



PREPAREDNESS & Recruitment into Violence and Extremism

This paper is one in a series that examines how the act of helping civilians brace for violence can complement and benefit efforts in many fields related to peace and conflict.

Local capacity for self-preservation has powerful implications for protection, human rights, nonviolent resistance, development aid, disaster risk reduction, early warning and response, humanitarian aid, peacekeeping, and security sector reform, as well as efforts to manage conflict, reduce recruitment into violence, mitigate displacement, and prevent conflict returning.

The knock-on effects of civilians being better prepared for inexorable violence have scarcely been considered (even within the field of protection). Nothing else has such crosscutting potential as preparedness: It is the hidden common denominator of our work.

Aid service providers will often be the best situated to support local preparedness. But by getting better joined up with such providers, the practitioners in these other fields may see a very impactful multiplier upon their work on the ground.

1. There are a many tactics for countering abduction as well as the push or pull pressures that feed conscription into general violence. (See the companion paper in this series entitled “Conflict Management.”) There *also* exist more specific subsets of violence into which young people get recruited such as *child soldiering*, *syndicated gangs* (organized thuggery for illegal enterprises that can lead to killing on a scale of warfare), and *violent extremism*.
2. There are some disturbing similarities between these separate phenomena, as in their targeting of youthful recruits and “soldiering” that is sometimes both criminal and terroristic. That said, each are different challenges and are being earnestly addressed by different fields and funding pockets. This section contends that those efforts can be greatly aided by people *already* positioned to support early vigilance and action against recruitment.

Use scaffolding that already exists on the ground

3. A cornerstone of the Center’s preparedness support doctrine is that there already exists on the ground vast scaffolding with the proven potential to help bolster local vigilance and action in the face of a variety of threats. In terms of the threat posed by recruitment into violence and extremism, any groups attempting to counter it might be well-advised to graft their efforts onto the existing platforms and canopies described below.

Platform of aid service provision

4. There exists vast bulwark of aid service providers around the world. These providers obviously have a very strong vested interest in stability—and they are often well-situated to do something about it.
5. Aid service providers are very often the best platform available to help foster preparedness. They tend to have the best access, contacts, and trust on the ground and the best situational awareness, cultural nuance, and street savvy. Community mobilization is their bailiwick. They have the most defensible (i.e. apolitical) reasons for being in sensitive areas—like vulnerable villages where child soldiers are being recruited, impoverished slums where gang members are being pressed into “narco” armies, or wherever the disaffected live and might be sliding toward radical extremism.
6. The mandates of these providers have them *already* steeped in the daily milieu of grassroots life. This is particularly true of social welfare-oriented agencies that work with disrupted families and neighborhoods and are physically closer to where target groups (susceptible youth for example) spend their days.

Canopy of grassroots governance

7. The strength of any such provider is its *local counterparts*—its local staff and partners. When they are from the communities being served, they have their finger on the pulse of associational and interpersonal life. Life “takes place” in these less formal spaces down below governmental or institutional structures and often it is here where those most apt to shun officialdom and be exposed to recruitment live. Agency local counterparts might recognize by face exactly who the desperate and disaffected are. They might live among the families, cohorts, and communities. Most importantly, they know how *leaders down in the grassroots* watch and care for their own.
8. Such leaders often are *not* formally elected and their structures are neither statutorily constituted nor housed in brick and mortar buildings. (Indeed, a street address, public profile, or any overt form of organizing might endanger the participants.) They are led by individuals who by social standing, social contract, or social unit are motivated to aid their own people. They might be service providers who by profession intimately support the population. They might be respected community elders who by tradition look out for the people. They might be heads of clan or family who by blood protect their own.
9. They often will do all they can to keep their own people disengaged from violence. As Mary Anderson notes, “Normal leaders in systems that already exist can respond to and support their people in non-engagement, and they do. This kind of conflict prevention does not require special training, new leadership, or special funding. It occurs, repeatedly and around the world in different types of conflict.”¹
10. Despite the existence of such capacity and scaffolding on the ground, we outsiders still too often do just that: come in with special funding and empower new leadership with our own special training. We often assume we have “gone grassroots enough” by soliciting and supporting local civil society as a partner. But as research shows, we often conflate “civil society” with “NGOs.” It is understandable why international NGOs (INGOs) and local ones (LNGOs) are attracted to each other.
11. For INGOs, LNGOs are the most easily accessible, relatable, interoperable canopy of civil society. (The critique is that this does not mean they will be the best partner for countering recruitment into violence and extremism.) INGOs turn to LNGOs because they share a form of organizing often shown to be accountable and efficient. (Yet in the eyes of their people, the unelected leaders and unincorporated structures cited above might be equally or even more accountable and efficient.)
12. INGO personnel may turn to LNGO personnel who are more cosmopolitan, sharing the same spoken language and the same technical and organizational jargon. (Being worldly, however,

