

# Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism

Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds).

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>i</b>
Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann	
<b>Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism</b>	<b>1</b>
The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding Mohammed Abu-Nimer	
<b>Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices</b>	<b>21</b>
A Gendered Lens on PVE Sanam Naraghi Anderlini	
<b>Engaging with Whom?</b>	<b>37</b>
Opportunities and Challenges of PVE Approaches in Iraq and Germany Maral Jekta	
<b>Effective Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism</b>	<b>49</b>
A Peacebuilding Systems Perspective Anita Ernstorfer	
<b>Religious Institutions and the Challenges of Extremism and Terrorism</b>	<b>61</b>
The Long View Radwan El Sayed	
<b>“What’s actually needed is to invent new terms”</b>	<b>69</b>
A Conversation about Radical Religious Norms and Experiences from the Balkans Beatrix Austin (interviewer)	
<b>A Way Forward in Transforming Violent Extremism</b>	
De-Islamisation, De-Securitisation and De-Religionisation Mohammed Abu-Nimer	<b>77</b>
<b>About the Authors and Editors</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	<b>86</b>



# Introduction

Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann

Is the topic of violent extremism slowly turning into one on which everything has already been said, but not yet by everyone, as Karl Valentin used to wryly remark? We do not think so. While violent extremism (VE) has indeed emerged as a new buzzword and a strong funding trend over the past few years, effective strategies for addressing the phenomenon are still being forged and need to be reviewed and tested. Violent extremism's manifestations range widely: from foreign fighters via terrorist attacks to increasingly public violence-condoning ideology and rhetoric of both secular and religious provenance. How to deal with violent extremism, and its protagonists, is therefore also becoming a major challenge for peacebuilders and conflict transformation practitioners. What specific advantages can a “transformative lens” bring – one which applies insights and learning from the peacebuilding and conflict transformation fields? This is one of the main areas of investigation of this latest issue of the Berghof Handbook Dialogues.

In detail, we set out to find responses to the following questions:

- ≡ What evidence-based knowledge is there in academia, practitioner and policy circles on the causes and effects of current radicalisation leading to or expressing itself in violent extremism?
- ≡ What are the links between violent ideology, religious *or* secular, and political action? Despite the prominence that the discussion of radical Islam currently enjoys in this context, our Dialogue aims to shed light on *all* relevant and diverse forms of radicalisation and extremism.
- ≡ Which avenues of influence – on which types of actor, at which levels, in which sectors – are particularly promising from a conflict transformation and peacebuilding perspective? Who needs to be involved? How can transformative strategies be formulated which actively contribute to changing and de-escalating extreme and violent practices and strategies, or which prevent their emergence in the first place?

Our aim with this 13<sup>th</sup> issue of the Berghof Handbook Dialogues is to pull together recent analysis, practice and policy experience into one dialogue, upon which a further discussion about regional commonalities and differences, and experiences from research, practice and policy can build.

## The current state of debate: a lack of unified understanding

The rise, both real and perceived, of violent extremism, armed radicalisation and terrorist activity challenges the field of peace and conflict studies alongside other areas of study and practice (politics, security, development). For all of them, it poses an urgent need to gain a better understanding of the actors, factors and dynamics at play. This starts, however, with acknowledging that no unified or even very explicit understanding exists of how to define the phenomena of violent extremism, armed radicalisation and terrorist activity.

As regards violent extremism, one of the authors in this Dialogue, Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, puts her finger on it: “despite the myriad policy directives and action plans to prevent and counter this phenomenon, there is still no agreed definition of what ‘violent extremism’ means” (in this volume, 22). One of the few exceptions to this is the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which defines violent extremism as “advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives” (USAID 2011, 2-3). This definition is also used by the lead author in this Dialogue, Mohammed Abu-Nimer (in this volume, 2).<sup>1</sup> If extremism as such implies a deviation from mainstream social norms, then violent extremism entails the use of all means, including brutal force, that seem to serve the extremists’ aim of pushing the mainstream within society towards extremist thought and belief as the dominant social norm.

A similar lacuna relates to the terminology surrounding radicalisation (and its non-mirror image, de-radicalisation), which has now become near-synonymous with violence-prone processes. As Allen has noted: “No universal definition of radicalization exists in the [...] academic/social science communities.” In his words, “the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence as a method to effect societal change” results in the radicalisation of social groups (Allen 2007, 3). However, he does not present a single convincing argument for an intrinsic combination of radicalism and violence. Waldmann describes a “radical” as someone who “does not make compromises but tries to resolve problems once [and] for all by tackling them at their roots ... questions the status quo of the socio-political order with a view to replacing it with another ... [and] will often act in the name of an absolute truth, be it an ideology or a religion, which does not admit concessions or restrictions” (Waldmann 2010, 8). Researchers from the Western Balkans, who have contributed to this Dialogue issue, apply a broader definition and rightly point out that at its root, radicalism simply means that one does not agree with the majority (in this volume, 73f). Uncoupled from violence, then, radical ideas can also be seen as motors of necessary and fruitful change. It is not without irony that one of the founding fathers of peacebuilding, Adam Curle, has been called a “radical peacemaker” (Woodhouse 2010).

And terrorist activity? After 9/11, terrorism has become a widely used, common term to characterise the apparently random but targeted use of force to intimidate a government, a religious or ethnic community or other social groups. While the selection of individual victims seems to be random, those victims are assumed by the perpetrators to represent the actor or community that is targeted.

Whereas radicalisation describes a process during which individuals or groups lean increasingly to extremist thoughts and belief, extremism implies the readiness to use force in order to achieve political (or other) objectives. Terrorist activity, however, refers to a terminology that brands actors for their intended or actual use of force. This practice of branding results in often reductionist policies, which may deepen a public sense of identity-based hostility and isolation, no matter what the motivation of individual perpetrators may have been. In sum, the direct link between (armed) radicalisation, (violent) extremism, and terrorist activity, very often to be observed in politics and media, seems to be constructed and blurs the lines between legitimate grievances and resistance on the one hand – and the illegal and illegitimate use of force on the other.

<sup>1</sup> Still, sceptical voices persist: “Violent extremism is really when a particular ideology, deemed ‘radical’ or ‘extreme’ is used to promote, incite or condone violent behaviour. But why not just call it ‘violence’ then?”, argues one interviewee in “Lost for Words: Questioning the Relationship between Trauma and Radicalisation”, Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 15 September 2017.

Despite this lack of shared understanding or definition of the core problem(s), Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism (PVE/CVE) has become a focal point of discussion, research and programming around the world.

There have been numerous attempts to classify the various root causes and driving factors of violent extremism according to their level of analysis (micro/meso/macro), their unit of analysis (individual/group/societal) or distinct sectoral approaches (socio-economic/political/cultural/psychological) (for an exhaustive overview, see Köhler 2016). The most common classification has become the distinction between “push” and “pull” factors of violent extremism. In this context, “push” commonly refers to structural conditions, such as poverty, grievances and lack of access to political processes or justice, often in the context of underdevelopment or protracted conflict. “Pull” factors are commonly understood as the direct drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (see, e.g., Holmer 2013), such as the ideological appeal or financial and social benefits of joining a terrorist group (e.g. feeling of belonging, in-group identity or more practical benefits such as finding a spouse).

The 2015 UN Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism (UN 2015) also identified clusters of push and pull factors. The “push factors” named include conditions conducive to violent extremism and the structural context from which it emerges, such as lack of socio-economic opportunities; marginalisation and discrimination; poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law; prolonged and unresolved conflicts; and radicalisation in prisons. “Pull factors” comprise the individual motivations and processes which play a key role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremist action. They include: individual backgrounds and motivations; collective grievances and victimisation stemming from domination, oppression, subjugation or foreign intervention; distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies and ethnic and cultural differences; and leadership and social networks. In reality, there is no either/or. Push and pull factors are interwoven and mutually reinforcing.

In public debate and programming, however, arguments about the causes of and policies for addressing violent extremism and radicalisation appear to be based less on thorough, up-to-date analysis and differentiated assessment (for a critique, see, for example, Kundnani 2015) and more on stereotyping and fear. It is not surprising, in this context, that the topic of violent extremism – albeit an issue which has assumed various guises for centuries – gained renewed prominence after the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001. 9/11 was a watershed in the sense that from that point on, the predominant Western political and public perspective seemed to intrinsically intertwine the phenomena of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. The global research agenda, however, is more varied than often perceived, or portrayed in the media.

