

Chapter 7

At the Crossroads: Rethinking the Role of Education in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

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This chapter looks at the issue of violent extremists and terrorists targeting the education sector, and subsequently recommends steps that the education sector can take to prevent and counter violent extremism (PCVE) amongst students. Educational institutions in general and students in particular have been targeted by violent extremists and terrorists. Paradoxically, they have sought to physically attack and destroy institutions of learning, while at times, they have actively sought to radicalize and subsequently recruit students to join their cause. Short case studies of attacks on educational institutions in different parts of the world, as well as instances of young people being radicalized in schools and universities, are presented and evaluated. Emphasis is then put on revisiting the idea of education and envisioning a greater role for it to play in PCVE among students. A case is presented for the education sector to take the lead in PCVE among the youth; given education's strategic advantages in terms of coverage in reaching the youth, duration of contact with the youth, and access into the cognitive and emotional makeup of the youth. A "whole-of-education" approach is proposed, whereby the educational institutes will identify specific areas of the students' cognitive and emotional spheres in which to build PCVE related "firewalls" in a systematic and comprehensive manner. In this proposed PCVE approach, teachers will take a redesigned role that would focus more on mentoring and guiding, preparing a "safe space" to initiate discussions, and building trust and credibility to maximize their ability to impart the contents to the students. Additionally, given the complexities involved in reaching out to the youth on the subject of PCVE, the role of the teachers would be augmented by leveraging on the skill-set, experience, appeal, and support of "select" individuals such as rehabilitated terrorists, former victims of terrorism, social media influencers, and role models.

Keywords: counterterrorism, preventing and countering violent extremism, PCVE, education, children, terrorist attacks, radicalization, schools

Education is powerful.

This has been recognized not only by governments and societies but also extremist and violent organizations. Given this, the education sector has always been the “battleground” for political, religious, and ideological movements, including violent extremist and terrorist groups, to impose their views and values on society. Such groups infiltrate the education sector to manipulate and recruit based on core human identities such as ethnicity, religion, race, and gender. They actively propagate rigid and extreme interpretations of religion and culture to help fashion an intolerant and violent environment for young and impressionable target audiences.¹ Hence, educational institutes are seen as a potential target that offers under one roof thousands of potential recruits for indoctrination and recruitment into violent extremism and terrorism.

Governments and authorities are beginning to recognize this vulnerability in educational institutes and are attempting to “plug the holes” and prevent such institutions from becoming *the* breeding grounds of violent extremism. Whilst this is undoubtedly necessary, the authorities would be missing a golden opportunity should they not realise that not only are educational institutions vulnerable to violent extremism but ironically, given the right support, they have the potential of becoming citadels for preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) among the youth. Simply put, schools and universities can move from being possible breeding grounds for potential sympathisers and recruits to instead active PCVE. This chapter will argue that the best defense against extremist ideologies taking over institutions of learning is to develop an education system that will prepare and equip the students to debate and defeat extremist thoughts.

Scope, Parameters and Definitions

This chapter will firstly consider the state of vulnerability of students in educational institutes towards violent extremism by looking at case studies, as well as the literature on the subject.

Secondly, the possible interventions, via education, in preventing and countering the trajectory into terrorism will be discussed. The institutions of learning that are covered in this chapter include public schools and universities, but will exclude religious or faith-based educational institutions.

I am mindful of the witty observations of Schmid and Jongman that “authors have spilled almost as much ink [while trying to define the concept of terrorism] as the actors of terrorism have spilled blood,”² and would therefore borrow Resolution 49/60 which the UN adopted during the General Assembly. It defines terrorism as “criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes.”³

Shifting from defining “terrorism” to “violent extremism,” like the proverbial moving from the “frying pan into the fire,” is wrought with challenges. The Federal Bureau of Investigations defines violent extremism as “encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social or economic goals.”⁴ The United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism observed that “violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon,” admitting that it was “without clear definition” while acknowledging that it “encompasses a wider category of manifestations” when compared to terrorism.⁵ Finally, in the context of this chapter, radicalization refers to the pathway or process that mobilizes a (young) person to support and ultimately engage in acts of political violence.

Education as a Target

The targeting of education in general, and institutions of learning in particular, by violent extremists is not a new phenomenon. Political entrepreneurs and agitators have always viewed educational institutions as recruiting grounds, but also as a potential threat to their ideologies. The persecution of Arab and Jewish scholars in Spain during the 15th century, the suppression of Jewish and socialist intellectuals by the Nazis in Germany, and the mass targeted killings of scholars by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia are but a few examples in history.⁶

In 2010, UNESCO published a detailed study that looked at political and military violence against the whole spectrum of the education system worldwide.⁷ The report highlights that possible motives for such attacks include:

- targeting what was perceived to be symbols of the imposition of an alien
- curriculum, value, culture, philosophy, or ethnic identity;
- preventing the education of girls;
- preventing any form of education;
- targeting what was seen to be symbols of government power and one of the most visible symbols of state authority;
- undermining the confidence in government authority over a particular area;
- extracting revenge for civilian killings;
- undermining the functioning of the education system;
- abduction of children and at times adults, with the intent of recruiting them to provide forced labour, sexual services and/or logistical support;
- abductions for ransom;
- sexual violence by members of armed groups, soldiers or security forces as a tactic of war or out of disrespect for gender rights;
- attacking students and academics with the intent to silence political opposition or prevent the voicing of alternative views;
- attacking students and academics to specifically silence human rights campaigns;
- attacking academics to limit research on sensitive topics; and
- destruction of education institutions by invading forces as a tactic of defeating the enemy and destroying education buildings in revenge.⁸

Additional motivations identified in the UNESCO study include media coverage that can be generated for the violent extremist groups as a result of an attack on an institution of learning as well as the ease of causing extensive damage to what are usually only lightly defended or totally unprotected targets affiliated with the government.⁹

Research indicates that there has been a rise in attacks on education in recent years. In 2018, the Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) published a study¹⁰ that was built on two previous studies published by UNESCO in 2007 and 2010 as well as a third study published by the GCPEA in 2014. The authors of the studies compared global patterns of attacks on education during the 2013-2017 period to those perpetrated earlier, and noted that there appears to be an increase in attacks worldwide. Here are some examples:

Past Attacks on Educational Institutions

Beslan School (Russia)

On 1 September 2004, armed Chechen rebels took approximately 1,200 children and adults hostage at School Number One in Beslan, North Ossetia, Russia. The hostage takers were

members of the Chechen group called the Riyad as-Saliheen Martyrs' Brigade, which had been founded and led by Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev. The hostage takers demanded the recognition of Chechnya's independence from Russia and the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from the region.¹¹ On 3 September 2004, the Russian security forces stormed the building with tanks, incendiary rockets and other heavy weapons.¹² At the end of the siege, 334 people, 186 of them children, were killed.¹³

Garissa University College (Kenya)

On 2 April 2015, Al-Shabaab militants attacked the university in Garissa, Kenya, taking 700 undergraduates as hostages. In the end, they killed 148 people (142 of them students) and injured another 79.¹⁴ Two days after the attack, Al-Shabaab issued a statement threatening Kenyan citizens with "another bloodbath" saying that they would "stop at nothing to avenge the death of (their) Muslim brothers" until and unless the Kenyan government "cease its operations" - likely referring to the Kenyan army's participation in the African Union's mission in Somalia against the group. They also warned the Kenyan public that they would be targeting "schools, universities, workplaces and even homes" for "condoning your government's oppressive policies by failing to speak out against them" and for "reinforcing their policies by electing them."¹⁵ It is also significant to note that as a consequence of the attack, 96 out of a total of 150 primary and secondary schools were closed in Garissa county due to "security fears" among both students and teachers.¹⁶ The psychological fear that such an attack had caused was the cause of a further tragedy. On 25 March 2016, two undergraduates fighting at Kenyatta University led hundreds of panicking students - thinking it was another terrorist attack - to cause a stampede, leaving 38 students injured.

