

Countering Violent Extremism in Trinidad and Tobago: An Evaluation

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Abstract: *Much research has focused on explaining the very high rate of radicalization among a small number of Caribbean island nations. This paper instead investigates the history and current status of countering violent extremism policies in Trinidad and Tobago, focusing on government, international partners, and local NGO programming in the field. Through an analysis of extended interviews with grassroots organizations, politicians, and members of the security administration alongside a desk review of existing literature and evaluations of CVE programming, we seek to illuminate gaps between official policies and actual, on the ground practices. While authorities in Trinidad and Tobago have recognized the power of non-state actor centered, bottom up policies, the majority of visible operations continue to rely on top down, state centric ones. This paper brings with it concrete recommendations for law enforcement, community builders, and local residents alike.*

Motivation:

Observers have provided a litany of reasons explaining how a Caribbean country of less than 1.3 million people could send more than 140 residents and their families to join the ranks of foreign fighters for - and in many cases perish with - the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq since 2013 (Graham-Harrison and Surtees 2018). Scholars have moved away from earlier attempts to link poverty, equality and development levels to participation in terrorism (cf. Piketty 2015), and instead explain radicalization of Trinidad and Tobago residents as a result of “gang violence, broken homes, poor education opportunities, and...a lack of a sense of self-belonging” (Basumatry 2016). Others have similarly argued that ethnic homogeneity, ideology and challenges with assimilation facilitate recruitment (Benmelech and Klor 2018) or that criminal linkages and a relatively unique history of radicalism advance terrorism in the country (McCoy and Knight 2016). Some have stated that money and a sense of community were the core factors (Graham-Harrison and Surtees 2018). But beyond understanding the motivation for these recruits, the government of Trinidad and Tobago in partnership with its counter terrorism partners have struggled to create policies which can reduce the threat from these actors.

Beginning in the winter of 2017, under mandate from the Trinidad and Tobago National Security Council, the Ministry of the Attorney General created a Counter Terrorism Strategy with a focus on counter terrorism policing and arrest, deterrence, and cooperation with other nations. The United States began listing several residents of Trinidad and Tobago on its terrorism sanctions list. The U.S. Army’s Southern Command participated in high profile raids of local residents in February 2018 planning an attack on the nation’s carnival (Browne and Starr 2018). Such top down, state-centered, kinetic responses fit in the standard toolkit adopted by democracies and non-democracies alike in handling terrorism and anti-state insurgency (Aldrich 2012). But Trinidad and Tobago have been experimenting with alternative, bottom up, market and civil society-centered approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE, cf Aldrich 2014). The degree to which these programs have been effective and unified remains an unanswered question.

This paper uses site visits to Trinidad and Tobago neighborhoods, more than fifteen extended, open-ended interviews with relevant actors in Trinidad and Tobago and the broader security sphere, and a review of relevant literature to understand how the concepts and approaches of CVE have spread and been adopted. It adds to the existing literature in several ways, primarily by combining qualitative empirical evidence from the field with theoretical frameworks and then setting out concrete recommendations. It also draws on a rich knowledge of the history and culture of the communities under study along with the expertise of agents who best know these countering violent extremism programs.

The paper develops as follows. First, it explores the drivers of radicalization. Then, it explores at length the somewhat unique history of Trinidad and Tobago, which remains the only Western nation to have experienced an attempted Muslim coup. Then we review the broad range of potential policy responses to terrorism, classifying them along a spectrum from proactive to reactive and also from “hard” to “soft.” We then move into the themes that emerged from interviews with actors in-country and conclude with broader lessons for community NGOs, security officials, and decision makers facing radicalization in their backyards.

Radicalization Factors

Observers of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have moved beyond simplistic and common arguments seeking to connect economic conditions, such as poverty, to outcomes such as support for or recruitment to VEOs (see Berrebi 2007 for an extended discussion of these now-dismissed claims). While many initial attempts at understanding terrorism argued that participants came from impoverished backgrounds, little evidence has supported these claims. Instead, scholars and governments have recognized a wide variety of paths to extremism, many of them tied into the political environment and extended social networks, and have categorized them into *push* and *pull factors* (Khalil and Zeuthen 2014).

Push factors involve conditions that help spread support for violent extremism. These are “the negative social, cultural, and of one’s societal environment that aid in pushing vulnerable individuals onto the path of violent extremism” (Hassan 2012: 18). Common push factors include government repression, corruption, elite impunity, and poorly governed areas (USAID 2011). For example, in Kenya, “the war against Al-Shabaab has led to an increase in ethnic profiling and discrimination against Somalis in particular, and Muslims in general” (International Crisis Group 2012). As a result of ethnic profiling, both Somalis and Muslims may have felt more sympathy or even support for terror groups because of government actions against their communities.