Before 9/11, the academic discourse around violent extremism and radicalisation was mainly concerned with far-right and extremist left-wing actors in Europe and the Middle East. Individuals were considered to be drawn to violent extremism for reasons such as the rejection of cultural imperialism, the free market economy and corruption, political illegitimacy, colonialist structures and extreme wealth disparities. During the early 2000s, research into the nexus between religion and violent extremism grew. Nonetheless, structural causes of radicalisation towards violent extremism, such as repression or economic conditions (relative deprivation, poverty and globalisation), also remained on the research agenda. Researchers explored possible links between violent extremism and the degree of democracy, education and governance (one recent example evidenced by UNDP 2017) as well as drivers such as honour and oppression. A noticeable shift towards social factors occurred during these years, prompting researchers to focus on the role of civil society, gender or identity formation. The research field took steps to distance itself from attributing violent extremism to religious beliefs, despite persistent pockets of hot debate about this connection.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This is starkly captured by the debate between French philosophers Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel, which contrasts the “Islamicization of radicalism” (Olivier Roy) with a “Radicalization of Islam” (Gilles Kepel); see Adam Nossiter, “‘That ignoramus’: 2 French Scholars of Radical Islam Turn Bitter Rivals”, *New York Times*, 12 July 2016.

Today's research agenda on violent extremism is concerned more particularly with youth radicalisation patterns, highlighting the lack of social inclusion. Identity is also examined as a driving force at the micro level (SFCG 2017). Alongside these more recent topics, other more traditional factors which are suspected to be root causes of violent extremism, such as blocked political and economic participation, are also being investigated. Finally, and ground-breaking, if extremism becomes increasingly popular and mainstreamed within a particular society, common assumptions about this society, i.e. its centre-periphery constructions, may become fissured, which tends to enlarge the body of research from a focus on particular groups and actors to the more fundamental issues of the social fabric and political values of the given society.

Overall, the contemporary body of research is characterised by specialised literature in a range of fields, such as criminology, security, terrorism, social psychology, conflict and development studies. There is little interaction between these fields of enquiry, which leaves little space for a common understanding to emerge over the main push and pull factors of violent extremism. There are growing calls, therefore, for more cross-disciplinary debate. Furthermore, since violent extremism can be considered an increasingly global phenomenon, the need for case-specific and comparative research on the topic is growing, particularly focusing on Europe (for example, Germany, France, Belgium and the UK), the MENA region, Asia (i.e. the Philippines, Indonesia and Central Asia) and Western Balkan countries.

## On terminology

For the purpose of this dialogue, we understand violent extremism generally as violence associated with radical ideologies or groups which strive for a complete, not gradual or incremental, change of political and social relations. We concede that the boundaries between extremism and violence are sometimes permeable and event-driven. And we bear in mind that although violence and extremism are not bound to one specific religious or ideological setting, discussions of the concept are usually associated with a very specific empirical reality, i.e. violence conducted by individuals or groups associated with Al Qaeda and ISIS or right-wing extremism associated with white supremacist ideology in the US or Europe. Concerning the various approaches for dealing with the phenomenon, we offer the following “understandings in progress”, which inform our interest in the topic. Although the different concepts in and of themselves still lack theoretical, definitional and operational coherence and clarity, it is useful to keep in mind the distinctions between them:

*Countering violent extremism (or CVE)* was initially a rather cosmetic improvement on the increasingly criticised anti-/counter-terrorism approaches, which rely on intelligence-gathering and a suppressive repertoire. CVE has now developed into a security-focused approach to dealing with VE which uses a myriad of tools and entry points, but remains rooted in a hard power approach.

*Preventing violent extremism (PVE)* was first introduced in the 2015 UN Action Plan presented by then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (UN 2015). Emphasis is put on identifying and tackling the push and pull factors, on addressing structural root causes and on strengthening individual and community resilience.

The recent introduction of *Transforming Violent Extremism (TVE)* underscores the necessity and the possibility of changing actors, and their means of violence, rather than solely stepping up security or resilience in order to protect and prevent: “*Transforming* violent extremism recognizes that while violent extremism exists, the reasons and motivators leading to an individual being drawn to violent extremist movements can be transformed into a different type of agency or engagement. This is distinct from *countering* violent extremism which is reactive to extremist violence rather than aimed at altering the dynamics that motivate it.” (SFCG 2017, 4). Similar terminology is also taken as the framing concept in this dialogue (“*Transformative Approaches to VE*”), where lead author Mohammed Abu-Nimer proposes: “What is truly needed to effectively address VE is the development of ... programmes that take into account the ‘human factors’ – the community context, culture and religion, building trust with the community, fostering intra-



community relationships through dialogue, finding a language of peace and peace education, etc.” (in this volume, 3).

With all approaches, there remains a major blind spot in terms of policy options for engaging groups that are already/still radicalised, as there are no existing approaches for ‘engaging violent extremists’ (or ‘EVE’) through third-party dialogue or negotiation. However, if third parties play a significant role in the radicalisation processes of social and political actors – a hypothesis which is widely acknowledged as a reference point for those actors – then the role of third parties in supporting reconciliation and peace processes must be equally important. An explorative idea at this stage, EVE denotes a stance that attempts to analyse root causes and options for change not in academic, securitised or Western “silos”, but *together with* affected communities and radicalised groups themselves. More particularly, such a term implies that dialogue engagement with radicalised groups and individuals might be a viable option if it is conducted with the aim of reducing violence or paving the way for a peace process. However, there is currently a severe lack of comprehensive and in-depth research to inform policy approaches and decision-making in this area.

## Contributions to this dialogue

The lead article in this dialogue comes from **Mohammed Abu-Nimer**, a Senior Advisor to KAICIID (International Dialogue Centre, Vienna, Austria) and Professor at the American University School of International Service, International Peace and Conflict Resolution Program. His article critically examines the emerging CVE/PVE field, addressing two interlinked core questions: how do various CVE/PVE approaches relate to current issues of violent extremism (VE) in Muslim communities, and what are the areas of intersection between interreligious peacebuilding and the various CVE/PVE approaches? Abu-Nimer unpacks assumptions and functions that CVE/PVE fulfil in the current crisis facing many Muslim and non-Muslim governments around the world, especially in Europe and North America. He stresses that since “countering Islamic” terrorism and VE constitute the core of CVE/PVE approaches (based on the misperception and assumption that Muslims are disproportionately responsible for acts of violence), it is necessary to explore whether this is the most effective method. In search of alternative approaches, the article explores several examples of Islamic peace models in building stronger resilience in Muslim communities and institutions to VE. He also calls for a stronger and more sincere engagement with religious institutions, better “religious literacy” among secular NGO and government workers and a better grounding in the theoretical understandings and principled approaches inherent in a “culture of peace”.

The first response to this lead article comes from **Sanam Naraghi Anderlini**, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the International Civil Society Action Network ICAN, spearheading the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) with member organisations active in preventing violent extremism by promoting peace, rights and pluralism in over 35 countries. In responding to Abu-Nimer’s framing article, her paper offers “points of agreement and difference in an effort to deepen our collective understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism and the responses needed to enable effective transformation” (in this volume, 23). It does so in two ways: first, by offering a conceptual shift to move beyond limitations of the current terminology and discourse; and, second, by arguing the relevance of identity with particular attention to the centrality of gender to the ideology, recruitment and action of violent extremists, as well as the importance of women in particular in countering, preventing and providing clear alternatives to such groups.

The second response comes from **Maral Jekta**, a Research Associate with the Berlin-based organisation *ufuq e.V.*, who has a strong focus on and background in media and strategic communication and the role of narratives in counter-messaging. Jekta’s response to the lead article discusses Abu-Nimer’s suggestion to engage more seriously with religious agencies and actors, using Iraq as an example. She examines in particular the way in which religion and its identity components are being integrated in INGOs’ project

structures in Iraq and highlights the limitations of this approach. In this context, Jekta argues that the emphasis on de-linking religion from the CVE/PVE debate and focusing more on root-cause analyses (Abu-Nimer in this volume, PAGE) is much-needed. Unlike Abu-Nimer, however, she emphasises the need to engage with *secular* organisations and movements. In a second step, this response underlines many of the deficiencies of CVE/PVE approaches which Abu-Nimer lists, by presenting their negative impact on international media development practitioners. Lastly, Jekta refers to the German federal programme “Live Democracy!” to support the call for a holistic “idealism” approach in PVE.

