

A small organization offers a fresh approach on preventing terrorism

By David Ignatius Opinion writer October 21, 2014

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates

Hidayah certainly doesn't look like a global counterterrorism center. It sits in a quiet villa on Fatima bint Mubarak Street here. It has a staff of 14. Its annual budget wouldn't begin to cover the cost of an Apache helicopter gunship.

This tiny international organization, whose Arabic name means "guidance," wants to be the softer face of the battle against such terror groups as the Islamic State. A brochure explains that if traditional counterterrorism efforts are perceived as soldiers with automatic weapons, Hidayah instead wants an image of kids sitting around a blackboard in a rural school.

Looking at the Middle East today, you'd have to say that the former approach, stressing soldiers with guns, hasn't been doing very well. Sectarian violence has devoured Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and it's gnawing at surrounding nations.

So perhaps it's time to try the alternative approach of low-visibility groups such as Hidayah, whose 2014 budget was just \$6 million.

Hidayah was created in 2012 by the 29 countries in the Global Counterterrorism Forum, which is chaired by the United States and Turkey. Member nations include many countries whose citizens have funded or exported radicalism, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The motivation was to share ideas, outside of existing intelligence and security partnerships, for "redirection of terrorist support and potential recruits through non-coercive preventive measures."

The organization doesn't even describe its mission as counterterrorism. Instead of "CT," its business is "CVE," which stands for "countering violent extremism." The nonsectarian approach extends to describing the office prayer room as the "all religion room."

Hidayah's non-coercive approach has unfortunately gotten more lip service than major support from participating nations. It holds meetings and seminars, but with so little money, its activities are limited. Maqsoud Kruse, the U.A.E. official who

runs the group, says it has accomplished 15 percent of what it could do with more money and attention.

The Hidayah agenda stresses ways to avoid the radicalization process that leads people to embrace terrorism. The idea is prevention, rather than reaction. In the group's summary of last year's activities, the first item is "preventing education systems from becoming breeding grounds for violent extremism." In practical terms, this means stopping the use of madrassas and other religious schools as a training ground for jihadists.

Personally, I think there's a simple way to check the abuse of Islamic education. Saudi Arabia, whose funding for madrassas in such places as Afghanistan and Pakistan helped create a generation of potential religious warriors, must stop the practice. "No more foreign funding for madrassas" should be a demand of the nations that have joined the coalition against the Islamic State. Hidayah doesn't propose anything so radical, but it should.

A second priority for Hidayah is de-radicalization and rehabilitation of prisoners. "Prisons are potential terrorist networks," notes the group, because they have become places where radicals can recruit, indoctrinate and strategize.

Prisons have been especially important for the Islamic State, which freed thousands of well-indoctrinated inmates as it swept through Anbar and Mosul in Iraq. Here, Saudi Arabia provides a positive model: The kingdom has worked over the past decade to turn its al-Qaeda prisoners away from violence.

Two other preventive approaches are also noteworthy. Hidayah tries to encourage victims of terrorism to tell their stories, so that young people will hear a counternarrative to the heroic self-promotion of the jihadists. And it encourages community policing efforts around the world, so that local cops in New York City or Amsterdam or Riyadh will get tips from parents, friends or imams when young people become radicalized.

Hidayah's final goal involves using social media to combat extremism. This may be the most important mission, given the mastery that the Islamic State has shown in using the Internet to promote violent confrontation. Over the past decade, this virtual battle against extremism has typically been waged by secret intelligence and military agencies, or has been ignored. Neither approach makes sense. One European nation is pioneering a program in which visits to jihadist sites prompt automated anti-radicalization messages. That sends a dual message: We're watching, and do the right thing.

Let's be honest: It's too late to stop the radicalization of Islamic State fighters. The battle to "degrade and ultimately destroy" those recruits, unfortunately, will now be waged with Apache gunships and drones. But maybe their younger brothers and cousins can be deterred from violent extremism by programs like the ones that Hedayah is promoting.