So too broad scale raids of heavily Muslim-occupied neighborhoods by authorities in Trinidad and Tobago may reinforce grievance narratives already being narrated by violent extremist groups. After the US Embassy received information from a local informant that there was a plot to destabilize the Carnival, Trinidadian security officers executed broad arrests in certain communities. As one resident told us, “[It was] a bureaucratic mess, as he was locked up for 16 months. Why 20 police officers would knock down his door, tie up his sons, why have they targeted us in Mohamedville?” (Interview with local resident 2018). One religious leader stated that he saw radicalization as an outcome of how people were being treated by national authorities: “They said that Shane Crawford radicalized: he was arrested as a youth who felt betrayed by the state” (Interview with Imam 2018). Some local decision makers argued that local ethnic divisions which solidified into gangs were another push factor. “I think some of our social circumstances and because of the divisions between Rasta City and Muslim gang, it may

seem desirable for some to practice jihad via ISIS” (Interview with Local politician 2018). Some religious members of the community believed that their political beliefs make them a target of the state. “I talk about US, French, foreign policy. I am outspoken on that, and they look at me as a different person. This is one of the things that people look at us and think we are terrorists.” But, he argued, local residents who interacted with them on a daily basis “feel at peace with us. This little community here shows us respect” (Interview with Islamic religious leader 2018).

Pull factors in contrast come from events and the characteristics of the potential supporters and recruits themselves. These include access to material support, the potential for adventure and esteem, and the possibility of self-empowerment through radicalization (USAID 2011). Pull factors also may come via charismatic leaders, the need to answer a spiritual calling and messages of defending Islam from invaders. In one case, a Sahel-based VEO provided financial support to would-be members. A resident who had been recruited reported that, “All one had to do was carry around a gun and patrol the streets...It was an easy job compared to other jobs such as construction work” (quoted in Hassan 2012: 18). In Trinidad, some residents argued that becoming a Muslim brought group affiliation and therefore a kind of power on the streets. “When I was growing up, everybody know that joining Islam meant joining to be a bad boy, because those people had access to drugs, guns, and power” (Interview with local resident 2017). The variety of pathways to radicalization raised by the push and pull factors can help decision makers realize that a silver bullet to end terror is unlikely.

Finally, rather than being seen as a linear progression, scholars have argued that recruitment and radicalization need not proceed in lock step and may need a trigger moment to push radicalized members to violent action (Mattei 2018). Trinidad and Tobago has a number of conditions which operate as push and pull factors, and it is worth exploring these historically in detail.

Trinidad and Tobago’s Muslim Population over Time

We divide the relevant history of Trinidad and Tobago’s Muslim population into four phases, the first beginning the late 19th century, the second during the World Wars, the third until the end of the 20th century, and the four from the end of the 20th century until current times. In examining the Muslim community in Trinidad, we also note two ideological points of conflict: the holistic nature of Islam¹ and that persecution of -Muslims has created a grievance narrative.

Phase 1 (late 19th/early 20th century) involved survival and settlement as the local Muslim community struggled to assert itself through community building. A combination of forced and voluntary migration created a Muslim presence early in Trinidad’s history. Muslim migration came from African slaves, liberated Africans, free immigrants, Indian indentured immigrants, and the Arabic-speaking immigrants from Eastern Mediterranean region referred to

¹ Islam emphasizes the wholeness of society, the inseparability between the ecclesiastical and the secular whereas Christian society separates the religious and secular. Islam sees human society as an inseparable totality in which everything is inter-connected. The religion is in fact, the culture guided by the Quran and the Hadith in accordance with the Five Pillars of Islam namely, Shahadah (belief in one god), Salah (daily prayers), Saum (fasting), Zakah (charity) and Hajj (pilgrimage). Islam is not only a religion but equally a social code and a political system. The Quran provides guidance for all phases of life in matters of manners and hygiene, marriage and divorce, commerce, crime and punishment, peace and war (Samaroo 2018).

locally as Syrian-Lebanese (Kassim 2017). Scholars have argued that “there was a small, but continuous West African Muslim presence in Trinidad” (Trotman and Gilroy 2004: 222). Samaroo (1988: 5-6) noted that “many of the Africans who had moved to the far east of the island to Manzanilla and Turure were nominally Muslims.” Moreover, these migrants were able to maintain their religion and “establish a strong community organization that governed its members in ways that bore a striking resemblance to the methods of Islamic communities in West Africa in arranging their internal affairs” (Ibid.). Muslims who arrived under the indenture scheme from the Indian subcontinent became a significant sub-population by the middle of the 19th century. A little less than 15 percent of the Indo-Trinidadian immigrants between 1870 and 1917 were Muslims (Brij Lal 1986: 172; 2013, 46).