Army Public School (Pakistan)

On 16 December 2014, fighters linked to the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) attacked the Army Public School in Peshawar, North western Pakistan. Armed with automatic weapons and grenades and wearing explosive belts, they entered the school by scaling a wall and then proceeded to go from one classroom to the next, opening fire indiscriminately on the school children. In total, the fighters killed 149 individuals of which 132 were students, with ages ranging from eight to 18.¹⁷ A military spokesperson highlighted the fact that all terrorists wore suicide vests, were heavily armed, made no demands, and were also stocked with rations indicated that they did not come to take any hostages.¹⁸ According to retired general and security analyst Talat Masood, the militants were very much aware that they did not have the capacity to "strike at the heart of the military" and therefore chose to go after soft targets, such as the school where most children were from military families.¹⁹ This was calculated to cause a great psychological impact. Justifying the attack, the TTP spokesman Muhammad Omar Khorasani was reported to have said, "we targeted the school because the army targets our families. We want them to feel our pain."²⁰ The Peshawar school attack was called the "massacre of the innocents" and the incident was seen as "Pakistan's 9/11 moment."²¹

The Chibok Schoolgirls (Nigeria)

On 14 April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students who had gone to take exams from a government secondary school for girls in the town of Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria.²² During the assault, 57 girls managed to jump and escape from the trucks in which they were being driven away. The remaining 219 girls were abducted by the kidnappers. Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau reportedly said that all the girls that had been taken had converted to

Islam and had been “married off.”²³ As of March 2020, out of the 276 girls who were kidnapped, 103 girls were released, reportedly in exchange for ransom money and prisoners and four girls were said to have escaped later on their own. There remain another 112 girls unaccounted for.²⁴ One of the girls who had escaped reported that during the early stages of the kidnapping, the militants had told the girls, “you’re only coming to school for prostitution. *Boko* (Western education) is *haram* (forbidden) so what are you doing in school?”²⁵ The Chibok kidnappings raised international awareness about the atrocities of Boko Haram in Nigeria but did little to stem the flow of more kidnappings as witnessed by the abduction of the 300 elementary school children in Damasak²⁶ and the kidnapping of the 110 boarding school girls²⁷ in Dapchi.²⁸ In April 2018, UNICEF highlighted that since 2013, Boko Haram had kidnapped more than 1,000 children in Nigeria. The UN agency appealed for an end to attacks on schools in Nigeria and said that young girls in particular were especially vulnerable to attacks by the militant group and had been “consistently targeted and exposed to brutal violence in their schools.” UNICEF Nigeria went on to stress that the “repeated attacks against children in schools (were) unconscionable.” UNICEF reiterated that “children have the right to education and protection, and the classroom must be a place where they are safe from harm.”²⁹

Bacha Khan University (Pakistan)

On 20 January 2016, four gunmen opened fire at the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda, Pakistan, killing 21 people. The four terrorists scaled the walls of the university and then opened fire on students and teachers. A few days before the attack, the authorities had closed some schools in Peshawar as they had reason to believe that an attack was imminent.³⁰ Charsadda is less than 40 kilometres away from Peshawar, where on 16 December 2014, fighters linked with the TTP attacked the Army Public School.³¹ In a follow-up video, Umar Mansoor, a Pakistani Taliban spokesman, vowed to target schools throughout Pakistan. He elaborated that his fighters had attacked the university “because this is the place where lawyers are made, this is the place that produces military officers, this is the place that produces members of the parliament, all of whom challenge Allah’s sovereignty.”³² He went to say that instead of targeting the armed “enemy” soldiers, his group would now change their focus and “target the nurseries that produce such people” and warned that, together with his fighters, “we will continue to attack schools, colleges and universities across Pakistan as these are the foundations that produce apostates. We will target and demolish the foundations.”³³

Susceptibility of the Youth to Radicalization

Young people between the ages of 15 and 25 are vulnerable³⁴ to following extremist ideologies as they are at a developmental age where they are searching to discover their own identities, bolster their self-confidence, and find meaning in their lives. This age group is also quite action-orientated and young people are oftentimes characterized as being more prone to taking greater risks.³⁵ Their minds are also more susceptible to external influences than those who are more experienced, and therefore they have fewer built-in “safe-guards” against extremism. Hence, for youth, the limited ability to compare belief systems and the lack of capacity of many to view things other than black or white, translates to the premise that a “radical ideology does not seem radical at all.”³⁶ This susceptibility is well recognized by violent extremists and, consequently, this vulnerability is very much exploited.

Terrorist Recruits Getting Younger?

Young people serve as a vital source of support for terrorist groups.³⁷ In Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE) have actively recruited children into their ranks. Tamil children were said to have been targeted for recruitment from age 11. The LTTE was reported to “routinely visit Tamil homes to inform parents that they must provide a child for the movement.”³⁸ Parents were bullied and threatened to comply with the LTTE’s request of forced conscription of their children.³⁹ Children were at the onset recruited into the LTTE’s “Baby Brigade” but later integrated into other units. For example, the elite “Leopard Brigade” was said to have been formed from children taken from LTTE-run orphanages; it allegedly became one of LTTE’s fiercest fighting units. In 1991, a major LTTE military operation against the Elephant Pass military complex was said to have used waves of children drawn from the “Baby Brigade.” The operation resulted in an estimated 550 deaths of LTTE members, the majority of them being children. There were also reports that 40 to 60 percent of the LTTE soldiers killed during the conflict in the 1990’s were children under the age of eighteen.⁴⁰ Children were also allegedly used for “massed frontal attacks” in major battles. Those between the ages of twelve and fourteen were used to massacre women and children in remote rural villages and some as young as ten years of age were even used as assassins.⁴¹

In Spain, the *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA - Basque Homeland and Freedom) emerged in 1959 as a student resistance movement opposed to General Franco’s military dictatorship. The group increased its youth members (under the age of 20) from 9 per cent in the 1970s to approximately 60 per cent of the organisation by 2005.⁴² Its push to seek out new members from a younger demographic (which was a marked change from the past when the ETA was very selective in its recruitment) has ensured its continuity.⁴³ In fact, the ETA’s ability to revitalize itself as a whole has been largely due to its own youth organisations, Jarrai (followed by Haika and Segi).⁴⁴ The ETA survived until 2018 but had declared a ceasefire in 2010.

In India, Samuel highlighted the case of the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, in which ten coordinated assaults left 165 civilians and security personnel dead. He pointed out that one of the common threads that bound the attackers together was their relatively young age. Besides the eldest terrorist, who was 28 years old, the average age of the remaining nine terrorists was only 23 with the leader, Ismail Khan, being 25 years old.⁴⁵

In the Philippines, the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) has been fighting for an independent Islamic state for the country’s Muslim minority.⁴⁶ The founder of the ASG, Abdurajak Janjalani, was in his early 20’s when he was radicalized and only 26 when he formed the ASG. His replacement was his younger brother Khadaffy Janjalani, who led ASG when he was only 22. In 2009, the ASG was led by Yasser Igasan who was only 21 years old when he joined the movement.⁴⁷ Besides the ASG, the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), which originated from a cell of militant students and teachers at a religious school in Luzon, was founded by Ahmad Santos who had been indoctrinated when he was only 21 years old. The RSM was infamous for its role in carrying out the Superferry 14 bombing on 27 February 2004, which led to the death of 116 people and is to date considered the worst maritime terrorist attack. The alleged perpetrator of the act was Redento Cain Delloso, who was in his mid-20s.⁴⁸

In Iraq, Al-Qaeda had also featured young people prominently. The group had developed videos targeting youth for recruitment. The videos featured the group discussing their strategy for training children to become suicide bombers and showcased young boys making “statements promoting slaughter and declaring their allegiance to al-Qaeda.” Videos were released containing scenes where “children would interrogate and execute victims, plant improvised explosive devices [IEDs], and conduct sniper attacks against security forces.”⁴⁹ Also in Iraq, insurgent groups were alleged to have paid between US \$50 and US \$100 to teenagers for planting IEDs, and shooting a mortar or firing a machine gun at coalition troops.⁵⁰ The number of children involved in terrorism in Iraq was clearly seen when during the first 12

months of the US invasion in Iraq, the US forces had detained more than 100 juveniles, a number which increased to 600 juveniles as of 2008.⁵¹

Radicalization in Schools

History has shown us that school children have oftentimes participated in various organizations that promote or carry out acts of violence. Their roles have varied from offering logistical support, serving as “mules” or “lookouts”, to fundraising and actual participation in attacks.