does not mean they are knowledgeable enough about the netherworld of recruitment into killing. Indeed, too often they are nonresidential host national staff who not deemed to be “local” by locals themselves.) At times, LNGOs are lured by INGO money to present themselves as gatekeepers of the community interest. They might even be the newly-established creations of INGO money.

13. The unelected leaders and unincorporated structures which this paper claims we are neglecting need to be held to the same scrutiny. At times these “normal leaders” Mary Anderson speaks of might not measure up as well as an LNGO that could be available.
14. But the critiques do suggest that our all-too-often default formula of “civil society = LNGOs” is too presumptuous. Liam Mahony finds that, “The professional NGO sector is just a small fraction of civil society, and some of the most important civil society capacities for self-mobilization and problem-solving are often found elsewhere.”² This certainly indicates the risk we take of overshooting the best local capacities.
15. Special initiatives to reduce recruitment are also at risk of overshooting. A recent USIP report on countering violent extremism in Afghanistan concluded that credible, trusted individuals and networks which could be engaged in countering such extremism frequently exist in isolated rural areas—but that neither the Afghan government nor civil society organizations regularly work with them.³
16. Fortunately, the local counterparts of aid service platforms *are an existing element of local civil society already known to us*—in some cases for years or decades. They in turn have *already* been dealing with “credible, trusted individuals and networks” that more formal incorporated LNGOs might not be close to. We do not need to solicit new leaders and reinvent capacities as often as we do.
17. None of this suggests that the obligations and expertise of those who work to counter recruitment into child soldiering, syndicated gangs, or violent extremism should just be shifted to aid service providers. Instead, there is great scope here for harmonization. There is a chance to share and embed anti-recruitment expertise with the providers. In turn, providers can help contextualize that global learning with extant local knowledge about avoiding conscription.
18. Providers can scale up this work at the micro level because their bulwark is often quite large. Yet they can also address the macro or “structural” concerns seen as drivers of recruitment in the course of their daily development work: those focusing on livelihood or on children and youth issues can logically fold anti-recruitment efforts into that work.
19. All-in-all, aid service providers are far too relevant to the matter of recruitment into violence and extremism for those working in related “silos” not to collaborate with them.

Refute, reduce, and replace drivers of recruitment.

20. Even before formal anti-recruitment programs are being initiated, local individuals and informal groupings will perhaps have already been concerned about and begun acting against the threat. What have they been trying? Have they undertaken effective steps that can be supported? Are there tactics they have not yet tried either due to a lack of awareness or resources?
21. The following is a sampling—by no means exhaustive or universally applicable—of what some of those measures might be. Broadly speaking (that is, any other taxonomy could work here too), people at the local level might try to refute, reduce, or replace drivers of recruitment. To “refute” a driver might be to debunk a propagandistic narrative. To “reduce” a driver might be to mitigate its power. And to “replace” a driver might be to substitute it with a safer, more constructive analogue. Here are some threats together with menus of possible responses:
22. **Safety:** Fear of violence, whether random or targeted, often pushes young people to join militias, gangs, or extremists for the presumed ‘security’ they will provide.

