

Expertise in Countering Urban Street Gangs can be used to Fight Jihadists

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E-Notes

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Word is out that Washington's traditional Arab allies, alarmed at rising terror threats, have been trying to counter jihadist groups on their own. In addition to aggressive military action, homegrown Arab "soft power" efforts have emerged — from [media activity](#) to [new schools curricula](#) — aiming to undermine extremist ideologies and preempt terrorist recruitment. Some seek to [inculcate a positive reading of Islam](#) in hopes that it will inoculate believing Muslims from jihadists' overtures. Others [appeal to young people to personally uphold the integrity of their nation-state](#) by transcending sectarian differences. Numerous Arab states, however, have yet to confront hardline teachings and preachings within their borders that remain frightfully mainstream.

It is essential to purge Arab seminaries and mosques of extremism. At the same time, a recent study by two Gulf research institutions suggests that jihadist groups increasingly attract followers by other means besides doctrine. The study, based on the most comprehensive survey of jihadist social media in Arabic to date, found that arguments for mass killing based on Islamic proof texts appear less often in terrorists' discourse than lay, purely emotional appeals that play off socioeconomic disaffection.

Of 45,254 surveyed jihadist Tweets, nearly 80 percent contained no reference to Islam or religion whatever. Among the 20 percent that did invoke Islam, nearly half used it for the specific purpose of pronouncing the general population "infidels" — part of a visibly cult-style strategy of isolating recruits from the society around them. Only 1.4 percent of all Tweets contained references to Islamic law. Most of these were edicts by present-day jihadist leaders purporting to be Islamic legal authorities, as opposed to actual Qur'an, prophetic tradition, or even the giants of modern Islamism such as Sayyid Qutb.

Our colleague Adam Garfinkle, in [his own recent E-Note](#), shared his view of what such findings mean:

"We face not an esoteric intellectual but a full-fledged sociological problem in the greater Middle East. ... The larger and deeper social context, which feeds off of collective emotion rather than the tracts of Sayd Qutb or the tape-recorded rants of Osama bin-Laden, explains why newly vogue U.S. counter-messaging efforts are a waste of time and money. Those efforts are bound to fail because those messages are ... disembodied from the social networks in which ideas are embedded and given life. The notion that a bunch of people on the fifth floor of the State Department are one fine day going to discover the perfect set of words placed in perfect order and translated perfectly into Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Pashto and so on — and that set before fanatics these words are going to suddenly change their entire point of view — is a rationalist fantasy."

Without dismissing the importance of doctrine, it is worth asking whether American specialists in other fields might have their own ideas about organized violence that could strengthen the attempt to counter jihadism in its present form — and, if so, whether homegrown Arab counterterrorism initiatives could benefit from their experience.

At least one American competency, which has been applied overseas but not in the Middle East, uses sociology rather than hermeneutics to counter groups of young people with guns: the practice of organized civil action

against urban crime gangs. In Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and other big cities where gang warfare kills hundreds annually, a range of scholars and civic actors have come together to augment law enforcement with a combination of community outreach, education, and special police training. Building on this expertise, the U.S. Government and others have financed projects abroad, primarily in Latin America and the Caribbean islands, whereby American specialists work in consort with local police and civil society to counter their own gang problems. The ventures, at their best, begin with a meeting of the minds between American and local participants: Americans immerse themselves in the unique problems of the foreign environment and the hard-learned lessons of locals who have been struggling to fix them. Locals, for their part, learn about the most effective tools Americans have developed to weaken gangs. Together, they devise a new approach, tailored to local realities, and proceed to implement it over months and sometimes years. The success of such ventures is measured by outcomes on the streets, as well as locals' choice to continue using the methodology on their own, without foreign funding or participation. Hallmarks of failure include the unwillingness of local stakeholders in government and law enforcement to change their own corrupt or abusive behavior, and a tendency on the Americans' part to present a cookie-cutter approach, informed chiefly by American realities, that does not fit local conditions.

As a preliminary thought experiment to gauge the potential relevance of these efforts to the struggle against terrorism in Arab lands, it occurred to us to accost a leading practitioner in the science of countering gangs. Heath Grant, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has worked with the State Department, USAID, and other agencies to develop programs overseas to counter crime and corruption. We tried to gauge potential parallels between the street gangs he knows well and the jihadist phenomenon in socioeconomically comparable Arab urban areas — and begin to imagine the application of the former expertise to the latter pathology.