The third response comes from **Anita Ernstorfer**, Director at the US-based CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. She leads CDA’s Peacebuilding Effectiveness Practice Area as well as CDA’s Advisory Services wing. Her article focuses on the question of what makes prevention of violent extremism approaches effective. It explores in more detail some of the points raised in the lead article related to an insufficient understanding of structural drivers of violent extremism (VE), the limited evidence base and research in relation to the ‘prevention’ or ‘countering’ of violent extremism (P/CVE), unrealistic donor expectations, and weak and externally imposed programme designs. It specifically responds to Abu-Nimer’s request to “delve deeper” into analysing structures of violence, not only the symptoms (Abu-Nimer in this volume, 17). The article takes a practical approach, based on the premise that political extremism and rapidly changing forms of violence have been a concern in the peacebuilding field for a long time and that we need to understand the phenomenon of ‘violent extremism’ alongside other forms of violence. In any case, Ernstorfer argues, significant levels of policy attention and funding will be focused on P/CVE programming for the foreseeable future, so it is wise to work towards maximising the potential for positive peace impacts of different approaches to preventing violent extremism by applying principles from the peacebuilding field and a systems perspective.

The fourth respondent is Radwan **El Sayed**, Professor of Islamic Studies at Lebanese University in Beirut, who also “digs deeper”, in his case into the question of what religious institutions can really do, what they are currently undertaking and how they could be strengthened in their endeavours. He applies a long historical view and reflects on how the securitisation of C/PVE has affected the relationship between religious institutions and their constituencies, stressing the need to rebuild the trust among them and follow the principle of inclusivity. He concurs with Abu-Nimer on the worrisome lack of clear long-term strategies and tool kits that help religious institutions take part in C/PVE programmes effectively without threatening their credibility with their constituencies, pointing to the necessity of empowering the religious institutions to develop tools and frameworks that use the language of faith and reflect the spiritual and religious traditions in a way that resonates in the modern age. He identifies steps of rehabilitation, qualification and dialogue as necessary avenues ahead.

The final response comes in the form of an **interview with a consortium of local researchers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo**. All are part of a collaborative and participatory research project currently implemented by Berghof Foundation’s Conflict Transformation Research programme.<sup>3</sup> In a conversation recorded in Sarajevo in March 2018, the experts from the region shared many areas of agreement with the propositions put forward in the lead article. In particular, the need to start by assessing the needs of the local communities meant to be strengthened by national strategies to counter or prevent violent extremism and the imperative to work with the Islamic community and especially local imams in the municipalities in question resonated strongly for the region of the Western Balkans. At the same time, there was lively debate that it would be wrong to put all the burden on the shoulders of the Islamic community, neglecting the national and global dimensions of the problem or romanticising the homogeneity and clout of the institutions at hand. The conversation then turned to the need to carefully examine the terminology used in programme writing and implementation (“‘Islamic’ anything”, it is pointed out, “that’s the wrong term”; in this volume, 74). A dynamic concept of “reciprocal” or “cumulative” extremism is introduced and

3 For more information on the project “Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in the Western Balkans”, see <https://www.berghof-foundation.org/nc/en/programmes/conflict-transformation-research/western-balkans-preventing-violent-extremism/>

the team of researchers agrees that “...this article’s contribution, and our own, could be to start a discussion about re-inventing the terms used in preparing and making policies in PVE and CVE” (in this volume, 75).

In his final reflection on the responses in this Dialogue issue, Mohammed Abu-Nimer reiterates the importance of integrating religious actors and interreligious peacebuilding. At the same time, he emphasises the need for complementarity: “without a complementary approach based on systematic cooperation and coordination between the various abovementioned agencies that contribute to the causes of violence, formal and informal interventions to counter violent extremism will continue to provide limited remedy and only handle symptoms at best.” (in this volume, 77). He therefore calls for interreligious peacebuilding to become a truly collaborative effort and points to the need for “sustained dialogue platforms designed specifically to identify common issues for collaboration and develop a sense of genuine respect for ideological and identity-based differences” (in this volume, 79).

## Prominent themes and dilemmas

The dialogue at hand, as is usual with the exchanges hosted by this publication series, is rich in detail and differentiation. Nonetheless, there are a few themes which emerge across the lead article and the responses, and they are worth highlighting at the end of this introduction. We pick two, which we see as particularly relevant, also against the backdrop of our understanding of conflict transformation (Berghof Foundation 2012, 7ff).

*The need for education, learning and reflection ... at all levels.* It has become clear, if it needed to be any clearer, from the contributions to this volume that the dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremism, the wording around the issue and case- and context-specific factors of what can be done are still not sufficiently understood. More dialogue and evidence-based comparative learning will be necessary. However, a different type of education also comes to the forefront, and that is the education of a resilient next generation, which early on is being equipped to see through the dubious promises of violent extremist ideologies. Of course, change is not merely a cognitive challenge. If radicalisation is rooted in social hardships and political grievances, education will make a difference only if it enables the affected people to mitigate tensions and enter into constructive engagement with each other to foster social changes.

*The needs of inclusivity ... for religious institutions and more.* The need for more respectful engagement with religious actors and institutions has generally been supported by the contributors to this dialogue. However, they also underline that it is important to cast the net of inclusivity more widely still, and build effective strategies for countering violent extremism on a broad base of religious and secular actors. Most importantly, the dialogue must not be confined to the relationship between different religious communities. It must start within the communities, focusing on shared values, social cohesion, principles of non-violence, minority rights, gender equality, and more. Naraghi Anderlini speaks for several of our respondents when she states: “Too often, religious institutions – even the more moderate ones – are at odds with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. Thus, while their inclusion in P/CVE efforts is essential and in many cases is occurring at the grassroots, their legitimacy or authority should not be elevated above those of women- or youth-led organisations and others active in this sphere.” (in this volume, 23).

## Conclusion

The violence-condoning ideologies and terrorising violence of the few should never make us forget the openness and non-violence of many. But it is undisputable that confronting violent extremism has become a central framework and priority, especially for policy-makers in national and international government agencies. The fertile ground for violent extremism appears to be growing, augmented by a number of drivers, both internal and external. Still, it is a problematic term: easily applied against communities rather than with the aim of understanding root causes of violence. It often gets lost in the current political debates which seek to clarify distinctions, be it between violent extremism and other forms of violence, political or social, or between violent and non-violent extremism.

At Berghof Foundation, we are primarily concerned with two issues: first, an open-minded and better understanding of the drivers of violent extremism; and second, supporting work promoting tolerance and inclusivity. We hope that this Berghof Handbook Dialogue 13 gives us a better start in achieving both, and thank all those who have made this frank exchange possible and who have contributed to its timely publication.

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# Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism

The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding

Mohammed Abu-Nimer

## Content

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Addressing Violent Extremism</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Overview of basic approaches to CVE/PVE	3
2.2	CVE/PVE is not the cure	5
2.3	From denial to an integrative approach: engaging religious agencies and marginalised actors	7
<b>3</b>	<b>Dilemmas and Obstacles</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1	Islamisation of CVE/PVE	11
3.2	Institutional responses to CVE/PVE in a Muslim context: Locked in securitisation	12
<b>4</b>	<b>A Peacebuilding Response to VE: An Alternative Approach for Bridging the Gap</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions and Implications for Peacebuilding and CVE/PVE</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>References and Further Reading</b>	<b>18</b>

# 1 Introduction

*In order to get funding for our peacebuilding programs, now we have to describe them in the context of violent extremism, otherwise we have no chance of being supported or even making it to the initial screening. (Head of an International NGO, Washington DC)<sup>1</sup>*

The above quote reflects shared experience among peacebuilding practitioners in various gatherings: the emergence of “violent extremism” (VE)<sup>2</sup> as a central framework and priority adopted by most Western and non-Western government agencies. It has become the primary lens through which to describe many of their activities, especially in conflict areas around the world, even when the issues are not or are only remotely related.

