Radicalisation in the Post COVID-19 Era

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Synopsis

While the world's attention befittingly concentrates on the health and economic impacts of COVID-19, the threat of radicalisation leading to violent extremism persists. In some circumstances, it has been aggravated during the crisis. The moment demands focus and consideration on issues regarding radicalisation so that the gains made in the pre-COVID era would not become irrelevant.

Commentary

The information flow all over the world within a few months suggests that violent extremist and terrorist groups are aware of the commotion caused by COVID-19. Many of the groups are at least aware of the possible benefits they can extract from that disruption, and to some extent they are already reaping benefits. The lockdowns, quarantines and inactive time during the closure facilitate a few situations that create multiple grounds for the process of spreading radicalisation. Educational institutions and social activities are being put on hold. A great number of young people are now confined to their households, and are spending even more of their time online. Parents around the world have broadly acknowledged that they are allowing their children more online surfing and screen time than usual in an effort to secure more work time for themselves. It is easy for youth to come across radical content and if unsupervised, the youths can navigate in the online radicalisation process through the help of learning platforms, search engines, and chat by themselves. Their monotony, frustration, combined with a rapid growth of online platforms and delivery content, makes them more exposed to online radicalisation along with violent extremist contents. The tremendous uncertainty brought on by the pandemic can leave them with the time and opportunities they would not usually get. This way, extremists are getting the

opportunity to exploit the youths' frustrations about their lack of activity, their families' economic sufferings, and their strong sense of disorientation, misperception, distress, and anxiety.

Cyber Radicalisation and the Targets

There have been researches which propose that the internet works as an 'echo chamber' where people find their concepts sustained and echoed by other compatible entities. In the absence of their typical social support systems and networks of trusted adults and peers, like daily interactions with teachers, youth club leaders, managers, sports instructors, and others coming to a halt has made youths become easy targets for the radicals as they promise easy responses about who they can blame for their difficulties and mistreatments, or their community's predicament that often include creating a just order by means of their choices. Thus, cyber radicalisation can be expected to run at a fast pace in the pandemic and afterwards. The radicals employ a clever use of misinformation and conspiracy theories about the virus, its origins, and grievances of the people floating all over the internet. Media reports showing that 18 million of the 40 million social media posts are about COVID-19 only while others deal with the justification for their cause. As more people become jobless, less will be educated, and the marginalized population will suffer even more. At the same time, religious, cultural, and other gatherings, things that can foster an individual sense of purpose, strengthen social cohesion, and support community resilience against these risks will be occurring in a lesser amount. Subsequently, it can be easily assumed that this type of narratives will push people of all ages who can be lured into radical content. Terrorists have long been using the grievances of the people to their own advantage.

Budget Cut on PVE

On a different note, the existing pandemic may even drop terrorism from the top of the risk chart for many regimes. This might be an indication to the end of the 'post-9/11 era'. It may cause a long-overdue conclusion to the greatly armed counterterrorism strategies worldwide ever since 9/11. PVE budgets, especially the foreign ones are turning into relief funds to help COVID-19 patients. The worldwide economic crisis may cause a collapse in the financing for external development for the next few years. Many of the traditional activities that PVE interventions used to rely on, like interfaith dialogues, training and education, employment schemes, all

include in-person interactions which simply cannot take place in the current situation or for the days to come. Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and charities that directly support PVE are themselves cutting back as a result of budget pressure and needing to allocate some of their limited resources to protect themselves and their communities against the virus. This brings out another challenge, if donors withdraw support now because of a shift in their priorities, shortage of funding, or an inability to complete programmes, many NGOs and communities cannot trust these donors if they want to resume PVE again next year. Consequently, the pandemic has both short-term and long-term implications for Preventing Violent Extremism.

"New Normal" and Way Forward

Policymakers, law enforcement, and the tech sector are already working to address this challenge. Over a dozen technology retailers are actively engaged in combating COVID-19 disinformation, by offering analysis, data tracking, and information to the public about misinformation. But the need for educational responses remains. Like the global pandemic itself, the challenge of radicalisation to violent extremism is an issue of global significance. Cross-national and global engagements about the COVID-19 pandemic need to include the sharing of educational and parenting strategies to combat the consequences of youth isolation, expanded online engagement, and the various terrorist organizations' mobilization of the virus. In the short term, existing PVE projects could be adjusted to allow for more flexible programming such as online or over cell phones instead of in-person gatherings. Schools, sports clubs, and the private sector are developing ways to adjust to the "new normal" by keeping students, members, and employees engaged at home. Depending on the local implementing agents, unforeseen training and technology may be essential to aid the transition, and at the same time donors should be flexible as well. For the time being PVE project funds could be used for COVID-19 activities that will allow local NGOs to continue with their local PVE programming. This would also help ensure that communities don't feel abandoned during the crisis. This might include purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE) for the staff members. It may also include raising awareness on COVID-19 within local communities that are the development beneficiaries. Steps like this would demonstrate the commitment of international donors and their NGO implementing partners to the well-being of these communities and help retain the trust that has been built up over time and will be needed to re-launch PVE and other activities in the post

COVID-19 era. In the longer term, the current public health crisis and diminishing development budgets may help create a move that was long-overdue in funding in the peace, security, and development domains. Donors have often relied on different funding streams to support work on the different global agendas, whether it was related to PVE, conflict prevention, preventing gender-based violence, protecting human rights, youth/women empowerment, or peace and security. Many a times, instead of directing a comprehensive peace, conflict, and gender-sensitive calculation to determine the needs and priorities of the communities and guiding resources in a comprehensible and sustainable plan, there is fragmented analysis. This type of inconsistent and short-term funding can cause competition rather than cooperation. Instead of building the long-term capacity of these organizations, the usual approach favors project-based support for NGO's and INGO's to deliver on a single issue.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to protect the world from the upcoming surge of radicalisation, international development assistance should not be viewed as an approach that focuses on which priorities to fund; rather it should be about how to make improved use of the increasingly limited resources to address multiple issues. In many cases, it should be about assisting the domestic civil society organizations and NGOs to allow them to work on PVE related sectors and gradually become self-reliant. At the end of the day, this shift may be necessary to ensure that PVE continues to get the attention it merits in a post-COVID-19 world where the threat of extremist violence remains. The best protection from any form of virus is prevention. The same goes for the spread of hate and radicalization, which in turn can lead to violent extremism.

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