This first phase of Muslim history involved the building of *masjid* (mosques) often by ex-indentured laborers and community members. The growth of communal physical infrastructure paralleled by the development of civil society organizations that structured and defined social relations. These religious, charitable, and high culture civil society organizations made available economic resources that could be mobilized for organizational movements around common goals. Friendly Societies formed the launching pad of localized Islamic group nationalism illustrated by Islamic Guardian Association (IGA) in 1906 in Princes Town (south Trinidad). Literary and debating associations were established by the Indian community in which Muslims participated.

Phase 2 (during the period of the World Wars, 1914-1945) continued relationship building between domestic and international Muslim organizations along with the clearer articulation and advocacy of local Muslim concerns. Afro-Trinidadians began publicly converting to Islam perhaps influenced by the ‘turbulent thirties’ of strikes, hunger marches and riots (Kassim 1999). Communal organizations such as the East Indian National Association (EINA) and the East Indian National Congress (EINC) articulated and advocated for local Muslim concerns. Other national Muslim organizations sprang up, including Tackveeyatul Islamic Association (TIA, in 1926), Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association (ASJA) and the Trinidad Muslim League (TML). They pushed the colonial government to broaden civil and economic rights, recognize Muslim marriages, and grant burial rights, better wages for their canes, end of indenture, and Indian representation in the Legislative Council. Nevertheless, TIA and ASJA united on demands for civil rights – recognition of marriage and divorce under Islamic rites (leading to the passage of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act 1935) and the right to manage denominational schools. A number of visiting missionaries to Trinidad from the Indian subcontinent deepened local communities’ knowledge while at the same time contributing to splits between Muslim groups in the country, setting the ground for Ahmadiyya movement (Interview 2017).

Phase 3 (mid to late twentieth century) continued relationship building (domestically and internationally), the articulation and advocacy of local Muslim concerns along with stronger state recognition and validation of the community. It also brought in the first major tranches of foreign funding for Wahabi-influenced Islamic teaching in the country. The Muslim community’s political organization resulted in the passage of a law in 1948 that made it possible for non-Christian religious bodies to manage their own schools with public funds. In March 1949, the El Socorro Islamia was formally opened and became the first Muslim school eligible for state aid. Between 1949 and 1962 the community set up fifteen Muslim schools.

Continued visits from Muslim leaders in the Middle East simultaneously enhanced the standing of local Muslim communities while further dividing them internally. This effectively strengthened the position of ASJA-led Sunni Islam enabled by support from the World Muslim

League (*Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami*) with funding from the Saudi Arabian government. The Trinidad Muslim League (hereafter TML) asserted its presence establishing links with Mirza Ahmad Hassan Ispahani, Pakistani Ambassador to the United States, in 1948 who laid foundation stones at TML, St. Joseph and delivered lectures. This foreign funding - particularly from Saudi Arabia - set the stage for the introduction of more fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic in Trinidad and Tobago.

Members of the local communities continued to organize politically and religiously. In 1958 a local resident founded the Islamic Youth Movement with the San Juan Muslim Ladies Organizations. The Islamic Missionaries Guild (IMG) was established in 1960 in Trinidad to engage in missionary work throughout the Caribbean via distribution and selling of Islamic books, arranging for Islamic scholars to visit the region on lecture tours, assisting Muslim youths in acquiring scholarships to study Islam abroad (Ali 2005: 4).

In post-independence Trinidad, Muslims made contact with the Arab world and many Muslim youths went to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Libya to study Islamic theology and Arabic. This created a better understanding among some but also confusion and tensions within the Indo-Muslim community as it sought to delegitimize South Asian Islam as 'cultural Islam' and bring innovations (such as *taazeem*, *niyaz*, and *qaseedas*) to validate Sunnification and/or greater orthodoxy back home. In the 1970s with the development of the global Black Power Movement black Muslims in Trinidad and Tobago began to formally identify themselves as belonging to particular Islamic movements such as the Jamaat-al-Muslimeen. Today, the Jamaat Al Muslimeen has multiple offshoots in Trinidad and Tobago, including Wajihatul Islamiyyah, Jamaat al-Murabiteen and Jamaat al-Islami al-Karibi, all of which have ideologies similar to militant black ethno nationalist movements (Basumatry 2016). As one longtime resident told us, "In the days when the Ladies' group was vibrant, you had people together and activities flourishing, but then you had divisions and confusion. The late 1970s and early 1980s was the pinnacle of the division" (Interview with Muslim community activist 2018).

Phase 4 (late 20th/ early 21st century) brought the increasing Arabisation/ Sunnification of Islam in Trinidad to its highest point, through transnational links, visits of missionaries and youths studying Islam abroad. It also brought the only Muslim led coup against a Western government which we discuss in more detail below. Moving beyond static print media, the local Muslim community established four Islamic television channels including the Islamic Broadcasting Network (IBN) and Darut Tarbiyah. Further, The Islamic Network (TIN) along with community and/or youth groups developed websites and social networking profiles as a medium for *daw'ah* and information sharing for members within and outside the community.

