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Policy Brief

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Boko Haram's momentum not slowed by military force

by Sianna ElManouzi

Boko Haram militants are likely responsible for three suicide bombings in Cameroon last week where 2,000 additional troops are said to be deployed. The jihad militant group, based in Nigeria, is growing in number and military force has not combated the problem successfully. With membership of between 7,000 and 10,000 the ISIS-allied group has been responsible for vast casualties and has remained reluctant to military action since its founding in 2002.

Boko Haram gained strength since its founding in 2002, which led to their debut of violent uprisings in 2009, after becoming radicalized and using youth as primary recruits. Though founded in Nigeria, Boko Haram now has stretched its influence over two other nations in the region: Chad and Niger.

Had preventative measures been taken, Boko Haram's uprising and the recent suicide bombings could have been avoided. TICVE is dedicated to preventing such uprisings through an innovative research-based approach to counter violent extremists, such as Boko Haram militants. Change always starts with youth civilians. Through thorough research, we can identify causal factors that motivate the rise of violent extremism and take measures avoid the emergence of radicals. Because military action struggles to weaken Boko Haram militants, a non-violent approach would be a more effective.

TICVE promotes local research and youth involvement to counter violent extremism. Preventing the problem starts by directly involving youth who are particularly vulnerable to extremist recruitment. By engaging members of these communities through discussion and collaboration, communities become enriched and less vulnerable to extremism. The role of youth is crucial in fighting this problem.

In a situation similar to Cameroon's, TICVE has worked extensively with the Gao and Timbuktu regions of Mali to implement book clubs to promote a dynamic of tolerance and freedom. The book clubs encourage students to broaden their understanding of the world and help enhance critical thinking skills. The TICVE mission shows promise in combating extremism by implementing a hands-on, collaborative approach with local communities. The youth are in control of the future, which is why shaping young and marginalized populations is imperative to countering violent extremism.

This approach is extensively more effective than military power in combating violent extremism. Violence only exacerbates the emergence of radical militants and are not deterred by threats. Like what President Obama said at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism last February, preventing people from falling to extremism is about winning "hearts and minds."

Military force does not win hearts and minds and does not solve the problem at its root. Fighting terrorism with violence only strengthens their desire to destroy and to make their power known. Solving the problem of violent extremism must be done through targeting local communities to transform the desires of their youth, which will lead to bright futures and less violence.

Sianna Elmanouzi is a fourth year undergraduate student at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA where she studies political science and business. With a certificate in Peace and Conflict Studies in progress, Sianna is interested in finding and implementing innovative solutions to counter international violence and encourage transnational collaboration on such issues. Sianna joined the TICVE team in July 2015 as a trainee to explore new solutions in counter violent extremism.