Q: What drives recruitment into criminal gangs?

A: Poor at-risk communities in urban areas tend to be the most vulnerable. Although there are many possible reasons to join gangs, initial recruitment often starts at the need to belong and the need for protection. The feeling of hopelessness — that actions don't matter — combined with a reaction to police harassment add to the appeal of becoming part of an organized response. Glorified myths about gangs can be used to appeal to gangs that are often packaged as “clubs” rather than gangs at first. Coercion or force remains a very significant strategy for recruitment with some gangs internationally.

Q: Do gangs espouse an ideology?

A: There is a counter-establishment ideology, offering a means of empowerment and response to oppression by the police against an unfair system. In some cases, strains of black supremacism — or for that matter, white supremacism — inform what might be considered a gang ideology. At times, conspiracy theories about a deliberate U.S. government campaign to repress African Americans have also played into gang ideology. And in prisons in particular, there has been some recruitment of gang members by Islamist ideologues.

In Arab environments, the theory that poverty and despair drives jihadism has been challenged by the presence of educated, middle class elites — particularly from the Gulf states — among terrorist organizations. But plenty of fighters also hail from among the urban poor, from Casablanca shantytowns to Baghdad slums. In these environments, moreover, [police brutality is indeed widespread](#). As to prison recruitment of gang members by Islamists, this is the one area of crossover between the two fields of inquiry with which we were previously familiar. Dr. Grant told us that he did not know of others.

Q: Tell us about gang domination of the public space. Is there any basis for comparing gang territory with a jihadist rump state?

A: Most of what we see is the designation of urban territory as a marketplace for gang activity, with boundaries designating the gangs' monopoly on drug exchange. These physical boundaries can be “tagged” by graffiti or even social media in some cases. But in the *favelas* of Brazil, for example, gangs actually police and run pieces of territory. In Caribbean states, such as Trinidad and Tobago, there are areas where the real police do

not enter unless there is a special operation, and most of the informal control is led by local gang activity.

Q: What purposes does gang violence serve? Are some acts of violence an end goal in and of themselves, and if so, what justifies them?

Gang violence can serve many different functions, depending on the nature of the gang and the particular context in which it operates. Gangs can be used as a means of force or coercion for recruitment and/or to control drug or criminal markets within its boundaries. Gang violence is most often the product of conflicts between groups or an instrumental need to conduct its criminal activities. Violence can serve as an end goal in itself in such cases where criminal gang members are “jumped in” to prove their loyalty by conducting acts of violence. Violence within the gang can be used as a means of controlling its members.

Q: You mentioned the use of social media to “tag” physical boundaries of gang domination. What other roles does social media play in gang activity?

It is used more often as an expression of bravado than a recruitment mechanism. Sometimes words in social media between gangs escalate into fighting on the streets. Social media can also be used by gangs as a means to identify where youths are hanging out and target them accordingly. To some degree, social media has also been used as a tool for the sale of drugs and weapons. And in addition to playing a role in the tagging of territory, it can be used to coerce individuals, as well as communicate with others in and outside of the gang about any specific gang activities. Cartels in Mexico have been known to target and harass citizen bloggers and reporters as well. USAID is currently doing innovative work with the SecDev Foundation to explore methods of communication and networks amongst gang members.

In sum, there is meaningful overlap between the two forms of organized criminal activity. With respect to jihadist groups — particularly those aspiring to establish self-governing enclaves — some have [used conventional gang tactics to establish economic self-sufficiency](#). With respect to urban gangs, violence is not purely an extension of the logic of criminal activity, but may actually serve as an end goal rooted in identity, gang culture, or a form of ideology. To varying degrees, both forms of criminal organization draw recruits from among the socially disaffected. As to social media, both use it as a means to express bravado, define gang authority, harass opposition, and engage in material transactions. These areas of overlap suffice to indicate that the professional study of gangs and the means to counter them would offer insights with bearing on counter-jihadism.

Another set of questions concerns the degree to which American specialists in countering gangs have been successful in migrating their expertise to foreign environments.

Q: Give us an example of an American attempt to apply its own anti-gang methodologies overseas.