In Indonesia, violent extremists are deliberately targeting and recruiting students from high schools.⁵² This is not surprising, as 23 per cent of the entire population of Indonesia are in high school, making this a key location for recruitment for violent extremists.

From this author’s research in Southeast Asia, schools have oftentimes been the “go-to” source for terrorists to actively radicalise and recruit.⁵³ For instance, hundreds of Indonesians, Malaysians and Filipinos, many of them students, volunteered as mujahideen warriors to fight in Afghanistan and subsequently returned radicalized.⁵⁴ B. Singh, a university professor from Singapore, observed a growing trend of students being radicalized in Indonesia.⁵⁵ In light of this, Indonesia’s Vice-President Ma’ruf Amin was tasked by President Joko Widodo to lead a government campaign to counter this phenomenon. Vice-President Amin highlighted that extremist ideologies had even reached preschool play groups, observing that “the challenge (was) getting bigger because radicalism has a growing influence on society, not just among civil servants but also students. We even received reports that it has already found its way to the PAUD (preschool play groups).”⁵⁶ Benny Mamoto, a retired Indonesia Police General, confirmed this, saying that, “they [radical groups] entered into all layers of society, including education.”⁵⁷ Indonesian violent extremists gained access into schools by assigning their members to join student or youth organizations and subsequently acting as mentors to youths and undergraduates with the purpose of recruiting them in the future.⁵⁸

In the Philippines, this phenomenon of recruiting youth from institutions of learning is not new either and has been going on since the 1980s. According to Umug, a former terrorist in the Philippines, communist-based insurgents exploited clubs in schools to target and radicalize Filipino youth, specifically those around 17 or 18 years of age. This method of exploiting the education system was subsequently adapted and fine-tuned by other Muslim-based extremist groups. The ASG, for example, had a policy of selecting only the “brightest and toughest students who were willing to fight for their religious cause.”⁵⁹ Other Muslim groups established religious schools and then provided financial scholarships, making it extremely attractive for students to study in such institutions. Reportedly, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, the brother-in-law of Osama bin Laden, had established a school in the Southern Philippines with the express intention of recruiting young people for jihad. The youths who began studying in these religious schools did so with hopes of receiving an education to become qualified religious teachers, but were, unfortunately, deceived and subsequently indoctrinated.⁶⁰

In 2007, the challenge of youth involvement in terrorism was highlighted by Jonathan Evans, MI5 director, when he stated that “extremists were methodically and intentionally targeting young people and children in the UK,” and that groups like Al-Qaeda were recruiting children as young as 15 to wage “a deliberate campaign of terror” in the UK. He further warned that extremists and terrorists were “radicalizing, indoctrinating and grooming young, vulnerable people to carry out acts of terrorism” and that urgent action was needed on the part of the authorities “to protect its children from exploitation by violent extremists.”⁶¹ In the same vein, in March 2009, the UK Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) highlighted that two-hundred schoolchildren in Britain (some as young as 13 had been reported as having been “groomed by radicalizers” and hence had become susceptible to violent extremism.⁶² In light of this, schools in the UK have been mandated by law (Section 26 of the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act) and are required to have “due regard to the need to prevent people

from being drawn into terrorism.” This controversial duty is known as the “Prevent Duty.” The responsibilities for schools include training teachers and staff to be able to identify and recognize children who might be vulnerable to radicalization, and promote fundamental British values that would enable the students to challenge the narrative of violent extremists or terrorists. Furthermore, teachers and staff are required to assess the risk of the students being drawn into terrorism, and build resilience in students by providing them safe-spaces to discuss controversial subjects, while educating them on how they could influence and participate in decision-making.⁶³

Radicalization in Universities

In the case of universities, Samuel in his research on undergraduate radicalization in Southeast Asia highlighted that “terrorists and extremists have been looking at institutions of higher learning and their students as a source of recruitment and support.” In the eyes of terrorist leaders, such undergraduate students are seen “as a strategic target audience and that by recruiting them, the terrorist network would be able to build up a support base amongst a group that might one day become influencers themselves in the wider community and future leaders.”⁶⁴

In a European study, Peter Neumann observes that universities are “places of vulnerability” due to the fact that undergraduates are young, “often away from home for the first time, feeling quite lost and often experiencing a sort of crisis of identity.” According to him, this makes it easy for extremist groups to pick them up and to say to them: “Come along to our meeting, we are like you.”⁶⁵

This was also reiterated by Kumar Ramakrishna (Nanyang University, Singapore) who notes that the majority of undergraduates who are young are “still maturing both emotionally and intellectually” making them “susceptible to idealistic appeals from charismatic ideologues who seem to have clear-cut answers for the confusion that these undergraduates might feel about the world around them.”⁶⁶ The reach and significance that violent extremists and terrorists can have in a university can clearly be seen in Afghanistan where groups like the Taliban (meaning “students”) take full advantage of their access to universities to exploit the mobilizing power of student protests to advance their vested interests. They do this by developing a patron-client relationship with undergraduates to provide assistance and financial support to undergraduate associations as well as opportunities after graduation from university. In return, some university undergraduates promise to become mouthpieces of violent extremists for advocating and disseminating their rhetoric, propaganda, and ideology within the university environment.⁶⁷

Universities are at times also used as a propaganda arena by foreign students and lecturers from countries in conflict zones. In such instances, lecture sessions are often “hijacked” to “preach” and explain the injustices and atrocities taking place at home and abroad. Over a certain period of time, such lectures can shape, mould and convince undergraduate students into believing that terrorism as “propaganda of the deed” is the only route available for addressing grievances.⁶⁸

Radicalization Pathways of Youth

Better understanding of how and why young people are radicalized and join violent extremist groups is essential in developing strategies on how to prevent and counter their radicalization into violent extremism.⁶⁹ Young people join violent extremist and terrorist groups for various reasons. Oftentimes, they have little choice in the matter as they are forced into joining. In Iraq, ISIS kidnapped thousands of children from orphanages, schools, and even their homes, while

also taking over existing schools and teaching their own curriculum.⁷⁰ Over one-third of the 6,800 Yazidis that were captured by ISIS in Sinjar in 2014 were made up of children under the age of 14. Another 800 to 900 children were said to have been kidnapped from Mosul for religious and military training.⁷¹ Boko Haram in Nigeria has frequently used mass kidnappings, including the infamous abduction of the 276 Chibok school girls in April 2014 and 110 Dapchi school girls in March 2018.⁷² In the case of Somalia, in 1997 alone, Al-Shabaab utilized detention, violence, and intimidation to recruit approximately 1,777 youths.⁷³

The UK Government, while acknowledging that there is no single path to radicalization, identified four possible contributing factors that can lead to a young person being radicalized into violent extremism. The factors include:

