

PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: Towards a holistic, evidence-based response

While violent extremism is often framed and expressed in religious terms, its roots lie in real needs, grievances and the life experiences of individuals and communities. Responses which narrowly focus on the religious dimension and negate the more systemic drivers of conflict and instability risk exacerbating, rather than remedying, the problem. There are better solutions.

There is often a tendency of governments, whether in sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Europe, or elsewhere, to view religion with suspicion, seeing it as a risk that, if not effectively monitored and managed, can at best jeopardise domestic stability and at worst directly lead to violent terrorist incidents and threaten the very existence of the state itself. The responses that some states employ do not make a clear enough distinction between 'violent extremism' and 'extremism', classifying any adherence to 'overly conservative' or 'foreign' Islam as unacceptable and therefore proscribed, whether or not it justifies or engages in violence.

How does this conflation manifest in practical terms? In some cases, particularly in the post-Soviet space, for example, authorities may view outward signs of religion, such as long beards, use of curtains between men and women, or even refraining from engaging with certain forms of art and music, as potential signs of radicalisation. The phenomenon is viewed as highly individual (often religious/dogmatic), with many P/CVE activities consequently focusing specifically on religion and religious issues, seeking to counter 'extremist' religious interpretations and 'change hearts and minds'.

Why is this the wrong approach? First, because it simply does not work. Attempting to directly confront or rebut religious arguments using similarly religious counterarguments can often induce the opposite of the desired effect, causing individuals with 'extremist' religious interpretations to defend more vehemently what they see as the 'correct' religious interpretation.



In addition, government sponsorship or proselytisation of certain religious interpretations has the potential to further damage receptivity to these voices for communities where the government may face issues of legitimacy. So essentially, in the attempt to respond to the violent extremist argument, we end up actually triggering retrenchment.

What these types of conceptualisations and approaches also fail to consider is that, rather than being homogenous, monolithic groups defined solely by certain demographic categorisations, citizens and communities have very real needs, grievances, and priorities, which may contribute to both radicalisation as well as conflict and insecurity more broadly.

This may include issues such as social and economic marginalisation, political exclusion, poor governance, corruption, and difficulty accessing justice – in other words, structural injustice due to an imbalance of power. While violent extremist propaganda is often framed in religious/ideological terms, it feeds on and is fuelled by grievances against such conceptions as the state and its subsequent success or failure to provide for those over which it claims authority. These types of systemic issues may be more uncomfortable for the state to admit and take longer to effectively confront, but failing to consider them in favour of a more securitised response can, ironically, deepen grievances, and thus fuel support for violent extremist organisations. Securitised responses may target ethnic minorities, for example, and can not only create animosity towards the state by these communities, but also sustain harmful stereotypes and reinforce ethnic/communal divisions which fuel conflict and instability. In such circumstances, conventionally marginal discourses advocating for violence as a solution to both real and perceived injustice, can take root and grow.

It is also worth cautioning that while socioeconomic issues and deprivation can certainly contribute to radicalisation, each radicalisation pathway involves a complex interplay of different factors. These are not only socioeconomic in nature, but also relate to identity.

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People need to feel that they have the space and freedom to manifest whatever facets of their identity (including their spiritual identity) they feel the most salient. Binary conceptions of a 'secular' vs. 'religious' not only miss the mark, but can actually end up contributing to radicalisation pathways when individuals feel that their identity is threatened or under attack. To effectively build resilience against violent extremist radicalisation, perhaps it is thus about promotion of pluralism, coexistence, and a sense of belonging for all groups, as opposed to falling into the trap of 'secularism'.

So, what is the 'correct' approach to confronting the phenomenon of violent extremism?

How do we account for the diverse drivers of radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremist and terrorist groups, and how do we use this evidence to encourage disengagement, deradicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration back into societies? First, at the risk of sounding trite, there is no 'one size that fits all'. What fuels instability, violence and violent extremist activity is most often context-specific, so any activity or intervention against these phenomena that works in one context may not be relevant or effective in another. For example, while global ISIS propaganda may speak in broad terms of an 'Islam under attack' and the consequent need to 'join one's brothers and sisters' to 'defend against the crusading west', how this is translated at the local level can vary considerably.

