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US Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism Must Prioritize Women

By Michelle Barsa

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“We announce our allegiance to the Caliph.”

With those words, Abubakar Shekau—the leader of Boko Haram—reportedly acknowledged ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and made official a connection that many have observed growing during the last year between Boko Haram and the Islamic State.

Boko Haram and the Islamic State are now allied in the endeavor to terrorize communities daily, stripping civilians of their dignity and defying the self-determination of nations. The expanding threat has been met by bellicose rhetoric of the international community, which has, thus far, failed to stop them.

Recently, domestic and international stakeholders gathered at the White House to discuss concrete steps for disrupting radicalism at home and abroad. The focus, according to one senior administration official, was to place “communities...in the driver’s seat.”

Recognizing that military force alone can’t thwart extremist ideologies or stabilize nations, the U.S. government is sensibly promoting a bottom-up approach. Communities are often the first to recognize the signs of radicalization and address them.

This approach cannot succeed without women. Though often portrayed solely as victims of extremist activity, women play varied roles inside and outside terrorist organizations. Some are members of active support networks for Boko Haram and the Islamic State – fighters, recruiters, messengers, and spies. Earlier this month, two female suicide bombers, reportedly from Boko Haram, blasted a market in northern Nigeria. But many more are at the forefront of moderating extremist influence in their families and communities. It’s these women that the U.S. must engage if it wants to effectively address this threat.

The Obama administration has pledged to integrate

women in its efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). But the devil is in the details. This rhetorical commitment must be accompanied by dedicated funding, targeted technical assistance to ensure women can access the money, and accountability mechanisms.

The first area glaringly in need of additional dedicated funding is the recruitment, retention, and strategic integration of women in national security forces, particularly the police.

Terrorist groups excel at exploiting gender dynamics: they track the location of female security personnel and use that information to their strategic advantage by dressing as women to cross checkpoints, knowing they won't be searched; they prey on the vulnerability of young girls and deploy them as suicide bombers; they impose harsh restrictions on women's freedoms aware of how this tears at the social fabric of communities.

In 2012, there were scores of recorded instances in Afghanistan of male suicide bombers gaining access to restricted areas by dressing as women. There were no female body searchers to stop them, with women only comprising one percent of the Afghan National Police and 0.3 percent of the Afghan National Army. The FY 2015 congressional spending bill signed into law last December included \$25 million to bolster the ranks of women in the Afghan military and police. This wasn't a nod to women's empowerment; it was a strategic bid to increase stability in a country still facing major attacks by insurgents. This money is an important step, but it can't stop with Afghanistan. It requires a wholesale review and revision of U.S. security assistance to ensure women's inclusion is prioritized throughout.

The second place where we should focus assistance: women in civil society. In his address during the White House summit, Secretary John Kerry noted that, "We have to amplify responsible local voices," in order to "build firewalls against ignorance and hate."

In many countries, women in civil society are these firewalls. Pakistani activist Mossarat Qadeem has spent the last decade talking radicalized young men out of committing suicide attacks. Even after

receiving multiple death threats from the Taliban, she continues to rehabilitate would-be jihadis and works with legislators, religious leaders, schools, and other stakeholders to tackle the problem of violent extremism from multiple fronts.

Qadeem is one woman, but she represents the hundreds, if not thousands, who are courageously doing work just like this in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, and elsewhere. With access to resources, these homegrown initiatives can multiply their already impressive impact.

The U.S. has established a Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund to fortify local communities against infiltration by violent extremists. Now it must ensure that this fund is not encumbered by the usual burdensome government aid agency application processes that local civil society organizations too often find difficult, if not impossible, to navigate. To help make some of that navigation more manageable for civil society leaders unfamiliar with American protocol, the State Department should fund training for technical skills in program design and grant reporting, for instance.

The administration's approach of empowering local communities in the fight against extremism is laudable. The next step, as the U.S. and partner nations develop CVE action plans that they'll present at the UN General Assembly in September, is to ensure that women in national security forces and civil society are at the forefront.

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