1. exposure to an ideology that appears to sanction, legitimize, or require violence, often by providing a compelling but fabricated narrative of contemporary politics and recent history;
2. exposure to people or groups who can directly and persuasively articulate that ideology and then relate it to aspects of a person's own background and life history;
3. a crisis of identity and, often, uncertainty about belonging which might be triggered by a range of further personal issues, including experiences of racism, discrimination, deprivation, and criminality (as victim or perpetrator), family breakdown. or separation; and
4. a range of perceived grievances, some real and some imagined, to which there may seem to be no credible and effective non-violent response.⁷⁴

Tippling Points to Violent Radicalization

Research has also shown common indicators for violent extremists which might also apply in the context of young people undergoing religious radicalization. For example, Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman conducted an empirical examination of radicalized individuals in the UK and US to discern the process that lead to them becoming radicalized. They found that firstly, those who were radicalized were familiarized with a very rigid, conservative and legalistic interpretation of religion in which a strong focus was placed on the literal interpretations of holy texts. Secondly, they strictly followed and trust only select religious authorities who were deemed authentic and credible while everybody else was considered a fraud or their teachings were presented as a watered-down and inauthentic version of the true faith. Thirdly, they believed that there were irreconcilable differences which had led to a divide between Islam and the West and that a clash of civilizations was therefore inevitable. Fourthly, there was little acceptance or tolerance with any party that did not fully conform with their theological doctrines and beliefs. Fifthly, violent extremists took it upon themselves to impose their religious doctrines and beliefs on everybody else, and any means towards this end was justified. Finally, there was an element of political radicalization as violent extremist believe that there is a conspiracy by the West against Islam to destroy the religion both “physically and morally.”⁷⁵

Whole-of-Education Approach: Rethinking Education in PCVE and Terrorism

There is a growing realization that solely focusing on a military approach or hard power to prevent and counter violent extremism is a strategy that is no longer tenable. Hence, national and international strategies in PCVE and terrorism are focusing more on conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.⁷⁶

In that regard, education has been described as a “moral enterprise” that has the capacity to develop and shape the hearts and minds of an individual in society.⁷⁷ This, in turn, could

potentially be a template for a viable and impactful strategy to address, and possibly reverse, the threat of violent extremism, particularly among the youth. As a result of this, schools and universities have “gained growing importance as platforms for different kinds of prevention protocols or counterterrorism strategies.”⁷⁸

Echoing this, in 2013, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair highlighted that violent extremism would “never be defeated by security measures [alone]”, adding that “only the education of young people can achieve [its] demise.”⁷⁹ Similarly, the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy emphasizes the pivotal role of education by reiterating that an effective counterterrorism strategy must take steps to “promote a culture of peace, justice and human development, ethnic, national and religious tolerance and respect for all religions, religious values, beliefs or cultures by establishing and encouraging, as appropriate, education and public awareness programs involving all sectors of society.”⁸⁰

In the same sense, the Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism was formulated to address the role of government institutions, agencies, and civil society in CVE. The Memorandum reaffirms the role that “educational institutions can serve as an important platform in countering violent extremism,”⁸¹ noting that critical thinking skills, civic education, community engagement, and volunteerism in schools have a potential in turning the tide against violent extremism and terrorism.⁸² UN Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005) also stressed the important role of educational institutions in “fostering an environment which is not conducive to incitement of terrorism.”⁸³ In light of this, considering integrating PCVE into the education curriculum makes eminent sense.

The Case of “Non-Violent Extremists”

Being radical in and of itself is not wrong. For example, giving non-whites and women the right to vote and the emancipation of slaves were, in 19th century Europe, considered to be “radical” ideas and seen as going against the status-quo. Thankfully, they were championed by radical political parties, brought to pass, and currently are accepted as the norm in most societies.⁸⁴ Radicalism is not the same as extremism although these two concepts are often used interchangeably. The popularity of the concept of radicalization as a term for mobilization to support or engage in acts violence has given radicalism a bad name which is – from the point of view of the history of ideas – partly undeserved. Radical political parties emerged after the French revolution and stood for equality, secularism, republicanism, and democracy. Extremism, on the other hand, emerged in the 20th century and is associated with fascism and communism and other authoritarian and totalitarian movements, including religious movements, some of them violent, others not (or not yet).⁸⁵

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT, or “Party of Liberation”), for example, targets university undergraduates in certain countries, rejects the idea of the nation-state and the principles of democracy, and instead advocates a return to a caliphate-style theocracy which HT claims to bring about without utilizing violence.⁸⁶ However, Ed Husain, a former member of HT, observed that certain world-views even when held without advocating violence, “provides the mood music to which suicide bombers dance.”⁸⁷ Echoing this, Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, when asked about his role in motivating terrorists in Indonesia declared, “I am only a craftsman selling knives; I am not responsible for how those knives are used.”⁸⁸ He was clear that his role was just to push an extremist idea and how that idea was subsequently interpreted and followed through, was not his responsibility.

Hence, there is a growing concern that extremist groups are developing and disseminating dangerous ideas such as the supremacy of a certain race or religion, the notion that their identity is being “attacked” by the “other,” or even that principles of democracy and election are against God’s will. It is significant to note that developing, holding, and disseminating such ideas is,

in most jurisdictions, not a crime and some would even say, play the role of a “safety-valve,” that allows the youth to express themselves without necessarily resorting to actual violence. On the other hand, there are also those who argue that such ideas act as a possible “conveyor-belt” into violent radicalization.⁸⁹ While the final outcome of some of these “non-violent extremist ideas” that are being developed, marketed, and disseminated by extremists to the youth is uncertain - what should our response be? Who would be in the best position to facilitate and develop a comprehensive counter response to that being pushed by the extremist? It is argued here that educational institutions can be equipped to lead this charge in the “marketplace of ideas” for the hearts and minds of our youth.

The Argument for Education as the Primary Line of Defence in PCVE among the Youth

When formulating strategies in countering terrorism, agencies such as law enforcement authorities play an active and often leading role. There is a growing realization that a soft power approach, and in particular, the use of education, is a promising way to move forward in PCVE. That being the case, national governments and the international community must not just pay lip-service but ensure that when they pledge for education to be given a greater role in PCVE, they also ought to implement policies to that end. However, before education can play a more prominent and pivotal role in PCVE, there needs to be the realization among policy makers that violent extremists and terrorists are indeed targeting and recruiting young people. Secondly, it must be recognized that students in educational institutions are vulnerable to such efforts being undertaken by extremists. Thirdly, while being susceptible to the radicalization process, institutions of learning, with proper planning and support, can be “hardwired” to develop in their students a mental and emotional “firewall,” capable of withstanding indoctrination (should it occur) carried out by violent and non-violent extremists. For this potential to be realized, there needs to be a rethinking in the way that PCVE is viewed in the education sector.

Education can no longer be seen as a secondary line of defence; rather, it must be viewed as the primary line of defence against violent extremism and terrorism, for no terrorist attack can take place until and unless potential terrorists are identified, indoctrinated, and recruited. Neumann’s definition of radicalization - “what goes on before the bomb goes off”⁹⁰ - indicates that before the physical battle even begins, radicalization must occur and it is precisely this radicalization process that education should seek to engage with and defeat.

Recognizing the primary role of education in PCVE among the youth should lead to a change of mindset in government as well as within the education sector itself. Within the government, education’s elevated standing as a primary player in PCVE, on par with the police and the courts, must be reflected in a National Action Plan (NAP) in PCVE. The role, mandate, scope, and responsibilities of the education sector must be taken into consideration. The Ministry of Education has to ensure that young people studying in institutions of learning are taught values at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Only in this way can a “firewall” against possible future radicalization be installed. This means that the education sector should envision and plan to protect student populations against radicalization to violence in the ten or more years that the student is in an institution of learning. Students ought to be given all that is necessary to be able to withstand the process of radicalization.

