TRANSFERABLE LESSONS: CROSS-LEARNING BETWEEN CVE AND GANG VIOLENCE PREVENTION

A literature review and field research were conducted in 2016 – 2017 to examine whether—and under which conditions—lessons from gang violence prevention initiatives in Central America’s Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) are applicable to countering violent extremism (CVE) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). After a literature review, the study team interviewed donors, practitioners, government officials, community leaders, and youth in El Salvador, Morocco, and Jordan to identify transferable lessons. Despite key differences in the nature and causes of violence across these contexts, the team identified applicable lessons from the evolution of violence prevention efforts in the Northern Triangle in recent years. The findings of this study are relevant to CVE policy and practice in MENA by highlighting how institutions and donors in the Northern Triangle overcame some challenges, but not others. In some cases, lessons from CVE in MENA may improve gang violence prevention practice in the Northern Triangle.

LESSON 1: National government-led CVE strategies can increase efficiency in violence prevention by promoting dialogue and coordination between international and domestic actors in the prioritization of geographic and thematic areas. For example, the Plan El Salvador Seguro (PESS), developed and led by the Government of El Salvador, prioritizes 50 municipalities for intervention based on crime and violence statistics. This allows donors and practitioners to integrate various violence prevention activities in the highest-risk locations. As a result, the US and other donors currently implement a geographically-focused strategy to address multiple drivers of violence and levels of risk. Since PESS decision-making and resource allocation occur at the municipal level, violence prevention strategies and interventions respond to local needs. But decentralization of the PESS poses a risk: success relies on the willingness and ability of local officials to advance the violence prevention agenda.

National government-led CVE strategies should draw on the lessons of the PESS, which guided government and non-government actors away from the prior law enforcement-only approach and toward prevention. National CVE strategies could specifically improve CVE practice in MENA in the following ways:

- Provide a comprehensive, geographically-focused strategy, benefiting from the input of multiple agencies;

1 In addition to key differences in drivers, differences in context include: In El Salvador, gang recruitment and violence tend to occur within the same communities, making it a more immediate security concern in contrast to foreign fighter contexts in Morocco and Jordan. Gang members number far higher in the Northern Triangle than in violent extremist organizations (VEOs) in MENA, justifying differences in targeting and policy approaches. Additionally, because it’s more sensitive to discuss VE in MENA countries than gang violence in El Salvador, policies and programs are framed differently. Key differences in armed group objectives—most notably that VEOs have religious and political aims and gangs generally do not—also limit the extent to which lessons will transfer across contexts.

SUMMARY OF THE LESSONS

• Government-led CVE strategies can promote coordination between international and domestic actors in prioritizing geographic and thematic areas.

• CVE interventions should explicitly include violence outcomes in their theories of change.

• CVE practitioners should not rely on a single, universal goal-level indicator.

• Local realities lead most violence prevention efforts to target a broad swathe of youth in high-risk communities rather than just high-risk individuals.

• CVE and gang violence prevention strategies should include policy change to address structural drivers underpinning violence.

• Encourage focus on root causes of violence, emphasizing prevention and long-term solutions;

• Reduce sensitivities around violence and enable frank discussions about violent extremism (VE); and

• Enable actors to achieve consensus on VE definitions, CVE objectives, and geographical priorities.3

LESSON 2: CVE interventions must go beyond presumed drivers of VE and explicitly include violence outcomes in their theories of change. In El Salvador, most violence prevention interventions connect intermediate outcomes—such as education attainment, employment, youth assets, or community-security relationships—and overall violence outcomes. Given pressure on donors in the Northern Triangle to demonstrate effectiveness, implementers measure the impact of their interventions on violence, even if individual programs cannot be held accountable for violence outcomes. For example, an impact evaluation of the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARI) attributed changes in violence-related outcomes to the intervention.4 Such evaluations test assumptions about the drivers of violence, evaluate geographically-focused strategies holistically, and inform theories of change based on evidence of whether and how programs actually reduce violence.

However, CVE interventions do not always focus on violence outcomes, partly because of heightened sensitivities around VE, including reluctance to broach VE with program participants. A lack of consensus on conceptual approaches to preventing or reducing VE further contributes to the variability of CVE goals. Current approaches to CVE fall into three categories:

• “CVE-relevant” interventions are sector-specific programs (e.g., that are assumed to reduce vulnerability to VE based on an assessment of drivers).

• “CVE-specific” interventions most closely mirror violence prevention programs as observed in El Salvador. These programs are designed so that outcomes explicitly relate to violence prevention or reduction.

• “CVE-sensitive” interventions involve mainstreaming CVE-specific activities and indicators into other sectors, such as education or civil society programs.

CVE efforts that straddle these categories or omit defining the desired violence outcomes risk ambiguity in their impact and miss a key opportunity to test the links between assumed drivers and violent behaviors or attitudes. For accountability, learning, and effectiveness, CVE programs and interventions should go beyond addressing presumed drivers and outline—at least internally—a clear results chain linking the drivers, interventions, and violence prevention goals.