During the 1990s the Muslim community came together to form two federated bodies known as the Muslim Coordinating Council (MCC) and United Islamic Organizations (UIO). The MCC consists of the three oldest organisations, ASJA, TIA, TML, while the UIO comprises thirteen small groups, with many now dormant.

The Jamaat Al-Muslimeem (JAM) Coup Attempt

Imam Yasir Abu Bakr, perhaps inspired by the Black Power Movement, founded the Jamaat Al-Muslimeem (JAM) in 1969 with some 12 members (Continho 2015). Soon after he received funding from Muammar Qaddafi and recruited thousands more. Its founding came at a time of tension between Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians (Zambelis 2007) as well as an economic recession (Simmons et al 2014), enabling Abu Bakr to reach out to people who faced difficulties provide them with services, resources, and a place for socializing. While the

government may have overlooked the group initially, its relationship with JAM deteriorated in the mid-1970s because of its seizure of lands that were left behind by the Islamic Missionaries Guild of the Caribbean and South America (Collihan and Danopoulos 1993). Abu Bakr built mosques and houses for JAM members, even though they had been warned by authorities against illegally occupying of the lands. By 1990, the 250 to 300 Muslim militants living on the compound were mostly unemployed teenagers and young adults of African descent between 17 and 27 (Collihan and Danopoulos 1993),

In 1990, the Minister of National Security instructed the army to besiege the JAM compound after the court decided that the land did not belong to the JAM, pushing JAM to recognize that their mosque could be demolished and moving towards violent action against the government (Collihan and Danopoulos 1993). JAM held broad ideological disagreement with the government focused on racism, social justice, poverty and government corruption. A particular sticking point was Carnival, which they classified as immoral (Zambelis 2009).

On 27 July 1990 JAM took the Prime Minister, cabinet officials and other government officials in the National Alliance for Reconstruction government hostage in the Red House, captured the Trinidad and Tobago Television network, and destroyed the police headquarters (Simmons et al. 2015). JAM “sent 40 followers, armed with weapons smuggled from the US, to storm the parliament. A further 70 seized the state TV building – Mr. Abu Bakr announced the coup live on air and promised new elections in 30 days” (Oliveira and Aviles, 2012). The coup attempt resulted in some 24 deaths and brought media attention but ended in failure as JAM lacked the numbers and support necessary to take over the country (Collihan and Danopoulos 1993). Financing of the coup evidently came from Saudi Arabia via a US-based JAM member (Simmons et al 2014) with arms and ammunition from Libya (Alleyne 2009).

The coup attempt had broader ideological visions. One report claims that “JAM did dream of and harbor a desire for Trinidad and Tobago to become an Islamic State. It was a long term project as some witnesses characterized it. Certainly Imam Abu Bakr and Bilaal advocated the desire in meetings as is evidenced by Special Branch reports” (The Report of the Commission of Enquiry 2014). Whatever his political goals, Abu Bakr had mistakenly assumed that the public would support his attempt to overthrow the government because of the economic recession (Simmons et al 2014). While some members of the armed forces had connections to JAM, on the whole the army also opposed JAM, a gap made broader by the class differences between them (Collihan & Danopoulos 1993). The Prime Minister initially granted JAM and its members amnesty in the wake of the failed coup, and while the London-Based Privy Council overturned the decision, invalidating the amnesty, the participants have not been re-arrested. Abu Bakr was charged with committing acts of terrorism, sedation and incitement to commit a violent act but was never convicted (Zambelis 2009). He continues to teach.

Trinidad and Tobago’s relatively unique history - including the continuation of JAM’s ideology and the continued teachings of many of its members - has created a number of push and pull factors towards violent extremism. Fundamentalist Islamic mosques, including the Monroe Road mosque, one along the Southern Main Road, and others in Carapo and Rio Claro, continue to operate. Many ISIS recruits come from the Rio Claro Mosque headed by Nazim Mohammed, a former member of the JAM and a participant in the coup attempt. “East Trinidad, Diego Martin and east of Chaguanas, [remain] as ISIS recruiting hot-spots” (*Trinidad and Tobago Newsday* 23 September 2018).

Local officials, residents, and foreign embassy officials expressed varying degrees of concern about Trinidad and Tobago’s need to prioritize handling violent extremism, radicalization, and terror recruitment. Many residents of neighborhoods with high recruitment rates see VE as a serious problem: “I saw we had a serious problem in Trinidad with people going to fight in the Middle East. These were my neighbors, people who would go and fight.