Given this challenging role, the education sector needs to evaluate what it has and what it may need, to be in the best possible position to shoulder this responsibility. The educational institutes will need to:

1. Identify specific areas (i.e., cognitive and emotional spheres) where they intend to build resilience and fortitude.

2. Target and teach specific qualities in relation to age levels (for example, focusing on developing qualities such as tolerance and compassion during the primary schooling while emphasizing empathy, appreciation of diversity and critical thinking during the secondary/tertiary schooling, etc.).
3. Seek outside assistance in reinforcing PCVE content to students (for example, by utilizing rehabilitated terrorists, former victims of terrorism, moderate religious and spiritual mentors, social media influencers, and celebrities to heighten the reach, appeal, and impact of PCVE narratives).
4. Develop a syllabus on PCVE that covers all the relevant issues specific to a country and ensure its continuity for the student from primary to tertiary levels.
5. Train specialized teachers at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels not only to mentor and guide the students in discussing PCVE issues, but also in being able to recognize and detect possible signs of radicalization.
6. Develop and build networks of specialised expertise, for example psychologists, youth counsellors, religious leaders, and even the police, for teachers to seek help or even to refer students who are showing signs of worrying behaviour which might be beyond their ability to handle.
7. Develop a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to assess, rectify, and modify all the efforts being undertaken at the working and policy levels within the education sector.

The potential of the education sector in facilitating and developing policies and interventions in the field of PCVE for the nation has yet to be fully explored. Given education's reach and daily access (via nursery, primary, secondary, vocational/tertiary schooling) into the lives of a huge percentage of the population (i.e., from the ages six to seventeen and even beyond) for a reasonably lengthy period, particularly during the formative and vital years of an individual, it would be a tremendous waste, if more is not expected and indeed done by national education agencies when it comes to PCVE.

Essentially, a holistic and comprehensive approach is needed when looking at education and PCVE. A whole-of-education PCVE approach should seek to impart and instil values and knowledge associated with PCVE in a comprehensive and methodical manner, through various approaches and interventions, spanning the students' entire academic and extra-curricular journey, from nursery to university.

Integrating PCVE in the School/University Curriculum

As said before, the goal of the education sector should be two-fold. Firstly, to protect a student from violent extremism while in an institution of learning and secondly, to impart and equip students with all that is necessary to prevent them from ever considering violent extremism in the future. Given this lofty ambition, it is essential that the PCVE component be integrated into the entire curriculum; it should also include vocational and religious elements of the student while in school and possibly into higher learning institutions such as the universities. PCVE should essentially be "aimed to be carried out principally as a part of everyday schoolwork."⁹¹

It is important to note that for a PCVE mindset to be successfully imparted on a student, it is not just knowledge that has to be transferred but also values. Both "knowledge" and "values," if properly constructed and delivered, have within them powerful defensive and even offensive characteristics that can protect an individual against succumbing to extremism. However, these components of "knowledge" and "values," if merely shoved onto the student, would look like propaganda or preaching and would greatly diminish their effectiveness. Hence, what is needed is a "vehicle" to carry both these components of knowledge and values into the hearts and minds of the student. The possible "vehicles" that could be utilized to carry these two components would include:

1. academic subjects like history, ethics/moral education, philosophy, and religious studies;
2. study of biographies of noted individuals as well as organizations;
3. sports;
4. extra-curricular activities within uniformed bodies, clubs and societies;
5. volunteerism;
6. student exchange programs; and
7. promoting better understanding and appreciation of differing cultures, practices and religions.

These approaches will be discussed below.

PCVE “Vehicles” in Schools

There are seven PCVE ‘vehicles’ that will now be discussed.

Academic Subjects

Academic subjects in schools and universities like history, ethics/moral education, philosophy, and religious studies can integrate PCVE components in their content. These subjects already touch upon issues such as violence, conflict resolution, the history of individuals/groups manipulating religion, etc. With proper planning and training, these academic subjects can be utilized to create knowledge and impart values on the sacredness of life and the total disregard that terrorists have for people’s lives.

Imparting PCVE Elements in Biographies of Noted Individuals and Organizations

Young people are oftentimes less interested in theories, concepts, and models and more interested in real-life individuals. Violent extremists are fully aware of this and oftentimes exploit this by painting their leaders and fighters as courageous heroes and martyrs, fighting for a noble cause. In this regard, PCVE initiatives need to showcase positive role models that young people can adopt as their heroes. Individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Florence Nightingale as well as organizations such as Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières) and the Red Cross/ Red Crescent Movement can provide inspiring and positive examples for students to get to know and emulate. Efforts could also be undertaken to identify and highlight young and current “heroes” that might be more relatable to the current generation. The inspiring stories of role models such as Malala Yousofzai, Greta Thunberg, Ishmael Beah, and Nadia Murad can be used in short documentaries, YouTube video clips or comic books to reach and impact youth in both schools and universities – showing how everyone can make a significant difference in the world.

Sports

Sports have the capacity to play a pivotal role in “fostering communications and building bridges between communities in conflict.”⁹² In January 2014, the European Commission, in its recommendations to the European Parliament⁹³ suggested that “sports be included in broader education efforts to build resilience against violent extremism.”⁹⁴ Specifically on PCVE, a study conducted in 2018 noted that sports-based programmes had the capacity to build in vulnerable youth core life-skills which, in turn, are essential building blocks when it comes to

preventing violent extremism.⁹⁵ In this regard, educational institutions have yet to fully exploit the positive role that many (but not all) sports can play in PCVE.

Extra-Curricular Activities within Uniformed Bodies, Clubs and Societies

Organizations, societies, and clubs in schools and universities such as the Boy Scouts,⁹⁶ Girl Guides,⁹⁷ the Interact Club,⁹⁸ the Leo Club,⁹⁹ or Toastmasters¹⁰⁰ are already involved in trying to encourage their members to become “agents of positive change who inspire others to action.”¹⁰¹ Through such bodies, members are trained “in life skills, leadership and citizenship”¹⁰² as well as skills to communicate and positively impact the lives of others. These organizations also actively encourage and promote social diversity and mixing in terms of race, culture and religion. Hence, recognizing the need for a sense of identity, adventure, self-worth, significance, and security among young people; the programs and activities organized by these uniformed bodies, organizations or societies could be “leveraged” upon “to deter youth from embracing extremist ideologies.”¹⁰³

Volunteerism

Volunteerism is a powerful way for students to engage in something meaningful while also giving them a sense of significance.¹⁰⁴ Kruglanski and his colleagues did extensive research on how the quest for personal significance is a major motivational factor that has pushed some individuals towards violent extremism.¹⁰⁵ In this regard, volunteerism has the potential to allow students to contribute in a meaningful way to a cause that would give them a sense of purpose. This would then, to a certain extent, mute the appeal and call of violent extremism to the youth for them to do something of significance.¹⁰⁶ Realizing this, in 2012, the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia launched the *Yayasan Sukarelawan Siswa* (YSS) or Student Volunteers Foundation. The focus of this foundation is to “promote, educate and guide students to volunteer to promote world peace and foster a spirit of camaraderie by engaging in community services at home and abroad.”¹⁰⁷ The idea to channel youthful enthusiasm and energy into altruistic rather than destructive directions is open to greater development.

