentive, that they do not care, or that they are sympathetic to radical messaging. Not only are the signs of change difficult to notice, behavioral changes do not obviously point to radicalization. Adolescence is characterized as a period of great change; young people at this stage in their lives are expected to be rebellious, to challenge authority, experiment with religion, and to demand more privacy in their lives. For example, in Dagestan, youth who are frustrated with the widespread abuse of power and corruption in the republic can reach the seemingly logical conclusion that secular governance is oppressive, and instead support alternative forms of justice as advocated through customary and sharia law. This in itself is not an unfounded proposition as the corruption of the clan system in Dagestan is rampant; radicalization as it stems from injustice can thus be difficult to identify.

Furthermore, some of the changes that can in hindsight be a sign of radicalization can in the moment be cause for relief. "Parents sometimes feel secure and relieved when their child turns away from drugs and embraces Islam instead. From then on, there is no smoking, no drinking, no sleeping until noon" (Schlaffer and Kropiunigg 2015, 20). In Chechnya, strict rules of Islamic behavior—such as a dress code and prohibitions on alcohol—are enforced by the Kadyrov regime such that a turn towards an Islamic code of conduct is not unusual in and of itself, it can be indicative of many things. Knowing what behavioral changes to take seriously is a fundamental challenge of CVE work that virtually every organization and agency has struggled to accurately classify.

Finally, even if radicalization is suspected, responding can be a daunting task. To believe that a loved one is radicalizing means acknowledging the possibility of losing them, your own cluelessness of how to help them, and the risk that they and the rest of your family may face from the security services. While families are *positioned* to serve as educators, protectors, and confidants, they do not necessarily have the *skills* to engage effectively. Like any other professional group working in the CVE space, families need to be taught the information, language, and techniques that are used in the countering violent extremism portfolio. Without the proper skills to intervene, families are often left feeling helpless in their ability to bring their loved ones back from the path of radicalization.

Challenges

Despite the need to bring families into the CVE space there are many potential and real challenges of doing so. To start, given how difficult it is to not only identify radicalization but also to respond to it, it is likely that there will be divergent opinions on how to react. For example, suspecting radicalization, one parent may want to seek professional help while the other parent denies the signs altogether. Or, if they both identify radicalization

but one parent wants to consult professionals while the other parent wants to deal with this themselves, how do they proceed? North Caucasus tradition, in some republics more than others, dictates strict aloofness in the relationship between a father and his children, which consequently limits parents' capacity to speak sincerely about certain issues with their maturing children, to debate with them, and hinders their ability to notice changes in their worldviews. Moreover, wives often-times do not have the sufficient power or community support to address the radicalization of their husbands and are fearful of reporting it once things get really bad.

Bringing families into the CVE space can also be challenging because family members can be part of the problem that contributed to radicalization in the first place. It is often the case that vulnerable youth come from troubled homes where there is active or unresolved sources of trauma, pain or domestic violence. CVE targeted programming in the North Caucasus focuses on individuals from "socially underprivileged, incomplete and dysfunctional families," many of whom find themselves in difficult circumstances due to the legacy of insurgency in the region, which has contributed to significant and unaddressed trauma (CAPC 2019). Families of former fighters (defined as deceased or convicted) in particular can find themselves under immense pressure from the republican and security authorities, pressure which can exacerbate grievances and trauma and contribute to destructive behaviors. It is important to note that "experiencing an unstable family environment does not guarantee involvement in VE or any other criminality" (Simi, Sporer and Bulboz 2016, 546). Due to the relative insularity of the home, however, it may be difficult for professionals to entrust CVE responsibilities to an environment that at best unknown, or at worst dangerous.

Perhaps the most difficult terrain to navigate is contact with the security services. The lack of trust between families, local communities, and local and federal authorities makes establishing cooperative relationships and good-faith information sharing difficult. A climate of fear surrounding contact with security services is pervasive across the region given the systematic and grave human rights violations reportedly committed by security services in all of the republics, including torture, enforced disappearances and falsification of criminal cases. The situation is the worst in Chechnya due to a long history of persecuting families of radicals, but is also severely dysfunctional in Dagestan given its use of *profuchet*, or a preventive registration list for "suspected" religious extremists. The list is largely an exercise in stereotyping and the threshold for being added to the list is low. At its peak in 2015 the profuchet list reportedly had over 16,000 names, including nearly all

family members of former fighters. Being on the list led to detentions at checkpoints and borders, forced appearances at police stations, and a slew of other harassments (CAPC 2019). While the list was reported to have been dissolved in 2017, reporting from Dagestan indicates that it is still active. As such, concerned families may be reluctant to reach out for help out of fear that by disclosing their concerns they will be subject to a life of harassment.

Ways Forward

Radicalization and violent extremism have complicated origins and thus require comprehensive approaches that engage a broad range of CVE actors such as psychologists, police officers, social workers, theologians, teachers, and, as this article argues, families. For a long time, CVE work in the North Caucasus involved primarily heavy-handed, top-down approaches that were sponsored by security agencies and local police forces. The expansion of the CVE network to include civil society actors was unequivocally a positive step for prevention work. The incorporation of families must be the next one.

Many creative and inspiring CVE practices have been successfully developed to support prevention efforts; that same level of energy and dedication must now be directed at improving family involvement. The ideas listed below will require collaboration between families and the entire network of CVE stakeholders and professionals. These suggestions are general and should be tailored to specific local and republic contexts.

- Develop more interactive training courses for parents to learn about their role in countering the influence of violent extremism. These courses should move past a lecture model and educate parents on the psychology of adolescence, how to discuss difficult issues with their children, and how to recognize possible signs of radicalization, how to intervene, and where to seek help. These lessons must be gender sensitive, focusing on the similarities but also the divergences between the recruitment and ideological narratives targeted at boys and girls.
- Train parents in internet security. Simply put, many parents are computer literate and are not familiar with the countless media platforms and forums where their children may come across radical ideologies. Parents should be made aware of the key arguments and images that recruiters use and prepare counter arguments for the material. While delivering counter narratives is always difficult, reducing information asymmetries is a critical step to improving communication.
- Make psychological health resources more available for both parents and children. Free counseling should be accessible to families and vulnerable youth

and must not be stigmatized or securitized. Radicalization often occurs in families where there are problems and unresolved traumas; CVE may not be effective so long as the personal wounds of individuals go unhealed. Furthermore, individuals who have previously experienced the radicalization of a loved one are great resources and intermediaries as they can identify with the personal experience.

For more information and recommendations for improving family involvement in CVE in the North Caucasus, see the Conflict Analysis and Prevention Center's recently released methodological cards.[1]

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