There is no doubt that VE narratives, especially those promoting violence in the name of Islam spread by groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, Taliban and Daesh, have gained strength and visibility in the last two decades (regardless of the differences in the groups’ motivation or type of justification – be it nationalism, anti-Western intervention or religion). However, it is an overstatement to solely explain the motivation for endorsing or adopting VE in Muslim societies as a result of theological factors; as explained below, there are many other factors besides religious identity and theological reasoning contributing to the phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace historical factors that led to the creation of such groups in predominantly Muslim countries. In Afghanistan, for example, one such factor is rooted in the Cold War dynamics between the United States (US) and the USSR at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. To fight communism, the US government mobilised local Afghan communities, which included some fighters who subsequently employed extreme Islamic religious narratives. The US’s fervent desire to prevent the spread of communism thus led to the arming of members of Afghan society who later utilised the concept of jihad against non-believers in certain Sunni interpretations:

*One of the greatest criticisms of U.S. policy, especially after the rise of the Taliban, has been that the CIA directly supported Arab volunteers who came to Afghanistan to wage jihad against the Soviets, but eventually used those American arms to engage in terrorist war against the West. However, the so-called “Afghan Arabs” only emerged as a major force in the 1990s. During the resistance against the Soviet occupation, Arab volunteers played at best a cursory role... Nevertheless, by delegating responsibility for arms distribution to the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence Agency of Pakistan], the United States created an environment in which radical Islam could flourish. And, with the coming of the Taliban, radical Islam did just that (Rubin 2002).*

Unfortunately, in the fight against Taliban, Somali Al-Shabab after 9/11 and Al-Qaeda before and after 9/11, international policy-makers shifted the focus from US-Soviet Cold War dynamics to a fight against the threat of Islam as a religion and then as a civilisation, a thesis that gained certain credibility when Al-Shabab continued their actions against the US intervention.

As a result of this shift in focus and perception, terrorist attacks led by Al-Qaeda and later Daesh in Europe, the US, Middle East and elsewhere since the early 1990s have fuelled fear and insecurity, strengthening negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims around the world. Global and national media have also contributed to the link between Islam and Arabs (their religion, tradition and culture) on the one hand and terrorism, extremism and violence in general on the other (Morgan/Poynting 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Participant at a United States Institute of Peace (USIP) workshop on Confronting Hate Speech, October 2016.

<sup>2</sup> There are various definitions of VE. For the purpose of this paper, the generic working definition is based on the following: “advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives” (USAID 2011, 2-3)



The outbreak of the Syrian war and Daesh's occupation of Iraqi and Syrian territories triggered new waves of refugees into neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey) and beyond (European countries). When the refugee crisis reached European borders in 2014, several politicians and political parties expressed the need to respond to the threat of VE, thus raising countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) to a high-priority level for most international agencies and policy-makers (Keiswetter/Chane 2013). Preventing the radicalisation of Muslim youth at home and among the incoming refugees jumped to the top of the agenda of international and national agencies such as the UN, OSCE, DFID and CIDA (Koehler 2016). In this process, new intervention programmes were developed and the objectives, success measures and scope of old programmes were redesigned and revised. The primary focus on external factors (not European or American policies) in such agencies' VE frameworks may have contributed to the ongoing institutionalisation of Islamophobia in such societies. It also allowed countries responding in this way to absolve themselves of responsibility for VE in general.

While few would deny the need to address violent extremism, underscoring the importance of CVE/PVE programmes' aims, they often fail to address its root causes. Ultimately, addressing VE is fundamentally about conflict transformation, yet CVE/PVE interventions are rarely designed to be transformative. What is truly needed to effectively address VE is the development of either CVE/PVE or other programmes that take into account the "human factors" – the community context, culture and religion, building trust with the community, fostering intra-community relationships through dialogue, finding a language of peace and peace education, etc. These are necessary in transforming a "culture of war" into a "culture of peace" (Boulding 2001), but are often left out of current CVE/PVE programme designs and implementation. The following article examines CVE/PVE programmes and the challenges they face, and looks at examples that offer alternative practices that together can provide a basis for redesigning programmes to address VE and shape transformative interventions.

#### Examples of international CVE/ PVE bodies and programmes

- ≡ Centre for Pakistan and Gulf Studies:  
CVE Monitor Project;
- ≡ Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF);
- ≡ United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTED);
- ≡ Club de Madrid (CdM): Madrid +10
- ≡ CdM supported by European Commission: PVE: Leaders Telling a Different Story
- ≡ OSCE: United in Countering Violent Extremism (2017)

## 2 Addressing Violent Extremism

### 2.1 Overview of basic approaches to CVE/PVE

#### Stage One: Counter- and Anti-Terrorism

The evolution of various approaches to confronting VE encountered numerous challenges. In its early stage, the traditional approach relied on counter- and anti-terrorism strategies, often involving counter-intelligence, surveillance and covert and overt military operations to eliminate active and suspected terrorists, etc. Such approaches were largely security- and military-oriented, with many strategies implemented following the terror attacks on 11 September 2001 (9/11) and evolving over the last 16 years along with new ones that emerged in the wake of later terror acts. These strategies range from anti-

Government anti-terrorism policies, such as FISA in the US (1978), pre-date 2001 by decades, but the number, variety, nature and expansiveness of many countries' post-2001 CVE strategies have increased inside and outside national borders (Haubrich 2003; Williams 2011).

terrorism legislation (both domestic and international) to direct military intervention. In the European Union, this has included a number of codified coordination efforts and operational cooperation among member states (Argomaniz 2009). In the US, the “historic ‘redefinition’ of the Justice Department’s mission” – referred to in John Ashcroft’s testimony to the House Judiciary Committee – “turned the focus of federal law enforcement from apprehending and incarcerating criminals to detecting and halting terrorist activity on American soil and abroad” (Whitehead 2002, 1086).

The military tactics used aimed to isolate terrorists and prevent them from gaining access to recruits, supplies, finance and targets (Freedman 2005, 24) or engaged in “search and destroy” tactics such as those deployed by the US in the assassination of Osama bin Laden. They also included the use of Predator drones for targeted killings of Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders (Williams 2010).

## Stage Two: Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

At a later stage, the CVE<sup>3</sup> framework was introduced to respond to the effective recruitment strategies utilised by Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, Boko Haram and Daesh. At its core, CVE focuses on counter-recruitment strategies, targeted messaging, youth engagement strategies and religious counter-narratives to confront the spreading discourse of Daesh and Boko Haram. Intelligence continues to play a major role in CVE strategies, stressing the need for intelligence gathering and processing to identify potential threats and facilitate appropriate action (Lazarus 2005; Oliver 2006). Examples include policing strategies combined with intelligence gathering at the community level with the aim of early intervention to prevent terror acts (Bettinson 2009; Brown 2007; Pickering et al. 2007). Other examples include border security and crisis reaction, which refers to being able to handle a potential situation with numerous casualties (Oliver 2006).

### Examples of IO and NGO PVE strategies

- ≡ 2011 UN Resolution 16/18
- ≡ 2012 Rabat Plan of Action (OHCHR)
- ≡ 2015 Fez Plan of Action (UNOtPG, KAICIID, WCC)
- ≡ 2015-2017 Fez Process (UNOtPG, KAICIID, WCC)

## Stage Three: Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE)

The third evolution in responding to VE is reflected in the development of the PVE framework: agencies emphasise the need for a more comprehensive approach, with a particular emphasis on engaging local communities and providing alternative religious discourses.

PVE approaches include actions such as bringing religious leaders and organisations into the spotlight to emphasise “normal” religious practices and to help prevent radicalisation. This has led to an emphasis on selected leaders and organisations within the Islamic religious community as having a central role in countering VE (Nasser-Eddine et al. 2011, 47). Such actions are often fostered by international intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), such as OHCHR, the UN Office on Genocide Prevention (UNOtPG) and the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), and international NGOs such as the World Council of Churches (WCC). Their resolutions and programmes target intolerance

KAICIID’s “Social Media as a Space for Dialogue” trained hundreds of religious leaders and dialogue practitioners to use social media for the purpose of counter-narratives.

<sup>3</sup> The term is a recent addition to the lexicon of counter-terrorism. The importance of extremist ideas in terrorist recruitment and radicalisation has been known for some time. But it is only in the last decade that a more sustained focus on the ideational aspects of terrorism has emerged and that CVE as a field of policy and practice has become more coherent (Romaniuk 2015).



and discrimination based on religious affiliation and counter national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.

The more recent actions by Facebook and Twitter in actively removing Daesh propaganda, beheading videos and hate speech, as well as government efforts to monitor Daesh online, are the manifestation of what was argued in the literature more than a decade ago (Brimley 2006; Kohlmann 2006). Alternatively, counter-narratives may be used, such as stressing Islam as a religion of peace and rejecting violence (Qureshi/Marsden, 2010). Other counter-narratives might include those by people who have left groups such as Daesh describing the difficulty of life, fear and general dismantling of the romantic picture painted by recruiters (Kessels 2010).

Lastly, governments, IGOs and NGOs have launched initiatives to “tackle the problem” by going to the roots, developing innumerable projects directed towards anything from development to state-building and citing challenges faced by populations due either to lack of infrastructure and opportunity or to displacement, fear and outbreaks of violence associated with failed states (Cordesman 2006; von Hippel 2008). Development organisations may not work under the pretext of CVE or PVE directly, but indirectly do so through programmes that aim to alleviate poverty and develop infrastructure and democratic institutions. The hypothesis is that the successful establishment of sustainable democratic institutions goes hand in hand with countering terrorism (Briggs 2010).