- a. *Refute*: Defuse rumors and counter deliberate disinformation and fear mongering with proofs. Discredit the promise that one will ultimately be safer by joining a militia, gang, or extremist group with evidence.
 - b. *Reduce & Replace*: If locals have more control over their own safety, then they reduce the power fear has to foster recruitment. Choose from among the great many weaponless options that exist for mitigating threats to safety (i.e. unarmed but tactically effective patrols, watch groups, warning systems, evacuation plans, intercommunal rapid-calming structures, etc.). These as well as steps locals may already have devised can be broached in modules (menus really) of options which they can consider and mobilize around.
23. ***Sustenance & services***: The collapse of life-critical sustenance and services often pushes people to align with violent groups who claim they can provide (or block!) these life-essentials. It is not for charitable reasons alone that violent groups (Hamas and Hezbollah, for example) often have welfare services: these can win loyalty and recruits as well.
- a. *Reduce and Replace*: Become more self-reliant. Minimize the need to rely on and collaborate with armed groups controlling such essentials. Preparedness support doctrine identifies many ways that locals devise or attain sustenance and services. This does not lead to full autarky or self-sufficiency but can strengthen their autonomy—and may enable them to stay nonaligned longer.
 - b. It has been found that one of the main characteristics of civilians who proved able to stay out of the violence surrounding them is “maintaining normal life as much as possible through continuing to provide *services* and promote *economic activity*.”⁴ [Emphasis added.] In violent environments, the tactics for attaining services and sustenance are of course far from “normal” or optimal—but they have mitigated the tremendous pressure many face. Tactics for greater self-reliance both fulfill life-critical needs *and* reduce the need for desperate people to join an armed group—perhaps keeping them out of harm’s way longer.
24. When recruiters tell the disaffected or desperate that they can provide safety, sustenance, or services they are essentially saying they offer a surrogate family or community. This metaphor applies not only to those physical needs but to psychological ones as well: family and community are integral to one’s very identity. (This again is a key reason why aid workers pose such an important platform in anti-recruitment efforts: their milieu is the family and community.)
25. ***Identity***: Recruitment into violence is extremely bound up with identity. Indeed, it often seems that a precondition of violence is that identities be molded for it. Ultimately, individuals, their cohorts, and their communities (whether physical, societal or spiritual) choose their identity. Another of the key characteristics of civilians who stayed out of the violence surrounding them is their capacity for “choosing an identity” incompatible with violence.⁵ This is not to imply these are simple unfettered “choices”. The forces pressuring people to take one path or another are tremendous. But as with every other danger discussed in this briefing series, facing the threat earlier and weighing it against a wider range of options can result in more viable “choices”.
26. Is recruitment into violence seen, consciously or not, as a way to restore self-respect or honor? As a path to manhood? Is it seen as a remedy to affronts, indignities, violations, injustices, and despair? As a way to defend the collective identity and dignity? At the same time, what traits are there in the identity of these same individuals, cohorts, and communities that reject violence?
- a. *Refute*: Recognize that at-risk youth might have a narrower view of who can speak to them with authenticity. Enlist welfare-oriented providers already in their lives as well as mentors and youth cohorts down in associational life. Engage former recruits or any others who will be seen as genuine and authoritative—having the street creds or battle scars to speak persuasively. Support their own ideas for helping youth recognize and raise up their self-worth.
 - b. Debunk any manipulative perpetuation of alleged historical shames or resentments. Use intercommunal and interdenominational approaches if possible to counter those legacies. Use elders and trusted figures to contradict hate-mongering trends.

- c. Use the same social media which recruiters might be using and other methods of outreach as well. Expose any lies youth are being fed by violent parties. When possible, reveal peaceful paths to the same objectives those parties might be promising.
- d. *Reduce & Replace*: √ Build dignity and symbolic defiance. As Carolyn Nordstrom finds, “Identity is asserted in creative resistance.”⁶ In countless conflicts across cultures and time, a certain nonviolent power has been seen time and again: dignity is defiance. Normalcy is boldness. Rebuilding is disobedience. Celebration is revenge. Help locals fight with every positive instrument of identity to affirm themselves. Their arsenal is endless—beauty, hygiene, routine, humor, music, intellect, art, sport, work, worship, parenting, neighborliness, succor to others, folklore, heroes, iconic symbols, rites of passage, and much, much more. Slim and Bonwick write that, “A person’s ability to maintain a strong sense of personal identity and self-respect can hold them through extreme physical suffering.”⁷ Yet it can *also* help them resist the call to inflict suffering on others. A positive identity does more than help people fight apathy and despair; it can help prevent their fall into fear, hate, and the arms of violent actors.
- e. √ Build youth cohort structures in service to family and community. Peer respect as well as social bonds and networks are important to youth across all cultures. This social architecture is often a key feature of recruitment into violence. It stands to reason that it can *also* be a bulwark against recruitment. The challenge is to strengthen or build peer structures that win stature via positive solutions: courier teams, food delivery brigades, reconstruction units, search and rescue squads, soup kitchen crews, scavenging gangs, information-gathering cells, and counter-propaganda artists, as well as porters, spotters, escorts, scouts and more.