A: Efforts have been made to apply the "Operation Ceasefire" methodology around the world. It is predominantly a policing strategy based on the identification and analysis of specific crime "hot spots" in order to develop an effective response. The problem is, the approach has too often been used without attention to factors beyond territory and the gangs themselves. In order to truly make a difference, it is necessary to understand the illegal economy that gangs have created, how many people rely on this system, and what other opportunities remain for them should it be taken away. This lack of understanding is seen in places that are using this model to combat gangs, such as Trinidad and Tobago. If there is only a strategy to drive out the gangs and drug economies, the populace that relied on them will be left without sustenance. To fix this, a counter-approach is needed that will help stimulate the social context as well as the economy.

In a similar vein, from the poppy fields of the Bekaa Valley to the smuggling routes of North Africa and the Sahel, Arab and Western security forces have faced the challenge of combining interdiction with economic development to offset locals' loss in revenue from criminal activity.

Q: Where have efforts been more successful, and what approach do you take in your own work abroad?

A: In the US, the piloted Weed and Seed model showed early promise as an example of social crime

prevention. Using the "weed and seed" approach, once gangs are evicted, opportunities are brought in to help the population. Economic development is accompanied by an effort to educate young people and police alike to embrace lawful behavior. When I attempt to develop a new approach for a country, I consider five main "planks" in the initiative: security sector reform, public education, business community and job development, youth justice capacities, and risk protective factors in the area.

Q: To which countries have you migrated this expertise?

I have worked in El Salvador, Peru, the United Kingdom, Israel, Malawi, Costa Rica, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Georgia, Guyana, Columbia, Mexico, and Bangladesh.

Q: Who funds these initiatives and how are they organized and staffed?

From my experience, the State Department and USAID are primary American funders for international work. Within the United States, the National Institute of Justice funds significant innovations in criminal justice and social crime prevention. Funding is also provided by international bodies, such as the Pan-American Development Foundation, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Development Alternatives Incorporated. Normally these programs are staffed by local workers for the groundwork, and they will bring in experts from abroad to partner with them in developing the plan.

Q: Among your many deployments, which effort has been the most challenging and why?

Bangladesh was very difficult. We thought we could implement "community policing" in the country — a strategy based on police-civilian partnerships — without due consideration of the culture. At first, the Bangladeshi government and the police looked to be very supportive, as they saw it as a way to get citizens out to help the police. But the effort was severely compromised — both by the alienation of the community from police due to the latter's bribe-taking and abuse, and by corruption among the citizenry, who sought to exploit the effort themselves.

Q: All the countries you have named feature varying degrees of democratic governance. What would be the challenge of applying your model to an authoritarian environment?

A: To fit it into a more authoritarian governing style, the democratic policing principles, such as aspects of community policing, would presumably need to be altered and expectations lowered. I would wager that it would work best for these governments if there is a buy-in to the ideology behind the prevention as not "counter-government," as well as getting the citizens to see that they can change the outcome of their lives.

Q: If an authoritarian state were interested in working with you on a security-related project, what would you propose as a first step?

A: I would need a risk and needs assessment that looks at the social context of the activities, where they are occurring, and who is the primary actor. I would need to do some research to further understand what is occurring in the country itself and any measures taken to counter it, such as government initiatives and law enforcement. Alongside that, further understanding into the country's education and society is needed.

Q: What would be the red flags that portend problems in implementing your strategy in a non-democratic environment?

The government overreaching into aspects of the program with which it should not be involved is a big flag. Human rights abuse and issues within its police force are also areas for concern — though this is not a complete black and white line, but more of a grey area. A positive flag is a willingness by the government to acknowledge the role that citizens can play in shaping their futures.

This discussion began by noting the unwillingness of some Arab states to confront prevalent strands of extremist indoctrination within their borders. But if one views the roots of present-day jihadism as more socioeconomic than ideological, it would seem that a greater challenge yet to be confronted is the continuing opacity of the state. In this respect, the willingness of the state to expose its security operations to outside

scrutiny may itself serve to indicate whether needed reforms are possible.

It is encouraging, therefore, that several Arab governments are growing more open to a frank discussion of their security sectors — and the fraught relationship between police and the people they patrol. The author's experience shows that it was possible to [embed with a unit of the Moroccan police](#) as a researcher for nearly half a year, convene a workshop in the Emirati security sector to explore integrity training for their own cadets, and visit with trainers and trainees at Saudi and Jordanian security academies. These experiences suggest that some countries in the region have approached the point where new international partnerships — involving non-government specialists from the United States, and aiming to establish a more holistic approach to stem organized violence — are possible.