Three is a girl in the Little Fire program who is from a family whose father went and died in the Middle East” (Interview with local resident 2017). So too Members of Parliament involved in the security field see it as a concern: “Violent extremism is at a high level today in Trinidad. People become extremist for many reasons, not only religious and today we have a high risk population in Trinidad that has become extremist in their views and actions due mainly to socio economic factors” (Interview with Member of Parliament 2019). Residents are skeptical of attempts to downplay the presence of Trinidadians among ISIS fighters. As a founder of a local NGO told me, “We have our own local extremism. I always tell people, if I leave here to go to Syria to kill people, I always wanted to kill people. It is a progression. A man just doesn’t wake up and decide to go to Syria to kill” (Interview with NGO leader 2018). Much scholarly attention has already been paid to the factors which may influence recruitment of Trinidad and Tobago citizens in past years we will not travel that ground again (Basumatry 2016; McCoy and Knight 2016; Graham-Harrison and Surtees 2018; Benmelech and Klor 2018; Graham-Harrison and Surtees 2018).

At the same time, though, more common, mundane sources of violence drive the spending and attention priorities of government officials. “The number one issue here is gang violence, drugs, and the murder rates that have gone up. It is difficult for us to sell all of these programs about not joining ISIS if we refuse to acknowledge to look at the day to day terrorism of being shot, attacked, raped” (Foreign Embassy official 2018). It is worth mentioning that a comparative look at radicalization rates among Muslim communities puts the nation closer to the center, rather than the extreme. Table 1 below demonstrates that among nations, Trinidad and Tobago’s foreign fighter contribution has been notable given its relatively small overall population but not the worst. Belgium, Ireland, and Tunisia top the charts, with radicalization rates roughly three times higher.

Table 1: ISIS recruiting rates

| Country | Total Fighters | Muslim population | Recruits ratio |
|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Belgium | 470 | 628,000 | 7 per 1000 |
| Ireland | 30 | 49,000 | 6 per 1,000 |
| Tunisia | 6,000 | 11 million | 6 per 1,000 |
| Maldives | 200 | 393,000 | 4 per 1000 |
| Sweden | 300 | 500,000 | 3 per 1,000 |
| Saudi Arabia | 2,500 | 27 million | 2.7 per 1,000 |
| Australia | 120 | 476,000 | 2.4 per 1000 |
| Austria | 300 | 339,000 | 2.4 per 1000 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 130 | 65,000 | 2 per 1000 |
| Finland | 70 | 60,000 | 1.6 per 1000 |
| Britain | 760 | 3 million | 1.6 per 1000 |

| | | | |
|-------------|-------|-----------|---------------|
| Netherlands | 220 | 1 million | 1.4 per 1000 |
| Norway | 81 | 212,000 | 1.4 per 1000 |
| Jordan | 2,000 | 8 million | 0.7 per 1,000 |
| France | 1,700 | 5 million | 0.5 per 1,000 |

Note: Table adopted from data in *The Guardian* 26 February 2017

Given the documented recruitment issues that the nation of Trinidad and Tobago faces, we now turn to illuminating and evaluating its countering violent extremism programs.

Trinidad and Tobago Countering Violent Extremism Policies

There are a wide variety of ways that state and non-state actors can counter violent extremism. We use a straightforward, two axis approach based on whether the approach is proactive - taken before radicalization and behavior - or reactive, after radicalization, and whether the response is hard (based on the coercive power of the state) or soft (grounded in community based responses). Figure 1 below sets out examples along these axes.

Figure 1: Classification of Countering Violent Extremism Programming



Among the most common tools states have at their disposal are those revolving around their Weberian control over the legitimate use of force and coercion through policing and surveillance. As mentioned previously, Trinidad and Tobago have used these hard, reactive law enforcement tactics in managing violent extremism. Standard techniques have included surveillance and arrests of known or suspected terrorists.

Since 2014, the Trinidad and Tobago government agreed to sponsor the UN Security Council Resolution on terrorist fighters. In its related National Counter-terrorism strategy, the government states it will pursue and investigate persons involved in terrorist related activity who may target the country and its interest and will bring such persons to justice. In its Pursue Pillar, the government has committed itself to stop terrorist attacks and its financing and ensure that terrorists are investigated, prosecuted and punished.

The government added Legislative Amendments in relation to the Anti-terrorism Act, Chapter 12, the Proceeds of Crime Act, Chapter 11:27, the Financial Intelligence Unit Act 72:01 and the Non-Profit Organization Act, 2019. The government has recognized for example, that the main sources of terrorist financing are from private donations, the abuse/misuse of non-profit organizations, and the proceeds of criminal activity. In response it set up the policing institutions to “follow the money.”

Less known in the grey-area between hard and soft tools and reactive and proactive ones would be the Citizen Security Program (CSP) which seeks to reduce crime and violence in selected high needs communities in Trinidad and Tobago through community actions and capacity building for the police. CSP, funded primarily through the Ministry of National Security, involves violence prevention training, community based interventions, youth friendly spaces, and NGO support, among other programs. The CSP was among the most commonly referenced program from decision makers asked about CVE programming: “The programs that come to mind in trying to counter this would be CSP - the Citizens Security Program - which was introduced under the Ministry of National Security several years ago, where they focused on community action councils that they labeled as hotspot areas“ (Interview with local political representative 2018). This is despite the fact that the CSP itself was established as a violence-prevention program and not specifically as one to counter violent extremism or overseas recruitment to terror networks. Overall, the CSP has had mostly positive results in the communities in which it operates (see Anever 2015 for a full evaluation).

