



COMMENTARY

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FROM COUNTER-
TERRORISM (CT) TO
COUNTER-VIOLENT
EXTREMISM (CVE)
AND BACK

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The Obama administration emphasized the need for a longer-term solution to the threat of terrorism; since traditional counterterrorism strategies (CT) have proven successful only in eliminating terrorists of today but not necessarily ensuring protection from the terrorists of tomorrow. As a result, the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in 2015 marked a shift from the traditional CT strategies by moving toward non-security tools.

This meant: firstly - addressing the root causes of extremism through community engagement and by building awareness; secondly – by countering extremist narratives and by encouraging civil society, schools, parents, and religious leaders to engage would create more resilient communities.

The new CVE approach paved the way for these non-security tools to be designed locally so they would fit and speak to local specifics of each place that faces some sort of violent extremism.

As an approach it was backed by the EU, UN and the OSCE who have been quite supportive when it comes to

developing counter-narratives, investing in expert research, training local security staff in recognizing radicalized individuals with the potential of becoming violent.

Moreover, they supported governments of smaller countries in coming up with their own CVE strategies, provided them with know-how skills in changing and tailoring their legal systems to address this issue, or by serving as an example of good and bad practices. Their practices often came packed as “knowledge transfer packages” who turned to be very beneficial for the smaller countries who often lacked expertise or capacities for developing on their own these operational processes.

The region of the Western Balkans even though has not been facing more imminent threats from violent extremism such as terrorist attacks still it gained attention for being a place that produces a considerable number of foreign fighters (FF) for the war in Syria and Iraq.

Furthermore, the potential the Balkans showed to have

for recruitments of FFs just proves that the region would benefit more with a CVE approach rather than with CT strategies.

As a result the Balkans did followed the trend of shifting towards CVE and these initiatives proved very successful as the number of foreign fighters from the Balkans joining the fronts in Syria and Iraq dropped dramatically.

However, after the US election and having Donald Trump elected as a President we could expect that Trump’s administration will try to shift back again to the traditional counterterrorism strategies since the previous Obama administration was harshly criticized during the campaign for being too soft or ineffective.

As a consequence, if CT over CVE strategy is to be encouraged that will inadvertently affect the policies of smaller ally countries such as those in the Balkans, which would mean that a lot of the support for local prevention initiatives will be lost while this support presumably will shift toward high state-level cooperation between security sectors. A more concerning fact is that the chances of making mistakes while implementing CT strat-

egies in the Balkans is much higher. This comes mainly due to overall lack of capacities and lack of institutional knowledge, while lack of accountability could just fuel those existing local grievances. The “El Masri” case should serve as a reminder when a small country tries to “impress” the partners what could possibly go wrong. Lastly, not forgetting the fragile social cohesion in the Balkans, a CT approach would mean stricter and more repressive measures to be taken which could negatively affect the di-

alogue-building initiatives and widen the gap between communities.

Under these circumstances, it is highly important for the Western Balkans to recognize the importance of continuing with the CVE strategies and to maintain good communication on this topic with local communities and with civil society regardless of the expected changes in Washington.

To further invest in regional cooperation between the security sectors when it comes to CVE.

To continue push for development of de-radicalization and reintegration programs for foreign fighters as it is known that a sizeable number of them have already returned home.

Finally, the CVE or the future prevention of violent extremism (PVE) could be successful only if it is inclusive where wide range of actors get engaged in action. CT would be exclusive only to the security apparatus of a state, hopefully making it clearer why this is less desirable for the Balkan context.

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