In Kosovo, for example, propaganda and messaging has been shown to exploit historical grievances and humiliations, recalling instances of wartime atrocities suffered at the hands of

Albany has been implementing the US State Department-funded Holistic CVE Strategic Communications Programme in Kyrgyzstan and Kosovo since 2016. One of our key focuses has been on working with each government to compile evidence-based communications strategies to accompany their counter terrorism (CT) and preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) National Action Plans (NAPs).

Rather than 'harder edge' counter terrorism and security measures, these strategies leverage evidence-based communications and community engagement activities to effectively respond to the national and hyper-local drivers (e.g. exclusion, perceptions of injustice) of violent extremism in each country. As part of these efforts, we are working with credible messengers (e.g. deradicalised former terrorist fighters, religious figures, terrorist recruiters) to directly engage with vulnerable audiences, highlight the negative impacts of violent extremist groups, their hypocrisy, and the alternative pathways available to young people exposed to radicalising influences. Through positive, sustained engagement, the aim is to build trust with vulnerable populations, and decrease feelings of alienation that may contribute to radicalisation in some instances.

Serbian forces and inciting sympathisers into 'Jihad' for a chance to 'redeem themselves'. In contrast, in areas of coastal West Africa, violent extremist propaganda may draw on and amplify more immediate issues and inter-communal tensions, such as those between farmers and pastoralists.

Here, groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin and the Macina Liberation Front, in addition to taking sides in these disputes, will also act as alternative service delivery providers, providing goods and services that the state is unable or unwilling to supply, such as boreholes, food, jobs, schools and clinics. This can endear these groups to local populations, helping to fuel recruitment of 'vulnerable' individuals, such as unemployed or underemployed young men.

While each of these situations and contexts is much more complex and multi-layered than there is space here to describe, each of them requires a different set of tools and activities to effectively reduce and counter the threats posed by violent extremist groups and the salience of their narratives. In the Kosovo example, a more purely communications-based intervention may be more appropriate, which involves designing and disseminating counter narratives to undercut and undermine ISIS's narratives, as well as provide alternative narratives that emphasise a positive, shared national identity and the opportunities for 'redemption' within the Kosovar nation. In the coastal West Africa example, it may be more effective to build resilience through direct engagement with grassroots communities, providing a space for them to articulate and communicate their needs, grievances and ideas, and then building mechanisms for this information to reach local government authorities and decision makers so that they can responsively fill these gaps and avoid them being exploited by violent extremist groups.

It may be both appropriate and effective to involve imams and other religious figures as

Albany's UK CSSF-funded Somalia programme, The Early Recovery Initiative (ERI), embodies the concept of evidence-based community engagement for stabilisation objectives. The project aims to build stable and resilient communities in Newly and Recently Recovered Areas (NRRAs) from al-Shabaab (aS), which are no longer susceptible to aS influence. We do this through our four-step Early Recovery Process:

- Conduct an in-depth study into the NRRAs, mapping the local drivers of conflict, presence of government authorities, community tensions, and individuals of influence.
- Prepare and implement local community engagement activities which have been tailored to the local context. Activities include community resolution forums, football tournaments for peace, cultural events etc.
- Set up feedback loops with the community. Through ongoing focus groups discussions, the project team learnt of the impact of activities, as well as changing grievances so that activities could be updated in real-time.
- Build the skills of security actors. As the Somali National Army is often the first point of contact after liberation from aS, we understand the importance of upskilling them to interact with communities in a conflict-sensitive manner, so as not to alienate the communities with whom they work.

Through the soft-power approach of ERI, focusing on evidence-based community engagements, feedback loops, and upskilling of security actors, the communities recently liberated from aS are able to develop resilience to the VE group, and thus foster an environment of increased stability.

programme collaborators and 'credible messengers' in both of these examples, given the respect and esteem they often command with the specific beneficiary populations and target audiences. But, it is advisable that they avoid disseminating religious counterarguments or attacking the religious underpinnings of the violent extremist narratives, for all of the reasons mentioned previously. Instead, a more effective approach would likely be research-led and evidence-informed (whether this is campaign-based, community dialogue-based, or some combination thereof) seeking to undercut the aims and activities of violent extremist actors and builds long term stability and resilience.

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