The government agency focus beyond traditional security and military approaches is a much-needed development; such efforts are necessary for effective responses to both ideological and security challenges posed by the various groups that promote violent extremism. These efforts have been enhanced by the support of IGOs, NGOs and globally recognised think tanks. The various cross-border partnerships and alliances have strengthened the capacity of governments, “especially those which lack the local infrastructure to deal with such militant groups (Newman 2007).

Integrating CVE/PVE programmes into the well-established international development and humanitarian aid programmes has also resulted in more systematic implementation of these programmes.

## 2.2 CVE/PVE is not the cure

The above approaches, while abundant and varied, face a number of criticisms. One of the major concerns is the possible (in many cases very real) infringement upon civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, in longstanding liberal democracies (Pearson/Busst 2006) or the specific targeting/profiling of one group, such as the singular focus on Muslims in the United Kingdom’s CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy (Thomas 2010).

**Push Factors:**  
poverty, unemployment, marginalisation, sectarianism, government oppression, lack of opportunity, etc.

**Pull Factors:**  
monetary benefit, protection or safety for a person’s family, sense of belonging, revenge, personal empowerment, religious rewards, etc.

In addition to the policy implications, there are various gaps in the research on CVE/PVE (Romaniuk 2015). While the amount of research being conducted is growing, it is still sparse compared to the number of programmes being implemented by various agencies. The limited scope and volume of systematic evaluation of these programmes are especially problematic (Koehler 2016). Empirical data directly relating to CVE/PVE is also lacking, especially in community contexts, which continues to be a major challenge in the design, reporting and analysis of these initiatives.

Although the study of drivers that lead individuals to join VE groups has developed a great deal in the last decade, the majority of these studies focus on generic factors such as poverty, government policies,

4 The UN-based Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTED) has put together five policy papers on guidelines for UN member cooperation against terror networks, to be found on its website. Security Council Resolution 2253 (2015) reinforced the existing international counter-financing of terrorism framework by calling on member states to move decisively to cut off the flow of funds, other financial assets and economic resources to Daesh.

extremist religious discourses or personality traits. The tendency to seek a universal formula to explain and detect drivers of VE has led to the lack of serious consideration of the impact and uniqueness of local contexts and local actors in shaping the dynamics of the drivers. Many studies emphasise the push rather than pull factors in their diagnosis of the drivers. A great deal of effort is also made to involve member states or their political representatives, resulting in the politicisation of both CVE and PVE that risks a greater degree of community distrust (an agenda for political rather than community gain) and therefore a lower level of acceptance of these efforts.

In addition to these macro policy aspects, there are various CVE/PVE programmatic challenges that hinder lasting results, including:

**1. Securitisation of CVE/PVE and the question of whose security:** Although security and intelligence gathering are strong drivers behind many counter-terrorism programmes, CVE/PVE initiatives are also influenced by the drive to enhance global, regional, national and local security. A number of projects, especially community early-warning programmes and other forms of CVE/PVE, aim to gather intelligence

Many US- and European-led programmes in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger are mainly aimed at countering the expansion of Daesh and Al-Qaeda in the Sahel region.

rather than taking genuine interest in community development practices. “...While the objective behind CVE is laudable, in practice, many of the efforts have been problematic and their impact limited or even negative in some cases. One of the key issues has been the tension felt by many communities that CVE initiatives were not there to support them but rather to spy on them...” (Houry 2017). Even those programmes initiated for local capacity building (education, elections, democracy, youth rehabilitation and vocational training, etc.) are being reframed with CVE/PVE language and terminology. Enhancing regional

and international security is also considered a primary measurement of the success of many of these programmes (for example, expecting and training imams to become law enforcement agents). Furthermore, policy-makers in European and American agencies often hold briefings about intervention programmes to determine whether these programmes actually contribute to their security. Such programmatic rationale is easily detected by beneficiaries of these interventions. As veteran participants in local community development programmes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have repeatedly said: “We know that you are worried about American security and not our security; that is why you came here to work with us. Why do international agencies suddenly care about VE when we have had political violence and mass crimes for decades?”<sup>5</sup>

**2. Externally imposed programming and designs:** International donors’ and government agencies’ priority on CVE/PVE and the urgency to counteract terrorist movements in their regions affect the impact and sustainability of these programmes; many programmes are externally imposed and intended to carry out the externals’ own political agendas. Programme designers face pressure to rapidly produce success indicators, causing programme designs to fall short of long-term effectiveness. Their designs specifically target selected communities and neglect wider stakeholders who are also in need of such programmes.<sup>6</sup>

Does focusing on changing Islamic religious narratives, by publicly putting on symbolic gestures of diversity or international conferences to denounce VE in the name of religion, really add value to CVE/PVE initiatives?

**3. Real added value of CVE/PVE initiatives compared to structural factors:** When these initiatives are presented as a cure and often as an effective response, they sometimes ignore the deep-rooted infrastructural

<sup>5</sup> Voiced by community leaders from Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Kurdistan, Jordan and Lebanon during workshops on education for peace that took place between 2011-2017.

<sup>6</sup> This criticism was expressed by several officers in Niger and Chad between 2012-2013 during various consultations on the effectiveness of peace and development programmes.

factors driving violent extremism. The question to ask is what the added value is of these programmes, considering factors such as collapsing educational institutions, corruption, discriminatory governance and lack of a national vision, lack of policies to ensure the basic collective and individual freedoms, control and censorship of media and territorial occupation systems. Are national and international agencies willing or seriously interested in confronting these issues? Can international agencies deal with these issues, which directly and indirectly impact youth in these contexts? How many – and what kind of – foreign interventions are needed to make a transformative change in these contexts?

### 2.3 From denial to an integrative approach: engaging religious agencies and marginalised actors

The lack of sincere engagement with or even denial of religion and its identity components has been a programmatic limitation of many CVE/PVE initiatives. As a result, in most cases IGOs and government agencies have historically relied on secular international, regional or local civil society entities to implement their programmes (Abu-Nimer/Kadayifci 2008). The lack of engagement with faith-based organisations (FBOs) has been documented not only in CVE/PVE but also with programmes on peacebuilding, democracy, post-conflict reconstruction, etc. (Abu-Nimer 2003, Abu-Nimer/Kadayifci 2008). Denying the need for positive, constructive engagement of religious actors has been, until recently, a characteristic of many international policy agencies (Gopin 2000, Appleby 2000, Abu-Nimer 2003).

Not recognising the need to engage religious agencies is largely due to the fact that most organisations operate within secular or non-religious governance frameworks. Thus their officers and managers are not aware of the need to engage religious leaders in the community. When they design their programmes, they therefore tend to build partnerships with secular civil society groups and professionals, who share with them the same secular ideological assumptions of promoting diversity, human rights and sustainable development. Beyond the lack of awareness, there is basic resistance towards engaging religious leaders by policy and development practitioners, who are themselves secular and believe that religion and religious institutions should be confined to their primary function of providing theological and spiritual services to communities. Additionally, they assume that any engagement beyond these parameters constitutes a violation of the principle of separation of church and state. What is missing in such approaches, however, is an authentic read of the local context, including major players and power relations, which would reveal that religion and FBOs are relevant beyond mere theological issues.

Nonetheless, there has been progress in recent years towards engagement of religious agencies and FBOs. The steps towards engaging religious agencies strongly resemble those of other areas: racial and ethnic studies, gender, peacebuilding and other fields working with marginalised minorities. As in other areas before, the process of engaging FBOs and religious agencies in the field of international policy-making, including CVE/PVE, is evolving from denial towards a more integrative approach, which could be described as one fundamental necessity of a transformative approach. These steps are as follows:

**Instrumentalised ('token') engagement:** In response to the pressure exerted on the centres of power (supporters of hegemonic discourse and/or dominant majority institutions) to include women and ethnic and racial minorities, new but slow steps of engagement were taken. The early steps were mostly in the form of symbolic involvement of gender, racial minorities and now religious agencies or paying lip service to peacebuilding discourse (the token minority representative syndrome) through programmes that highlight only the harmonious and ritualistic features of the relations and avoid any structural aspects of the conflict.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Peacebuilding for the purpose of this article is defined as an umbrella term that refers to intervention processes aiming at bridging the gap between conflicting parties pre, during, and post conflict (those can include conflict resolution processes such as mediation, facilitation, arbitration, problem solving, and other types of peace activities such as dialogue, peace education, nonviolence campaigns, etc.).