Interestingly, many have seen that the CSP itself in a sense competes for policy space and funding with local NGOs. “CSP was a guided initiative under the government which focused on community building and had particular goals, but it operated separate and apart from NGOs. In some communities NGOs joined the CSP, a lot of time people looked at it as a rival to them. There should have been a policy that guided NGOs to fall under the CSP and qualify for funding, training and guidance” (Interview with Local politician 2018). Moreover, given that CSP was among the most recognized programs which in theory could reduce violent extremism, some experts were worried that its strong support indicated a lack of serious attention to the broader problems. “The local government hasn’t really invested much at all into CVE per se. They do have Citizen Security Program, funding grey areas to reduce violence, but not officially CVE. For the CVE issues that we’ve done, I haven’t seen any movement from the national government beyond, “Hey, you’re doing a great job, keep it up.” This is a pattern that repeats” (Interview with Foreign Embassy official 2018).

Beyond the gray area occupied by the CSP sit a larger category of soft approaches to countering violent extremism in the field of community development and NGO-driven capacity building. These include literacy building classes (such as the Adult Literacy Tutors Association), sports and martial arts (e.g. Endeavours Sports Club, Ryu Dan Dojo, and the Warrenville United Sports Club), spoken word and drama focused NGO groups (such as the Quays Foundation and the Roots Foundation), and entrepreneurial and business training programs (e.g. Youth Entrepreneurship for Self Empowerment).

Many programs operating under the aegis of CVE programming with either local or foreign government support had little to do with ISIS recruitment or radicalism. One program which helps local students build the skills necessary in the field of business described it as such: “The beginnings of this program started off with my quest to create more success stories from Lavantile, the area where I’m from. Many people under the age of 16 were dying of gun violence, joining gangs. Rather than see those negative stories, I wanted to see more good news. I went out in search of success and began to study what that meant in children and young children. I did research for about a year and it pointed me to youth entrepreneurship. I got a vision from God about something that told me to turn on the television, which was a program called Accelerator about an African American woman trying to get more entrepreneurs into Silicon Valley and get more venture capital” (Interview with NGO leader 2018).

Another NGO involved in drama, spoken word and other intervention programs saw its work as creating a space for expression. “Those who youths who are 16-24 who are not in school, not employed, but want to make a difference. We label communities high need, underserved, hot serve, but these young people just want an opportunity. We try to create an opportunity. That is a space, a space where you will not be judged. That space is not just a physical space – as our office here just opened recently – instead it is a space for young people to express themselves” (Interview with NGO leader 2018).

Broadly speaking, Trinidadian NGOs receiving CVE funding do not imagine that they are solving violent extremism. “We are not a silver bullet. By no stretch of imagination do I intend to solve all of the problems. We will do what we can do. We are hoping that through the work that we are doing we can inspire others to avoid the negative paths. I remember after once incident, I was shocked, and my brother told me, why are you shocked about human behavior? If I hear that a bank was robbed by elephants and giraffes, I would be shocked.” (Interview with NGO leader 2018). In framing their work, many NGO workers and founders saw themselves as providing positive spaces for youth who otherwise could be drawn into negative behavior. “We call ourselves the inoculators, the counter actors, because we provide a positive program. We provide a homework help center. We provide parents with financial management skills so that they can improve their lives and the lives of their children. I see myself as a preventive program, tackling the push and pull factors of radicalization. We tackle the sense of belonging, low sense esteem. We provide field trips, tournaments so that they can win and get recognition. Many who join gangs have low self-esteem, or want recognition, or help them to manage money. We look not only at countering violent extremism but also preventing and inoculating - the idea of joining a gang should never” (Interview with NGO founder 2018).

Other NGOs do see their explicit role as providing children with the tools to fight recruitment. “The program [X] engages twice per week some 50 children to do life skill building and self-affirmation exercises. In the program we also have had discussions around extremism, what it means, how it can manifest in a classroom, and we have looked at it of course at an international scale. The children are being groomed as credible messengers to talk about anti

violence and countering violent behavior in their school where they can burn out bad behavior” (NGO leader 2018).

Many of these NGOs have received financial and administrative assistance from foreign embassies in converting their existing programming to interventions which better align with CVE approaches. “Our role has been twofold: with civil society organizations and the government to help facilitate and coordinate efforts, creating a true whole of society approach to preventing and countering VE. Our initial mission was to create a network of credible influencers and experts from different sectors of society - academics, local, municipal, and national figures, Muslim organizations, pastors as well” (Interview with Foreign Embassy official 2018). “As you know we have worked with the [foreign national] Embassy in their Safe CommuniTTy projects. The [foreign national] Embassy has sponsored numerous programs related to sports, social media marketing, counselling and projects that train youths and mentors” (Interview with Member of Parliament 2019).