These missions and structures can be “analogues” for whatever is drawing youth to violent groups. They can provide a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood. They can hold up a moral code rooted somewhere in the youths’ core identity (perhaps in the craving to act on purpose and loyalty). They can provide opportunities to serve and protect; to win peer and social respect. Recognition can be displayed through initiations, uniforms, badges, tattoos, slogans, salutes, salutations, public ceremonial appreciation and much more. It can also be rewarded monetarily if micro grants for service are part of the initiative.

- f. √ Build and show governance that gives youth hope. Recruitment into violence very often finds fertile ground where governments are occupiers or are violent, corrupt, weak, or absent. In such settings parallel governance sometimes arises. The existing government might (1) try to crush it, (2) tolerate it for a time, (3) co-opt it, or (4) accommodate, incorporate, or confederate with it. As depicted here, demonstrating governance is *not* about replacing an existing governmental jurisdiction per se. It is about showing how local authority figures can serve with legitimacy and capacity.

Past examples of shadow governance typically have had aims that are basic in scope and temporary in duration. Those basics usually were to provide for civil defense as well as life-critical sustenance and services. They lasted until occupation or conflict ended. Yet the lessons learnt and confidence built by such experiences have always had the potential to pave the way for a better future order—and that is the value in countering recruitment into violence: proving to youth that something better may lie around the corner if they believe in it and support it.

1. ***Religious conviction.*** A given interpretation of religious faith sometimes will push young people toward soldiering or even violent extremism.
 - a. *Refute*: Where feasible, enlist credible religious figures to dispute a violent interpretation of religious doctrine. These figures might be able to prove that a given interpretation has been taken out of context or is not supported by most current religious scholars—or is actually a violation of the faith.
 - b. *Replace*: Credible religious figures might show alternate or opposite interpretations of the faith. They might encourage nonviolent actions which protect and advance the faith. They might point to harmonious coexistence between differing faiths as providing alternate ways of thinking and living. With the help of micro-granting they might offer classes. (The celebrated story of Malala Yousafzai might never have occurred had it not been for the tireless efforts of her father to obtain funding for schools that were free of fundamentalist dogma.)

2. ***Homage to heroes and martyrs.*** Feelings of fidelity toward heroes or martyrs who sacrificed themselves “for the faith” sometimes will move young people toward violent extremism. And, to reiterate the role that social bonds often play in recruitment, those feelings are more intense when the one who fell, whether on the field or under torture in jail, was related by blood or friendship.
 - a. *Refute & Replace:* Highly trusted figures might be able to challenge not the “feeling of fidelity” (because the sacrifice was real, as are the feelings) but rather the response to that feeling. Is “emulating” that hero or “avenging” that martyr the best solution? What else have heroes done? How else can vengeance be exacted? Will the community really view your own act of martyrdom with pride? Will the group trying to recruit you really take care of your family after your martyrdom? What do past events actually reveal? Might you be able to do more to advance your faith, your family and your community by taking other advice from your holy texts?

3. ***Charismatic leader.*** Some teacher-recruiters can, by virtue of their speaking ability, personality, and grasp of the psyche of their target group, move young people toward violence. They might be very adept at forming mentor-to-disciple bonds.
 - a. *Refute & Replace:* Charismatic leaders who lure youth into violence have skills sets which they put to unethical use. Anyone who would counter what these perceptive and manipulative individuals say will need some of those same skills. In the parallel world of counterinsurgency, “the qualities required of the real jungle fighter are not those of the elephant but rather of the poacher, gangster, and cat-burglar.”⁸ And in this case it might take a reformed gang member, reintegrated child soldier, or repentant extremist to outmatch teacher-recruiters of the same. It might take a former recruit to beat a recruiter. A very real part of authenticity, in the eyes of youth on the edge of being recruited, is hearing from a charismatic person who has already defied what “bankrupt authority” is telling them. Officials from government or activists from polite civil society might not have these credentials (or worse, might be rejected precisely due to where they come from).