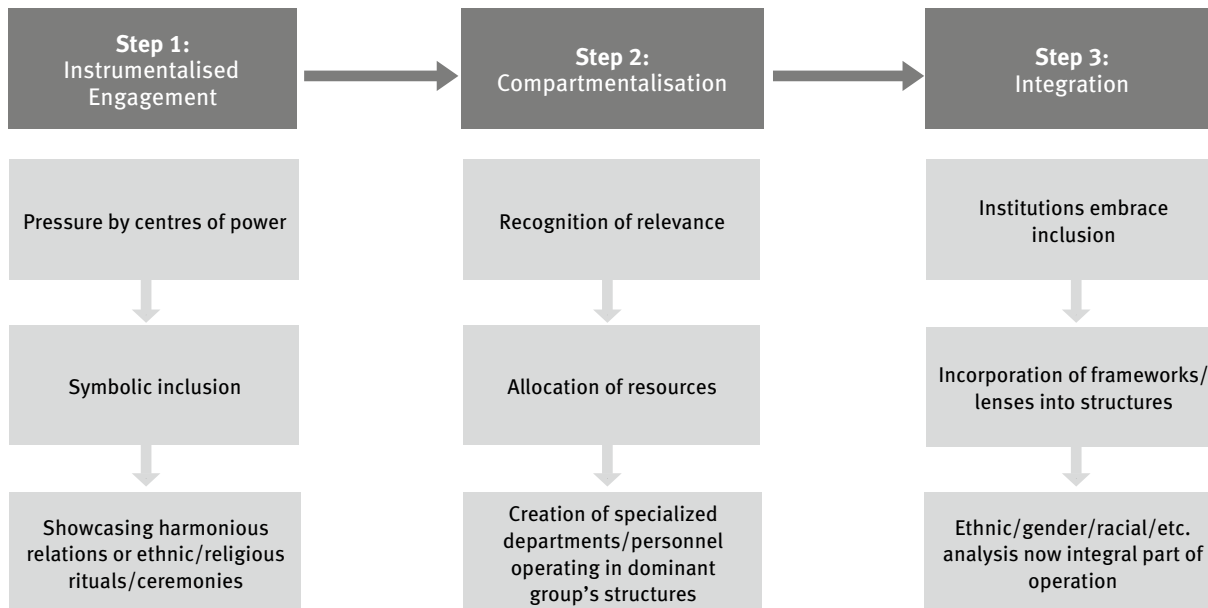


Figure 1: From instrumentalisation to integration

**Compartmentalisation:** The dominant discourse and its institutions partially recognise gender analysis, racial and ethnic perspectives, peace and conflict analysis, etc. as relevant or necessary frameworks. During this phase, the institutions might even allocate resources or personnel to handle race, ethnicity, gender or peace, while continuing business as usual in the remaining units or in the dominant institutional culture. Academic or policy institutions thus create ethnic, racial, gender or peace studies departments. However, the primary paradigm and its operational structure continue to exist in the dominant group’s norms. The racial, ethnic, etc. structure continues to be exclusive in its functions.<sup>8</sup>

**Integration:** Some institutions have moved from the compartmentalisation phase to the integration phase, in which ethnic, racial, gender or peacebuilding frameworks and lenses have become an integral part of the structure. Their affiliation is no longer an obstacle to their integration or advancement in the structure. This means that academic and policy institutes have adopted ethnic, gender, racial, etc. analysis as an integral part of their framework and operation.<sup>9</sup>

CIDA, DFID, GIZ, the EU, SIDA, USAID, UNDP, UNFPA, the World Bank and other agencies have either initiated new programmes to engage FBOs or begun adjusting existing CVE/PVE programmes to engage with religious stakeholders.  
(Karam 2016)

Religious leaders, institutions and symbols are increasingly part of CVE/PVE programmes. In recent years, there has been an increasing desire among international donors, government agencies, IGOs and NGOs to work with religious actors, based on the realisation and assumption that in order to effectively respond to VE it is necessary to engage with religious agencies, especially at local community levels. However, and unfortunately, in many cases, the nature and scale of the engagement remain at the level of *instrumentalisation*. The role of religious actors is confined to providing theological interpretations aimed at legitimising

<sup>8</sup> Between 2014-17, the author facilitated over 25 consultations with policy-makers and religious leaders in the context of UN, EU, OSCE, African Union and various government agencies. In each of these settings, religious leaders wondered whether the recent intense increase in policy-makers’ interest in engaging religious agencies to support their fight against VE would become an institutional commitment to work with the religious agencies on other issues, building long-term partnerships that could contribute to the transformation of troubled and complicated relationships between secular and religious stakeholders and their respective institutions.

<sup>9</sup> The institutional implications of such transformation are the fundamental changes in the balance of power, decision-making centres, representation on boards, allocation of resources, public discourse, etc.

the secular framework of programmes in CVE/PVE. Such examples include: requesting religious leaders from Yemen to provide Quranic verses or hadiths supporting democratic values for a youth training manual on participatory democracy developed by an American team for youth training in the Balkans in 2009; or inviting Grand Muftis, Patriarchs or other religious leaders to ceremonial openings of CVE/PVE programmes, then implementing secular tools. This symbolic engagement of religious agencies and leaders with CVE/PVE programmes can have negative implications for the legitimacy and credibility of these leaders, particularly when the programme’s “securitisation” agenda surfaces. For example, Chadian religious leaders questioned their imams about the agenda behind the Peace through Development (PDVII) programme initiated by USAID from 2012-2016.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2015, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland has been committed to strengthening the engagement with religious leaders by founding and supporting a new network: the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.

With the realisation that religion and religious agencies are necessary partners in responding to CVE/PVE, new initiatives have been formulated to build the capacity of the international agencies and national political and diplomatic institutions. New religious literacy courses (basic religion courses) are thus being offered as part of junior foreign service officers’ training. The Foreign Service Institute in Virginia, Swiss government agencies and some academic and professional training institutes have begun offering courses on politics and religion or diplomacy and religion.

The process of *compartmentalisation* of engagement with religious agencies or FBOs in policy-making institutions is recently reflected in various international and national agencies. An example is the 2013 decision by the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, to open the first State Department Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, dedicated to partnering with global faith communities and leaders on priority issues such as Arab transitions, Middle East peace, climate change and disability rights. With the support of the Obama Administration, the Office grew significantly (over 30 staff members). However, the new administration has reduced its capacity and limited its budget and operation to a few officers.

Other national agencies that followed the compartmentalisation model – such as the Finnish and Swiss Ministries of Foreign Affairs – have created special units or assigned special officers or envoys to monitor and promote engagement with FBOs and other religious agencies.

A unique example are UN agencies, such as UNDP and Alliance of Civilizations, which have further evolved their engagement with FBOs to an institutional level; in some cases, new platforms have been established, such as the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Work (UNIATF). The inter-agency model of operation is certainly a stronger mechanism that allows wider engagement of FBOs with many UN bodies. However, the lack of resources and structures for UNIATF reduces its capacity to fully promote systematic engagement with religion in all UN agencies, while the lack of enforcement capacity leaves FBO engagement as an option and reduces monitoring or documentation processes.

Unfortunately, there are no examples or practices in international or national policy-making institutes to date that would illustrate systematic and institutional *integration* of engagement with FBOs or religious actors in their entire operation. The secular nature of these IGOs and their member states is certainly one of the obstacles hindering institutionalisation of engagement.

Additionally, FBOs and religious agencies which advocate working with policy-makers on CVE/PVE have yet to develop comprehensive, systematic strategies to structure their engagement. Clear strategies and tool kits on how best to build mutual engagement on PVE/CVE without threatening each other’s (religious and secular) identity and constituencies are lacking. Furthermore, like policy-makers and

<sup>10</sup> PDVI and II were launched by the American development agency with the intention of countering the risk posed by Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Sahel region. The programme was framed for American policy-makers as part of a larger counter-terrorism campaign sponsored by US government and focused on strengthening local security and military forces, borders and intelligence gathering. However, on the ground, no direct link was made between these two types of interventions.



development agencies, traditional and conservative religious agencies often see their role as confined to providing religious and spiritual guidance to their followers; they thus avoid engaging in their wider communities' social, political or "earthly" affairs.