LESSON 3: CVE practitioners can learn from the evolution of gang violence prevention programming by not relying on a single, universal goal-level indicator. The evolution of Northern Triangle violence prevention programming includes multiple iterations of evaluation strategies, clearly pointing to the need for multiple quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure impact. Given Northern Triangle programs’ inclusion of violence outcomes at the goal level, a single ‘hard’ indicator, such as homicide rates, is attractive for reporting and linking program impact to goals. But respondents in El Salvador indicated that homicide rates do not accurately account for the impact of prevention efforts. First, changes in the homicide rate result largely from factors external to prevention programs, such as changes in national policy or consolidation of gang territory. Second, focusing on one crime statistic, like homicide rates, excludes other crimes (e.g., extortion, kidnappings, and disappearances) and forms of violence that affect communities. Third, such high-level outcomes take years to achieve, and can often not be influenced by short-term programs.

In MENA, practitioners similarly search for specific and measurable indicators of program success. Current CVE practice relies primarily on data around intermediate outcomes that were identified through assessments as drivers of VE. A promising practice from the Northern Triangle is triangulat-
ing various measures of citizen security—from crime statistics and perception surveys to socio-economic indicators—to gauge progress holistically. CVE practitioners should incorporate hard data when available, which may require advocating to governments on the usefulness of accessing security data such as recruitment statistics, in combination with perception or qualitative data, (e.g., attitudes toward violence or level of support for VE aims). Researchers have developed advanced techniques for measuring CVE-related outcomes that address sensitivities.5

Lesson 4: Both in the Northern Triangle and MENA, local realities lead most violence prevention efforts to focus on primary prevention, targeting a broad swathe of youth in high-risk communities rather than just high-risk individuals. The majority of violence prevention efforts in El Salvador focus on primary prevention—which targets high-risk communities or youth generally in those communities (See pyramid below). Respondents had few examples of programs that target either individuals most vulnerable to participation in violence, known as secondary prevention, or programs that target individuals who have already engaged in violence, known as tertiary prevention. Key informants in El Salvador reported initial success in an intensive secondary prevention pilot program to deter youth from engaging in gang violence; this intervention centered on the family and also provided youth with education support, resulting in a significant decrease in vulnerability. However, practitioners noted that this intervention cost significantly more per individual than primary prevention programs. One promising tertiary prevention program worked to rehabilitate former gang members within prisons by providing different types of skills training, counseling, and recreational and mentoring opportunities to prepare them for life after prison. However, legal restrictions prohibit US-funded organizations from engaging with suspected members of certain gangs.

A key challenge for secondary prevention involves understanding risk factors and identifying youth most vulnerable to recruitment. In the pilot mentioned above, practitioners in El Salvador reported using the Youth Services Eligibility Tool (YSET) to identify a small group of at-risk youth and then monitor their vulnerability over time. Practitioners initially adapted the YSET from the US gang context and adapted it to various Northern Triangle contexts. Local sensitivities around targeting at-risk youth...

5 For example, https://graemeblair.com/sensitive/.
may further compound the barriers to secondary prevention, particularly for CVE programming (See text box). In the meantime, practitioners should refine their understanding of vulnerability in MENA contexts to improve their ability to identify and understand changes in individuals over time while avoiding the risks of any highly-targeted approach. As demonstrated during the development of the YSET tool in the Northern Triangle, a greater understanding of risk for VEO requires more research, particularly with current and former members of violent extremist organizations (VEOs).

When CVE programming includes secondary prevention, the approach for identifying at-risk youth should be context-specific. Already, hyper-local community organizations in Morocco and Jordan are working with community members and police to identify youth already in contact or at high risk of contact with VEO recruiters. These focused strategies led by local partner organizations for targeting as observed in Morocco and Jordan may complement more structured diagnostics, like the YSET, or apply where the use of diagnostic tools is not feasible in the Northern Triangle.

In El Salvador, tertiary prevention in particular proved challenging due to social resistance to working with gang members, in addition to added layers of legal restrictions. Because youth need a viable path out of violent groups and toward becoming productive members of society, policy approaches would ideally include strategies for working with offenders. In Morocco and Jordan, widespread tertiary prevention remains a critical gap, particularly given the inevitable return of many foreign terrorist fighters. Systematic reintegration and rehabilitation would require influence at the highest levels and intensive government collaboration. Primary prevention and community-level targeting, therefore, remain central to CVE, but as in El Salvador, practitioners, donors, and government should find ways to invest more in both secondary and tertiary prevention.

### CONCLUSION

As long as deep-rooted, systemic and policy-level challenges persist, the impact of many donor-supported violence prevention efforts across all contexts will be limited. Donors in MENA can draw on the relevant experiences from the Northern Triangle to accelerate the learning process for CVE, both in terms of crafting effective CVE practice in the short term and influencing broad-based government policy to affect the underpinning institutional, structural, and national level drivers of violence in the long term.

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