Student Exchange Programs

Student exchange programs at schools and universities allow young people to travel, both within and beyond their country’s borders and experience for themselves foreign and different cultures. This, in turn, has the potential to dispel ignorance and prejudice as well as sow seeds of appreciation for other races, religions, and cultures. Based on contact theory, the assumption is that “meeting and interacting with others who are different will challenge stereotypes and biases” and can make young people more resilient to withstand recruitment by extremists.¹⁰⁸ According to a Malaysian student who participated in a student exchange program with Japan, staying in the homes of foreign students allowed him to “learn new cultures, form new friendships and encourage people to be open to new things.”¹⁰⁹

It is also important to point out that student exchange programs need not only be confined to travel outside one’s own nation. Countries that have multiple races, religions, and cultures can utilize such exchange programs to enable their students to have a short experience outside their own racial, religious, and cultural confines. In addition, travelling and experiencing other cultures does not only benefit the student-traveller but also allow the host family/school/university to “take a peek” into a foreign culture. This has the potential to provide practical opportunities to realize that we are all “connected” and can become “global

citizens,” and that the “other,” so often demonized by populists and extremists, is not so different.¹¹⁰

Promoting Religious and Cultural Literacy Among Students

Ignorance and prejudice are powerful tools in the hands of violent extremists and terrorists. Misinformation and disinformation coupled with selective interpretations of religious texts and highlighting only certain negative news about another race, creed, or ethnicity has the potential to paint the “other” as the “enemy” responsible for everything conceivably wrong with one’s own “tribe.” The only way to counter systematic brainwashing by extremists is to actively create awareness of the “other” as well as building bridges to them. In this regard, education via religious literacy¹¹¹ is critical in promoting knowledge of others and in dispelling ignorance. According to Diana Moore, religious literacy can be defined as the ability to discern through multiple lenses and analyze the convergence of religious, social, political, and cultural spheres that have occurred throughout history.¹¹² The consequences of religious illiteracy, according to Moore, include fuelling culture wars, curtailing historical understanding, and promoting religious and racial bigotry. These are the very triggers and drivers that have the potential to lead young people into the hands of extremists, who then skilfully manipulate and exploit grievances.¹¹³

Besides educating students in schools and universities on the characteristics and contributions of people from other cultures, there should also be efforts to ensure that this education continues beyond the classroom. Field trips to the places of worship of other religions, community service in areas where the residents are of different ethnicities and cultures to that of the student, and visiting homes of people from other backgrounds could be systematically planned and implemented at various stages of students’ educational journey, taking into account sensitivities involved. In the case of Malaysia, a national PCVE undergraduate program was carried out in January 2020 by the International Islamic University with support from the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The organizers conducted visits to various places of worship as part of the program. While there were “initial reservations,” briefing sessions followed by open and frank discussions before the visits were vital in getting the necessary buy-in from the participants and other parties involved. The feedback received from the participants was “positive” and the participating students felt that the visits “promoted understanding, tolerance and respect.”¹¹⁴

The Role of the Teacher

Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, introduces the term “banking model of education” which he describes as a form of education that is fundamentally one way only. In his model, instead of communicating, the teachers’ function is simply to issue directives and provide information for the student. Under this “banking” concept of education, the students’ responsibility was solely to receive, file, and store the “deposits.”¹¹⁵

At present, however, the idea of education has evolved from a process of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the student to a more student-centered approach, wherein the student is more involved in the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, and the culture of the society that he or she is placed in.¹¹⁶

Specifically, when it comes to teaching elements of PCVE, it must be stressed that the transfer of knowledge is not the primary goal. *Knowledge* on counterterrorism, terrorism and extremism in general, and the violent radicalization process in particular, will be of little use in preventing a student from being indoctrinated and subsequently recruited. What is desired instead are the *values* transmitted to the student which are then internalized (i.e. accepted and

believed) by the student and subsequently practised and manifesting itself in the behaviour of the student. For this process to take place, the role of the teacher is pivotal. Given this, when we look at turning the institution of learning as a channel to counter extremism, the teacher will be the focal point of this initiative, as they are in the “unique position to affect change, impart affirmative messaging, or facilitate intervention activities due to their daily interactions with students.”¹¹⁷ However, given the range of responsibilities and the complexities involved, careful consideration should be undertaken when identifying and selecting the teachers intended to carry out these tasks. Rather than training all teachers to undertake this responsibility, it would be worth considering selecting a handful of teachers in each institution of learning to be the focal point of this initiative. Teachers involved in counselling, psychology, or student affairs, given their closer dealings with students, could be potential candidates.

However, given the magnitude of the problem of possible radicalization among the youth, there is also the possibility of considering all potential teachers undergoing their training, to be at the very least, exposed to the basics of PCVE and terrorism. The European Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) noted that “schools should invest in basic training for all teaching staff (not only those teaching politics, history or ethics) so that they are equipped to detect the signs of radicalization and intervene effectively.”¹¹⁸ This could be done by ensuring that all participants in teacher training colleges are taught and are aware of the main issues pertaining to the radicalization process targeting young people. In this regard, while all teachers might not be given the responsibility of conducting PCVE initiatives in institutions of learning, all teachers would nevertheless still be aware of the fundamental issues involved and would be able to detect possible signs of radicalization which they can subsequently discuss with the trained specialized teachers.

The training for specialist teachers would essentially be focused on equipping them with the skills to shift from just providing knowledge and information on a particular subject to that of being a guide or mentor facilitating the discussion on the subject of PCVE. Specifically, these teachers/mentors/guides would play a vital role and therefore need to be trained in:

1. setting the scene and preparing a “safe space” to discuss the subject;
2. building trust to allow the students to openly share their views, fears, and concerns;
3. maintaining their own credibility to ensure the best chance for the students to consider and adopt the material being presented;
4. displaying calmness and composure when confronted with difficult issues and questions;
5. exhibiting humility to avoid students from feeling patronized and belittled in any way; and
6. demonstrating gentleness, creativity, and even a sense of humour to maximize the impact of the content imparted to the students.

Firstly, the teachers would “set the scene” when it comes to introducing the subject to the students. They would play a crucial role in assessing the environment, background, and impact of violent extremism and terrorism on the students before even presenting the content. In this regard, teachers would be trained to contextualize the issues based on the particular time, and setting in which the students find themselves.

Secondly, the teacher would need to earn the trust of the students for them to feel safe to voice their fears, doubts, and concerns with regards to the issue. It must be stressed that winning the confidence and trust of the student is not immediate nor automatic, but there are steps that could be taught to teachers, that could, in time, lead to the students bridging the “trust deficit” that might possibly exist.

Thirdly, given the sensitivity of the subject material, teachers must maintain their credibility at all times. Hence, it is of paramount importance that their intentions, words, and behaviour, not only when teaching the subject per se, but as a whole, does not exhibit any signs

of racism, bigotry, or prejudice.¹¹⁹ In the event that they do, any hope of building a mental and emotional “firewall” through the material presented, would be lost and could even aggravate the situation, leading to further polarization.

Fourthly, given the controversies surrounding this issue, teachers should be prepared and trained to face difficult and perhaps even hostile questions, comments, and opinions with calmness and composure. It is in this sometimes “hostile” environment that teachers can and should take the opportunity to impart the valuable example of dealing with opposing views held by “difficult” individuals. Calmness and composure will not only be essential when dealing with controversial and emotionally-charged issues, but could possibly form the basis which students can use as an example when they in-turn have to deal with “difficult” people themselves.

Fifthly, teachers should display humility when presenting PCVE content, to ensure that the students do not end up feeling patronized or belittled. Oftentimes, the manner in which PCVE content is presented to students is typically one of a “master-disciple” dynamic. Based on the premise of “describing the problem” and subsequently “providing the solution,” the content presented is a “close-system” in which there is little need for input from the students simply because everything has already been “thought of,” “figured out” and “resolved” and all that the student is required to do is to “follow the set of instructions given.” This condescending approach does not allow the student to contribute in any meaningful manner. Humility, on the other hand, will allow the teachers to acknowledge that there could be possible weaknesses in the system that has led to violent extremism and that input and effort from all, particularly the students, is essential in resolving this issue and making things better. This admission, followed by the act of “seeking help” from the students to resolve the problem, could prove pivotal, as students realize that they can now participate and have a meaningful role in actually addressing and resolving grievances. Not only could this help in encouraging participation from the students but it could also play a role in muting the appeal of the violent extremist for young people to join them.