A variety of development based soft programs in the country are used as countering violent extremism programs even though their philosophies are about community development and not connected to CVE itself. These include Trinidad and Tobago’s Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Program (CEPEP) and the Unemployment Relief Program (URP) which may be guided to financial communities where there have been hotspots of violence or crime. “What has been done to keep the radical elements in check is to open CEPEP, URP and construction projects to certain ‘companies’ with a view to prevent any extremist behavior in the country” (Interview with Trinidadian Ministry of Defense official 2018).

In reviewing the in country CVE programs, interviewees saw a variety of challenges before they can be successful. Some denied the possibility of Western built or supported programs working in country: “I do not think CVE/PVE can be effective in Trinidad and Tobago” (Interview with Ministry of Defense official 2018). So too Muslim residents were skeptical: “This way that the state and law enforcement are doing CVE is not going to help. They have a flawed approach. What I am telling you that we lived through is the deep ideological disconnect in the Muslim community that requires deeper dialogue and understanding. There are many people who dream of a utopian society, and you’re seeing clips of children being oppressed in Palestine or whatever, and you are prepared to give your life to deal with oppression” (Interview with Muslim community lawyer 2018).

Others pointed to a lack of institutions and institutional capacity. “But because we don’t have that culture of treating violent extremism our court system is caught up in the everyday living of the city. The city has been shut down almost every Friday for the past couple ways to put provisions in place because of concerns about violent extremism. While it is good that they are doing this, we did not foresee these security concerns, and have built infrastructure to handle it. Court cases should not encumber the lives of citizens on a daily basis” (Interview with Local political representative 2018).

Some local leaders active in the countering violent extremism space argued that the plethora of NGOs are in fact competing for scarce financial resources and attention. “There are many NGOs, in fact I don’t know if that is a problem or a good thing, if per capita we look at how many NGOs we have, we probably outstrip the world. I think we have too many NGOs doing the same thing, and they are all competing for resources to do the same things. They all form from some level of passion or interest, it may be personal or related to a church or something like that, or religious. But there are so many different NGOs and groups. If it makes sense at all,

government policy should guide how things are done, and government policy should come with financial, and that financial assistance should guide NGOs. Because there are so many groups doing the same thing, government funding is spread far and wide, the expenditure isn't necessarily having the impact it is supposed to have" (Interview with Local NGO leader 2018).

Several NGO leaders supported the argument that rather than cooperating against a common goal, local groups in Trinidad in the countering violent extremism field may see other groups as competitors. "We are all fighting for scarce resources, and the government loves to use the carrot and the stick, so we are fighting for crumbs. We feel that if we do it by it by ourselves we will get all of them. The [foreign] Embassy has tried, and some of us collaborate together, but others stand behind me as I go forward... I personally have been burned by some organizations under the pretext of partnering, and because of scarce resources, I feel if my logo is the biggest on the page, I'll get more. Those carrots are grants. [Our founder] doesn't ask government for anything – she deliberately goes to private funders, never asking the government for a cent" (Interview with NGO leader 2018).

Some security officials argued that, without a more coherent and visible framework, any CVE approaches are going to be localized and ad hoc. "I cannot say how effective it is as far as I am aware there is no national policy on CVE nor a national approach" (Interview with Trinidadian Ministry of Defense official 2018). Decision makers argued that community NGOs may have an impact, but it would be minimal. "I am not saying that the NGOs don't have a role, but there are so many, some of them may be a bit watered down, and they may only doing very basic short term interventions that don't have as much impact" (Interview with local politician 2018).

Discussion

Trinidad and Tobago, in cooperation with international embassies, has sought to build up multiple layers of often hyperlocal programs which can achieve countering violent extremism goals. As no existing NGO or CSO had this as an explicit goal when they were founded, vocational programs and a variety of youth focused programs were repurposed for countering violent extremism. As a result, sports, martial arts, entrepreneurial training, and spoken word programs became ways for the state to seek to diminish the likelihood of recruitment into VEOs and to increase connections between youth and their society. Much of the work being carried out by these groups rests in communities known for high levels of gang violence and conflict. They are not evenly distributed across Port of Spain or the country as a whole. Most of the work being done is focused on pre-recruitment stages, that is, what some have called the *early intervention* stages of countering violent extremism policy, in these few communities (Mattei 2018). As a result, critics have not seen sufficient long term, focused programs across the country. "I am not saying that the NGOs don't have a role, but there are so many, some of them may be a bit watered down, and they may only doing very basic short term interventions that don't have as much impact" (Interview with Local representative 2018).