Internal limitations may also hinder the process of engagement and include: the lack of capacity in utilising tools to engage religious agencies, and the reliance on secular peacebuilding tools for interreligious peacebuilding. Regarding the first point, the field of interreligious peacebuilding, which includes intra-religious intervention and secular religious relations programmes, has only recently begun conceptually theorising its practices, and while there are efforts to do so (Little 2007, Appleby 2000, Lederach 1997, Abu-Nimer 2001 & 2003, Gopin 2000, etc.), significant gaps continue to exist in the field, especially regarding its theoretical and disciplinary foundation. Most literature relies on anecdotal and abstract conceptualisation rather than empirical and systematic research to build grounded theories of interreligious peacebuilding. A similar challenge characterises the tools offered to policy-makers and development and relief agencies on integrating religious agencies in their operation. While many practitioners in many workshops embrace the need to engage religious agencies, they are often not given adequate tools to do so. In fact, in many cases, the trainer or the interreligious peacebuilder offers the same tools that any secular peacebuilding agency would share. The problem with this is that they may not reflect the methodological uniqueness of interreligious peacebuilding and thus are not fully applicable, relevant or useful in aiding interreligious peacebuilding processes or peacebuilding processes which need to include religious actors and dimensions.

Interreligious peacebuilding is unique in the depth of its sensitivity for the participants since religious identity relates to the core being of the person and his/her calling and meaning in life. Any mistake or mischaracterisation of the person's identity can thus provoke a serious reaction among the participants. The existence of the sacred and profane or prohibited in many religious practices adds to this sensitivity and reduces the margin of error for each of the participants and practitioners, especially if they belong to different faith groups.

#### **In building interreligious peacebuilding programmes, there are several guidelines to keep in mind:**

- 1. Integrate spirituality and faith language** in the programme design and framing of the intervention. For example, when we invite religious leaders to work on a specific project related to health or women's/girls' education, we should not shy away from integrating an intentional space for prayer or other rituals.
- 2. Provide space for religious actors to utilise their religious rituals and sacred texts** to enhance the comprehension, motivation or application of the programme in their communities.
- 3. Include intra-religious dialogue** and platforms that focus on internal and critical examination of the current and historical religious interpretations that facilitate the justification of VE. Intra-faith forums can also be a tool to avoid the classic limitation of "preaching to the converted", by allowing the inclusion of less moderate voices, in particular those who oppose dialogue with outsiders.
- 4. Adopt an institutional approach** instead of creating "individual stars": The hierarchical and authoritative nature of many religious institutions can be a unique feature that often impedes the capacity of the participants and partners to fully engage with the policy-makers and development agencies without the full endorsement of their highest authorities. Seeking endorsement is thus a first step to ensure institutional and sustained impact. The historical background (colonialism, communism, civil war, tribal and ethnic structures, etc.) and current conditions (authoritarian governments, educational systems, regional conflicts, international interventions, extremist groups, etc.) also have negatively affected Islamic religious institutions and their capacity to respond – they therefore need to be empowered. Without working through the religious institutions (formal and informal), the current top-down approaches to CVE are also fairly limited in reaching the relevant Islamic religious leaders.

Nevertheless, there has been progress on this journey. Today, few policy-makers and religious entities can publicly deny the need for mutual engagement to effectively respond to VE and while few entities can be said to have “integrated” engagement in their institutions, more and more are engaging with FBOs or religious agencies.

## 3 Dilemmas and Obstacles

### 3.1 Islamisation of CVE/PVE

As indicated above, CVE/PVE campaigns are largely rooted in a response to Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Daesh and the many other smaller regional groups which claim Islam as their basis and manipulate Islamic identity and its components to justify exclusion, violence and destruction against others (both Muslims and non-Muslims). Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the victims are Muslims in Muslim countries, the threat of these groups, particularly to European and American societies and interests, is seen as the primary motivation behind policy and priority change.

Muslim and Arab communities widely believe and discuss this assumption. In consequence, when international agencies refer to CVE/PVE, this is interpreted as a code for countering exclusively or primarily the discourse of groups affiliated with Islam and not Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism or violent secular ideologies.

This perception is confirmed by the sheer number, scale and focus of CVE/PVE programmes implemented by these international, regional, national and local agencies in Muslim countries. While such programmes exist, it is rare to identify or give wide media coverage and recognition to a programme that addresses VE motivated by the Jewish settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, white supremacist groups in the US, Sri Lankan and Myanmar Buddhism, or Indian Hinduism in Gujarat or Kashmir.

Obviously, the threat and the scale of the terrorist groups motivated by their “Islamic ideologies” are being reported and portrayed as far more intense and widespread. Yet the fact that other forms of VE are not being addressed seriously by policy-makers and donors reduces the legitimacy, credibility and trust in the intentions of the message and messenger.

The Islamisation of CVE/PVE is also evident when policy-makers and media fail to distinguish between genuine Islamic teachings/values and the negative/destructive interpretations espoused by the VE groups. Many mainstream media and politicians, especially in European, American and even in some Muslim contexts, have consistently and systematically utilised certain VE framings that generalise and stereotype Islam and Muslims (Ali et al. 2011; CAIR 2016).<sup>11</sup> The most discussed question in such media outlets is: “Does Islam support VE and terrorism?” At the same time, the attacks on Muslims and Islam are often neglected or marginalised in Western media. Such an approach has directly fed into the growing Islamophobia in the Western hemisphere.<sup>12</sup>

In general, public de-Islamisation of CVE/PVE approaches is an essential step towards a more effective and credible response to the threat posed by groups which promote violent extremism in the name of Islam. The de-Islamisation approach can include various elements:

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- <sup>11</sup> This includes the mainstream media’s naming of violent acts committed by Muslims, even if they are lone wolf attacks, as “terror attacks”, and the general avoidance of such terminology when the person who committed the act is not a Muslim, in which case attention is more likely to focus on the perpetrator’s mental health. This is a recurring issue after mass shootings or bombings and is widely discussed in non-traditional media sources (such as social media).
- <sup>12</sup> The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is one of several organisations which monitor groups that promote Islamophobia, doing so through its Islamophobia Network.

To an outsider, jihad is often interpreted as “religious war”, whereas jihad means “struggling or striving”. In the Quran, jihad has many meanings, not at all associated with war but rather with an individual striving in the path of God, in other words the personal struggle to live according to principles of faith (see Quranic verses 49:15, 9:20, 9:88).

First, avoid linking Islam as a religion or Muslims as people and communities with CVE/PVE campaigns, for example by avoiding the use of terms like “Islamic terrorism”, “Muslim terrorists”, “jihadists”, etc. This can help delink Islam from VE.

Second, systematically provide examples and illustrations that most, if not all, other major religious and faith traditions have had groups within them which manipulated their faith and tradition by justifying violence and exclusion. Members of these groups are also not representative of these faiths and traditions and

the vast majority of their respective adherents. In fact, massive atrocities have been committed by misusing religions (including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism) throughout modern history. This does not mean providing legitimacy for the acts of violence, but making sure they are put into historical and theological perspective.

Third, delink religion from the CVE/PVE debate by focusing the primary analysis not on religion and religious actors, but on the root causes that produce structural violence in any given context. These root causes include the nature of the governance system, institutional corruption, social class divides, gaps between have and have nots, tribal divisions and loyalties, security/military structures and operations, weak educational systems, social norms and structures that support all forms of exclusion (gender and patriarchal), basic human rights violations, etc.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Niger, there are root causes that will continue to generate violence and exclusion even if all religious actors and agencies in these countries are converted to the discourse of pluralism and diversity and nonviolence.

When CVE/PVE programmes are implemented in conceptual and practical isolation from the above factors, their effect can be limited and unsustainable. In many of these contexts the problem is generated by various drivers and requires a multi-layered and multi-stakeholder approach, not further segmentation and sector-based divides such as those which arise when CVE/PVE programmes are focused only on youth, women or religious leaders but neglect to engage other sectors in the community. In fact, the exclusive religious framing of VE can contribute to the preservation of the status quo, the same order that produced it. When explaining problems in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Palestine, etc. as primarily religious or sectarian, international agencies are de facto supporting the internal structures that generate political and social violence. CVE/PVE programmes that neglect these factors and exclusively focus on launching initiatives to revise Quranic interpretations, train imams on values of peace and conflict resolution, issuing public denunciations of violence, etc. are unable to gain legitimacy in the local communities. Instead, participants in these programmes react by stating that the problem is not religious and “religion has nothing to do with it”. Yet the implementers insist on religious framing of the problems in the community.

Other beneficiaries of these programmes have voiced the suspicion that linking violence in the community and country to religion is in fact contributing to the intractability of the conflict and preventing genuine change. Such hypotheses have been confirmed by studies and analyses of fragile state systems, in which the problem lies not in the religion or religious interpretation, but rather in symptoms of a weak central state that does not provide services to its citizens (OECD 2016).