Finally, teachers would be trained to maximise the impact of the PCVE content by displaying gentleness, creativity, and even a sense of humour. Gentleness would be essential in conflict or difficult situations where hurt, resentment, and bitterness are present among the students. “Creative foresight” in bringing up the subject, making it relevant, and even slipping through the mental and psychological defences of the students would go far in ensuring that the content is well-received and impactful.¹²⁰ Using humour has the potential of defusing an emotionally-charged subject, enabling the teacher to convey a point in a non-confrontational manner.¹²¹

The Need for External Support

While teachers play an important role in PCVE in educational institutes, it would be detrimental to assume that they are the only channels that one could use to reach the students. Role models and influencers can be found in different walks of life. In this regard, former rehabilitated terrorists, victims of terrorism, and influencers/celebrities/youth heroes have tremendous potential to make a significant impact when it comes to PCVE among the youth.

Rehabilitated Terrorists

Rehabilitated terrorists have a story that people in general, and youths in particular, would want to listen to. Their background, choices that they have made, and experiences that they have undergone, not only make them intriguing speakers but also gives them the “street cred” that teachers or lecturers might not necessarily possess in the eyes of the students. For example,

Nasir Abas, a former senior leader of *Jemaah Islamiyah* in Indonesia,¹²² has oftentimes been invited to reach out to students both in high schools and universities across Indonesia.¹²³ In Malaysia, the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism has used rehabilitated former terrorists (who were themselves young) to reach out to university students; the impact caused was significant.¹²⁴

However, in most cases, utilizing such individuals has been on an ad-hoc basis, limited by issues of logistics such as travel. This however, could be easily resolved by using video testimonies of selected rehabilitated terrorists and screening them to students in schools and universities in a structured manner. The author of this chapter utilized this method by screening a video clip of Arno Michaelis story, a founding member of one of the largest skinhead organisations in the world in schools and universities all over Malaysia.¹²⁵ What was intriguing was that while the skinhead organization and the ideology of white supremacy had very little traction in Malaysia, many Malaysian students and undergraduates were nevertheless visibly moved by Arno Michaelis's narrative, making it a valuable tool in reaching out to students.¹²⁶

Victims of Terrorism

Victims of terrorism have a unique voice and provide a “powerful emotional narrative” that has the potential to “reinforce dissatisfaction” among young people over the method and the approach taken by terrorist groups.¹²⁷ Max Boon, a victim of the 2009 Marriott Hotel bombing in Jakarta who lost both legs, has used his experience to reach out to high-school students in Indonesia.¹²⁸ What is unique is that he has partnered with rehabilitated terrorists in reaching out to Indonesian youth and this approach has inspired many.¹²⁹ In this regard, it is unfortunate that while many young people are very familiar with the rhetoric and propaganda of terrorists, they have heard very little from the very people who have suffered the most from terrorist attacks. In this regard, the narrative of a victim is a powerful tool that has the capacity and the capability to counter the often times evocative premise that the terrorists are representing and fighting for a victimised group of people. For example, mothers who have suffered at the hands of violent extremists and terrorists have an extremely powerful message that would certainly resonate, and not just with youth. Mothers who have lost their children and collective groups of women such as Mothers for Life,¹³⁰ and Women without Borders¹³¹ can work with educational institutions to vividly showcase the dangers of violent extremism. The poignant letter that the group Mothers for Life wrote to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Mother's Day,¹³² grieving for their children who died as a result of terrorism, is a powerful example that should be read in all institutions of learning. Hence, as highlighted by Schmid, “victim and survivor voices need not only be heard, but ought to be amplified.”¹³³ In this regard, educational institutions could play a significant role in being the conduit to channel the stories of such victims and allow the students to see past the propaganda of violent extremists.

Role Models and Influencers

While it is essential to ensure that qualified and trained people like teachers and lecturers are used to present content on PCVE to students in educational institutes, it is also imperative that such initiatives utilize other people; role models whom the youth look up to. Far too often, there is a disconnect between experts *speaking* to the young people and young people *listening* to what is being said. To a great extent, the receptivity issue on the part of young people would be better tackled should they be addressed by the right people; the “right” people being defined as the people that the students look up to and might aspire to become. After identifying such individuals, the onus would then be on the authorities to seek them out and get their assistance

to become “messengers” on the issue of PCVE. Among the possible people that the youth look up to include actors, singers, sports personalities,¹³⁴ and social media influencers.

Getting celebrities to speak on issues of national and international interests is not new, as seen in the case of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appointing Angelina Jolie as a Special Envoy in April 2012.¹³⁵ Not only do these celebrities have a large following and reach (on-line as well as off-line) but they also have the charisma and “pull” to get messages across to the young people. While not all celebrities would be suitable and there would be some who are suitable but might not be interested, there would certainly be those who are both well suited to speak on PCVE issues to the youth and willing to take upon that role. In Malaysia, PCVE programmes targeting university undergraduates have experimented with using local celebrities including singers, YouTube influencers, beauty queens, sports personalities, and television actors to both attract young people and present them positive messages linked to PCVE – with considerable success.¹³⁶

The Need for Education to ‘Reclaim’ Social Media

A 2013 RAND study highlighted that the Internet has increased the opportunities for an individual to become radicalized and can also act as an ‘echo chamber’¹³⁷ in many cases.¹³⁸ Education must play a role in reclaiming social media from extremists, not just by learning and understanding the basics of electronic intelligence and cyber security¹³⁹ but also by fully exploiting the internet’s potential in PCVE.

A possible reason the internet has oftentimes been cited in playing a role in the radicalization process could simply be due to the “content-imbalance” in favour of the violent extremist or terrorist narrative when compared to more moderate and balanced views. Simply put, on certain issues, violent extremists and terrorists, together with their sympathizers and supporters, appear to offer far more “attractive” content, both in terms of quantity and quality, targeting young people on the internet. Given this scenario, efforts have been undertaken by various specialized organizations to correct this “imbalance” by putting out counter- and alternative narratives to that of violent extremists. The Sawab Centre¹⁴⁰ in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Global Engagement Centre (GEC)¹⁴¹ in the US are two good examples. However, their actual – as opposed to intended – audience might not necessarily be vulnerable young people and their ability to reach out to youths from different cultures and geographical locations might prove to be challenging given their affiliations and backgrounds. In this regard, the education sector would be remiss if it opts to solely rely on specialized strategic communications organizations to play the role of countering and debunking the narratives of violent extremists.

In such circumstances, the education sector could take a leading role in conceptualising strategies to ensure that students are better equipped when being targeted by extremists over the internet. The first step for the education sector would be to ensure that all PCVE-related content be digitalized and repackaged into attractive formats (digital comics, video animation, on-line games, and quizzes) – formats that appeal to the young generation. This would encourage students to reach out to other sources than those disseminated by terrorist groups and their supporters. This could possibly contribute to correcting the content-imbalance we see at present.

Secondly, institutions of learning, particularly universities, could start initiating programs in which countering the narratives of violent extremists are taught to undergraduates. This, in turn, would be followed by the undergraduates themselves starting to develop and disseminate their own narratives. In this regard, the author was involved in organizing the Students Leaders Against Youth Extremism and Radicalization (SLAYER) workshops which brought 100 university undergraduate leaders from various races, religions and cultures from all over Malaysia together over a period of two-and-a-half days in April 2017. The participants were

trained in the workshops to conceptualize, develop, and disseminate digital PCVE products. With their assistance, the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), doubled and later tripled its capacity to produce PCVE-based digital content.¹⁴²

It is also significant to note that PCVE narratives and messaging coming from the young people themselves carry more credibility in convincing their fellow peers when compared to messages solely developed by educational authorities. An emphasis on getting the youth to both create and disseminate counter- and alternative narratives should be part of a larger effort to train students to be positive social media influencers¹⁴³ and “digital story-tellers” and reach out to their fellow digital peers.