While Issue 15 in 2016 of the ISIS magazine *Dabiq* featured an interview with "Abu Sa'd al-Trinidad," the last few years have seen fewer such cases and the broader collapse of the Islamic State's territory. The reason for financial support for many of these programs came out of the period of peak recruitment, nearly five years ago, and ISIS recruitment in the islands has since diminished. The current needs for countering violent extremism may be less about the need to keep youth from becoming foreign fighters and more about how to re-integrate the

spouses and children of radicalized Trinidadians back into society. “Our responses have been reactive, and not proactive” (Interview with Local resident 2018).

Finally, for CVE programmatic goals to succeed, residents and NGOs need to trust the government and each other. Yet the government itself may not see the residents themselves as partners in its work and residents - especially within the Muslim community - may suspect that the government sees them as likely perpetrators rather than civically engaged residents. Local authorities and the police should ensure that their activities and attitudes help build a trust flow with local residents, who are critical components of countering violent extremism frameworks.

Conclusion: Looking Toward the Future

We have sought to lay out the relevant history of the Muslim community in Trinidad and Tobago along with landscape of CVE programming. A number of push, pull, and environmental factors in the country, along with a relatively unique history of a coup attempt, have created a situation where recruitment was a visible - if not large scale - phenomenon. Foreign embassies and the government have worked to develop NGO capacity to serve as the core level of diminished recruitment and “off ramping” to prevent youth and other residents from becoming radicalized.

As a result of our research, we see three major areas where the government and foreign embassies should focus their efforts. First, decision makers should systematically invest in NGOs and community based, bottom up responses to recruitment and radicalization. These nonprofit organizations, faith based organizations, and civil society groups should form an integrated community of practice, sharing best practices and deliberately integrating their visions into government plans and goals for the field. As part of this shift from a top down perspective, local Muslim community should be seen as a resource to help the state in preventing radicalization and even reversing it. “My view – we are in a position to deradicalize people – because this is a deeply rooted ideological shift that has taken place” (Muslim community activist 2018). This may be a shift for law enforcement and police authorities who envision the local Muslim community as the problem, not part of the solution.

Next, we urge NGOs and the government to work together to attempt to measure the impact of programs as has been done in other areas, such as the Citizen Security Program (CSP). There, though a combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses, objective, third parties were able to show differences in impact by local community. Such consistent evaluation at individual and community level remains necessary and unfortunately incomplete. NGOs themselves may be ideally placed to assist in measurement and evaluation efforts. As one resident mentioned, “Who went and why did they go? I am now working with an NGO and we have developed a questionnaire” (Interview with Muslim community lawyer 2018). Scholars at universities in the country - whether the University of the Southern Caribbean or the University of Trinidad and Tobago - should join these measurement and evaluation efforts.

Finally, returning fighters and their families should take center stage in programming. While programs to off-ramp would-be foreign fighters should remain at the core of CVE frameworks, a larger and more pernicious problem may be a comprehensive and consistent response to re-integration. Returning radicalized foreign fighters requires a comprehensive set of policies not yet in place in Trinidad and Tobago, including disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration (Mattei 2018: 7). A variety of ad hoc programs have sprung up to fill this policy gap. “Hasan Anyabwile, a UK-based Trinidadian imam who uses messaging apps - the same

channels ISIL uses to spread its message - to convince people to leave and facilitates their travel back home by liaising with authorities and families” (Thomas-Johnson 2019).

The Trinidadian government initially refused to allow even the families of foreign fighters back into the country, but has recently, under tremendous political and social pressure, allowed some of the children to return (Thomas-Johnson 2019). Reports have been published claiming that a handful of fighters have returned to Trinidad and Tobago. The central government’s stance remains ambiguous, though, and the populist position would be to deny all those connected to ISIS passports, nationality, and repatriation assistance.

Trinidad and Tobago has served as the front line for attempts to stop foreign recruitment and radicalization. Working with existing programs and the support of foreign embassies, the nation has built up an initial set of programs which can help to keep youth and other would-be members from joining violent extremist organizations. But much remains to be done, and we need to ensure that we fight the battles of tomorrow, not yesterday. Decision makers and citizens alike should recognize the challenges in the field and the need to main trust, openness, and transparency as they seek to use cohesion and engagement to fight radicalization and extremism.

Appendix

Appendix Table 1: Open Ended Interviewees

| Organization / Type | Role | Gender |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| Ministry of Defense | Official | Male |
| Foreign Embassy | Security Official | Male |
| University | Professor of security studies | Male |
| Foreign Embassy | Official | Male |
| Parliament | Member of Parliament | Male |
| NGO | Founder and Chief Social Entrepreneur | Female |
| NGO | Founder | Male |
| NGO | Founder | Female |
| Barrister | Lawyer in the Muslim community | Female |
| NGO | Officer | Male |
| University | Professor of security studies | Female |
| Political representative | Deputy mayor | Male |
| Jamaat | Religious leader | Female |

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