4. ***Adventure.*** Boredom, idleness, and a longing for adventure can sometimes be part of the reason that youth are successfully recruited into violence.
 - a. *Refute:* The narrative of thrills and glory at the end of a gun barrel is found in every violent venture. But it can be debunked in concrete ways. “Come and tell” testimonials from defectors can describe long marches, periods of tedium, empty stomachs, poor shelter, murder of noncombatants, nightmares, and inequity or even brutality within “the band of brothers”. Victims can graphically describe brutality. “Go and see” visits (along with other humanitarian intelligence) can expose the atrocities behind the adventure and reveal the scorn society has for those responsible.
 - b. *Reduce & Replace:* Well-established programs for idle at-risk youth have long included safe spaces for their work, schooling and recreation and for downtime mentoring and monitoring. To that can be added efforts to build youth cohort structures in service to family and community mentioned, as noted above. As with all of these strategies, a key element of success is to act *early*—and that is a prime advantage of the Center’s preparedness support doctrine.

5. ***Sexual opportunity.*** The chance for sex or “marriage” is sometimes part of the reason that boys and men are recruited into violence. Promises of easy rape, sex slaves, forced wives, or even virgins in heaven are common in some conflicts. Preparedness support focused on near-term threats cannot address deeper cultural or economic factors that may frustrate males for whom dating or dowry or independent home life is out of reach. But the process of preparing does create opportunity to consult with and assess alongside locals. Focused consultation with boys, girls, men, women, and local influentials might reveal locally plausible ways of countering “sexual opportunity” as a driver of recruitment.
 - a. *Refute:* Can former recruits discredit the idea that fighters win distinction and money that will someday make them more marriageable? Can fathers and mothers help repudiate the misogynistic messages often undergirding the violent use of females? Can religious figures help debunk allegedly faith-based justifications espoused for trafficking females to fighters?

- b. *Reduce*: Might efforts be made on the “supply side” to diminish this practice? The smaller the pool of sex slaves, the less that armed groups have to offer for recruitment and retention. Preparedness support doctrine provides innumerable tactics for keeping girls and women safer from abduction.
 - c. *Replace*: Does forced sexual recruitment sometimes fill a void left by traditional practices for arranging marriage that are being outstripped by modernity or by economic and demographic forces working against livelihood, inheritance of workable land, etc., and leading to larger numbers of transient single males? Would consultation with locals at least reveal stopgap measures to address these pressures and displace recruitment somewhat? Could service to family and community such as described above be appropriately romanticized in ways that make the young ‘heroes’ more socially desirable?
6. ***Financial gain***. The promise of financial or material gain is at times part of the reason that youth are successfully recruited into violence. Beyond easy “profiteering,” the allure of financial gain can often be described in terms of desire for social status or the need to meet the costs of social obligations (for marriage and family).
- a. *Refute*: How often does the path of violence actually result in lasting financial gain? How often does it help win social status or meet social obligations? Again, the best people to debunk that dream are those who have actually lived through it and found it to be fraudulent. Find them and put them on this task.
 - b. *Replace*: It was suggested above that youth might be persuaded to participate in cohort structures serving the family and community. Such endeavors would have more appeal if sweetened with money. The Center’s preparedness support doctrine suggests that funneling micro-grants into these efforts could help them outcompete the recruiters’ promises of financial gain.
7. Preparedness support can use existing platforms and capacities to help undercut the drivers of recruitment into violence in locally doable ways.

Endnotes

¹ Mary B. Anderson and Marshall Wallace, *Opting Out of War: Strategies to Prevent Violent Conflict*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, November 2013; p. 12 (of the excerpted version).

² Liam Mahony, *Non-Military Strategies for Civilian Protection in the DRC*, Fieldview Solutions, March, 2013; p. 20.

³ Reza Fazli, Casey Johnson, and Peyton Cooke, "Understanding and Countering Violent Extremism in Afghanistan," *USIP Special Report*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, September 2015; p. 15.

⁴ Found at: <http://cdacollaborative.org/publication/opting-out-of-war-strategies-to-prevent-violent-conflict/>

⁵ Found at: <http://cdacollaborative.org/publication/opting-out-of-war-strategies-to-prevent-violent-conflict/>

⁶ Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1997; p. 14.

⁷ Hugo Slim and Andrew Bonwick, *Protection: An ALNAP Guide for Humanitarian Agencies*, Overseas Development Institute, London, August 2005; p. 31.

⁸ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005; p. 69.