Finally, education will only “reclaim” social media if the authorities are willing to seek genuine cooperation and collaboration with young people. Numerous digital PCVE initiatives targeting the youth are facilitated by bureaucrats who are out of touch with the intended target audience, do not understand the messaging habits of young people, are not recognised by the young people as being credible messengers and do not even themselves use the digital media utilized by the youth. For educational institutions to make an impact via social media, the students should not be seen as mere “clients” but rather as “partners”; with both sides having the common objective of preventing and countering violent extremism.

Inculcation of ‘Mental and Emotional Firewalls’ in Students

The education sector could conceptualise, develop, and impart both mental and emotional “firewalls” into the hearts and minds of the students. In this regard, certain values, skill-sets and awareness such as critical thinking, empathy; diversity; resilience; and awareness on the failures of violent campaigns and the power of nonviolent social movements should be developed and institutionalized into the education system. These firewalls could provide a barrier against the radicalization process targeting the students.

Firewall 1: Critical Thinking

Institutions of learning such as schools and universities should play an essential role in developing and facilitating critical thinking among their students to enable them to make sound choices and decisions when confronted with the ideology, rhetoric, and propaganda of violent extremists.¹⁴⁴ All students should be taught basic cognitive skills such as how to distinguish facts from opinions, identify unstated assumptions and biases in an argument, evaluate the reliability of evidence presented to them, etc.¹⁴⁵ Critical thinking can be integrated in almost every subject, e.g. civic education, religious studies, languages, science, and philosophy. This is essential as skills like critical thinking allow the youth to see multiple perspectives before coming to a well-reflected perspective of their own.¹⁴⁶

Firewall 2: Empathy

Empathy has been defined as the capacity to understand and feel what another person is experiencing; it also includes the capacity to place oneself in another person’s position and act altruistically towards persons in need. Experts are of the opinion that if empathy and compassion are nurtured, extremism could be reduced and with that, the propensity for violence diminish.¹⁴⁷ However, it is also significant to note that empathy needs to be taught in a nuanced and balanced manner. If empathy is only extended to one’s own group (whether racial, religious, or political), it can actually make an individual justify acts of violence to the “other” group.¹⁴⁸ Hence, when PCVE programmes focus solely on enhancing empathy for one’s own

group, there is a potential for conflict escalation. However, if the PCVE intervention develops a balance between the empathy felt for members of one's own group and empathy felt towards the suffering of outsiders, individuals are less likely to inflict violence on the "other."¹⁴⁹ Hence, the education system needs to conceptualize and implement a curriculum and syllabus that can instil a sense of empathy and solidarity not only with members of one's own group, but also extends emotional bonds to members of the "other" groups at home and abroad.

Firewall 3: Diversity

Diversity can be defined as a range or variety of different things. In the context of human behaviour, it would include an understanding that every individual is unique and recognizing and appreciating individual and group differences. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) considers the rejection of diversity in society as one of the drivers of violent extremism.¹⁵⁰ Hence, in multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic societies, accepting diversity is paradoxically the key to achieving greater unity, which is a formidable "hedge" against violent extremism. In this regard, diversity-education plays an essential role in ensuring that differences, so long as they are within the ambits of the law, are indeed an asset and something to be respected and appreciated. Students in schools and universities should be taught to learn to respect the diversities of cultures, races, religions, opinions, thoughts and practices.¹⁵¹ They need to understand that diversity has the potential to make a society or a nation richer and even stronger. Wherever there is diversity, there is also a need for respect and tolerance for opinions and practices which differ from one's own. On the practical side, students should be taught on how to express their ideas and, equally important, accept differing ideas with respect and tolerance. Students need to learn to "disagree without being disagreeable." That should be translated into their thinking, conversation, and behaviour; both off-line and on-line. In this regard, the educational authorities need to creatively and boldly conceptualize policies and implement interventions that will be able to carry this powerful truth.

Firewall 4: Resilience

Resilience has been defined as the ability to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis and/or to return to a balanced pre-crisis status quickly. Simply put, it is the ability to recover from adversity. Oftentimes, students are made vulnerable due to the adverse circumstances to changes in their environment and these can act as tipping points to make them ready for radicalization.

The reality is that there will be times in the lives of a student where he or she might undergo a crisis or face a problem. Education policy makers in Malaysia, for example, have noted that resilience is a quality that is generally lacking among many Malaysian students.¹⁵² This might also be the case in other countries. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) noted that students in schools need to build resilience as they are in the "frontline of countering violent extremism."¹⁵³ Hence, there might be a need to strengthen resilience among students by teaching them how to cope with existential as well as less serious problems.¹⁵⁴ Hence, resilience training has the potential of equipping such students with tools necessary to bounce back from a crisis, thereby eliminating the temptation to seek council, friendship, or solutions for their problems from extremist recruiters.

Firewall 5: Awareness on the Failure of Violence and the Power of Nonviolence

Extremists oftentimes greatly exaggerate their case that violence can bring about the change that they so desire and that there are no other options than rebellion in the form of terrorism. However, terrorist groups rarely reach their goals. To understand the efficacy of both non-violent and violent approaches to conflict, Chenoweth and Stephan developed the Nonviolent and Violent Campaign and Outcomes (NAVCO) data sets in which they analysed 323 violent and non-violent resistance campaigns. According to them, “the most striking finding is that between 1900 and 2006, non-violent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts.”¹⁵⁵ In reality, civilian populations have oftentimes organised themselves successfully, utilizing various non-violent resistance methods such as boycotts, strikes, protests, and organized non-cooperation to exact political concessions and challenge entrenched power. For example, non-violent methods were successfully used to remove autocratic regimes from power in Serbia in 2000, in Madagascar in 2002, in Georgia in 2003, and in Ukraine in 2004-2005. Non-violent action was also instrumental in forcing the Nepalese monarch to make fundamental constitutional concessions in 2006.¹⁵⁶ Hence, there is an urgent need to revisit the premise that non-violent action is weak and armed struggle is strong when it comes to address grievances and prevail in conflicts.

Not only is there a need to further develop strategies of nonviolent action, it is also imperative that educational institutions play a pivotal role in ensuring that such ideas and models are publicized, taught and disseminated to students. This is because at present, the narrative of the terrorist that “violence is the only way” is so prevalent that oftentimes, it is seen as the immediate default setting when dissatisfied people are faced with injustices and repression. Given this, students need to be taught that peaceful conflict resolution¹⁵⁷ and non-violent forms of struggle are not only available but that these are also often more effective than the use of arms. In this regard, it is important to note that Samuel’s quantitative study of approximately 8,900 undergraduates in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand revealed that the majority of the students believed that the more people know about alternatives to terrorism for waging conflict, the greater receptivity for such options as viable models to address grievances and resolve conflict.¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

The reality on the ground suggests that violent extremists often look at educational institutions as a potential threat to their existence. Hence, the increase of lethal attacks upon schools and universities in many parts of the world. Somewhat paradoxically, terrorist leaders also look at educational institutions in terms of their recruiting potential for both foot soldiers and future leaders of their organizations.

Authorities have, in many cases, been slow in protecting the infrastructure of educational institutions from physical attacks and even slower to protect the hearts and minds of the students from radicalization efforts by violent and non-violent extremists. More often than not, PCVE has been given a narrow role in educational programs, oftentimes limited to a single stand-alone module presented to the students.

However, education has a tremendous potential of playing a far bigger and pivotal role in PCVE amongst young people, given the lengthy duration that most children spend in educational institutions. Most governments have yet to realize this opportunity to prevent radicalization.

There is therefore an urgent need to revisit the role of education in PCVE in institutions of learning and, wherever possible, expand and strengthen the education sectors’ mandate, resources, and delivery mechanisms to become a primary source for PCVE among the youth.

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