### **3.2 Institutional responses to CVE/PVE in a Muslim context: Locked in securitisation**

Similar to European and American contexts, policy-makers in Muslim countries have joined the global CVE/PVE initiative campaign. This is reflected in a growing number of special centres and initiatives launched by many of these governments. In addition, policy-makers and security agencies have mobilised religious leadership and institutions (religious endowments, ministries of religion, Dar al-Ifta, religious education



institutes such as Al-Azhar, Al Azytouna and Al Akhawain) in the fight against Daesh, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram. As a result of this mobilisation, we have witnessed significant increases in the number of religious fatwas (decrees), conferences and statements that denounce acts of terrorism carried out by these groups.<sup>13</sup> The security motivation reflected in the design, media coverage, etc. has cast a significant shadow on these meetings. Some religious representatives whisper: “Are we an extension arm of the security apparatus?”<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, new centres have been established to this end, such as Sawab (True), a centre sponsored by the Foreign Ministry of the United Arab Emirates that focuses on the fight against Daesh. Its programmes aim to strengthen the capacity of media, social media, women, youth, etc. and to counter Daesh’s recruitment efforts. Al-Marsad (An Observer) is another media monitoring initiative supported by Al-Azhar, one of the leading Islamic theological educational institutes in Egypt. Their aim is to monitor VE messages issued by Daesh and other groups in eight languages and to selectively respond to Daesh’s religious interpretations by setting the record straight in terms of authentic Islamic theological discourse. A third example, Hedayah (The Right Path) Centre based in Abu Dhabi, was created as an IGO to focus on counter-terrorism. Similar to other organisations in the field, it has also moved to focus on CVE research and training in various parts of the world.

There is no doubt that these organisations launched by and operated through Muslim governments are much needed to support the public discourse of anti-exclusion and to counter the manipulation of religion to justify violence. Nevertheless, they remain focused on the securitisation of CVE/PVE campaigns rather than a human security framework. Their approach is not far from other CVE/PVE operations that have failed to delink religion from their CVE/PVE analytical framework. In fact, some continue to link religion with violence and look at the community solely as a source of data and intelligence gathering to help security agencies’ work to ensure order. The sustainable development community approach is certainly lacking in such operations. Additionally, since none of these centres deal with root causes of VE, their target audience and effect might also be limited.

Human security framework principles include the protection and empowerment framework.

Human security promotes people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented measures that seek to reduce the likelihood of conflicts, help overcome the obstacles to development and promote human rights for all.

<http://www.un.org/humansecurity/human-security-unit/human-security-approach>

Although Muslim formal governmental institutional responses continue to be overwhelmingly rooted in the securitisation approach, there are a few examples that also reflect the potential role that religious agencies and actors can play in this context. Such examples aim to spread a culture of peace and promote religious diversity and pluralism, such as the newly launched Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams Morchidines and Morchidates (male and female spiritual guides) in Morocco<sup>15</sup>, geared toward training imams in CVE by instructing them in values of openness and tolerance. However, similar to CVE/PVE programmes, these interreligious initiatives are still not organically or systematically linked to the grassroots and remain under the general auspices of the governments and their political agendas. Additionally, they struggle in their efforts to delink their operations and methodologies from the “security-oriented” or “defensive Islam” CVE/PVE approaches. Another example is the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies which started under the leadership of Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah in 2014. The Forum has attracted high-level Muslim leaders and is committed to promoting the peace idealist paradigm despite pressure from policy-makers and governments, who continuously push the CVE/PVE agenda.

<sup>13</sup> [www.kaiciid.org](http://www.kaiciid.org) has a list of over 150 statements by Muslim organisations denouncing violence in the name of religion and especially Islam.

<sup>14</sup> Due to the sensitivity of this information, specific attribution of this type of statement cannot be made publicly.

<sup>15</sup> <http://moroccoonthemove.com/2016/05/19/morocco-imam-academy-leading-way-combating-radical-islam-middle-east/#sthash.LdHT2a30.dpbs>

KAICIID serves as an international example. The International Dialogue Centre is the only IGO governed by a multi-religious institution, a Board of Directors representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Using dialogue as its methodology, the Centre builds its interreligious peace and reconciliation programmes on the assumptions that there is a gap between policy-makers and religious agencies and that religious actors have a positive role to play in contributing to solutions to challenges facing the world today.

## 4 A Peacebuilding Response to VE: An Alternative Approach for Bridging the Gap

The above-mentioned limitations to CVE/PVE approaches and public perception within Muslim communities in particular constitute serious challenges for peacebuilding practitioners and agencies.

For peacebuilding in general and interreligious peacebuilding in particular, there are certain challenges, limitations and implications to adopting CVE/PVE approaches, terminology, assumptions and methodology on a community level, as well as in larger social and political contexts of peace work.

**Idealism:** “ [the] plan of the liberal democratic state is based on a formula that seems to beg for application in the international sphere. Might not nations enter into a social contract just as individuals supposedly once did? Why should domestic governments alone be founded on nonviolent principles? Why stop at national borders? Shouldn't a system of cooperative power, the key to resolving disputes without violence, be extended to the limits of the earth? Thought glides smoothly and easily to this conclusion.”

(Schell 2003, 265-266.)

Peacebuilding as a field emerges from the “Idealist” rather than the “Realist” power paradigm (power politics or *Realpolitik*) that dominates international diplomacy and international relations. Its values and methodologies in responding to conflicts are thus based on human relationships, justice, compassion, collaboration and cooperation, mutual recognition, nonviolence and emphasis on the role of non-state actors. A “Realist approach”, by contrast, is based on the assumption that the world is anarchic and only a power balance establishes order and stability, that states and individuals’ primary objectives are to pursue and preserve self-interest, state sovereignty, competition and force, and that states are the only legitimate entity for representation, etc. (Jervis 1999). CVE is based on the “Realist” paradigm. It sees security and order as the end outcome, is developed by the state to serve the state’s interests and pays little attention to justice, cooperation, nonviolence, etc.

Thus, when peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue practitioners uncritically adopt CVE/PVE language and methodology, they, by default, operate against their own “idealist” paradigm. Realism’s pragmatic approach does not change the hearts and minds of people and communities; rather, it aims to restore the asymmetric situation present prior to the violence. The framework of such interventions does not include conflict analysis or nonviolence peace mapping, which require identification of the drivers of violence: governance, corruption, foreign intervention, North-South dynamics and possible nonviolent community-based responses. The language of relationship building, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation are not part of the design, leaving out the “human” aspect so integral to community ownership of such programmes. Such values are an integral part of intervention programmes even when the focus is on development, relief or capacity building for local stakeholders.

Another dilemma with CVE programmes for interreligious peacebuilding is the lack of spirituality or faith. Interfaith dialogue, when carried out by the “Idealist” paradigm, is rooted in faith and spiritual values of the community and participants. While many CVE/PVE interventions focus on the mechanics of peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue, the language of faith is absent from these meetings, and the space constructed by the practitioner or the agency is often framed as a place for learning technical skills and for the individual to become an agent of change who works and protects the state and its government agencies.

These secular, security-driven CVE/PVE solutions have proved antagonistic to religion and religious identity in part by reflecting the assumption that VE groups and their communities are self-defined as theologically-based. Moreover, when there has been engagement with religious leaders, it has often been problematic, like the above-mentioned instrumentalisation of religious leaders, meant to show community engagement, but still excluding religious leaders from decision-making processes. This reality is not lost on community members and religious adherents, who often look to their religious leaders for guidance and answers.

Asking Muslim leaders for a blessing or to issue a fatwa in support of a policy and not including them in policy-making is **not** community engagement.

To bridge the gap between the secular and the religious and to increase the likelihood of finding solutions that will work, there is a mutual responsibility in which religious leaders and community actors must be genuinely involved in initiating alternative framing for the CVE/PVE approaches used in their communities, especially when they are externally imposed. Religious leaders and religious peacemakers not only have the well-earned trust of their communities, but they are also able to use their religious identity to positively shift perceptions along the conflict-peace continuum.

Some peacebuilders argue that it is possible to engage with CVE/PVE programmes and maintain, to some extent, the “Idealist” discourse of interreligious peacebuilding.<sup>16</sup> Many peacemakers involved in CVE/PVE programmes indicate that in general, the majority continue to do the same work and use the same framing; however, for purposes of funding and security approval, they began labelling their work as CVE/PVE.<sup>17</sup>

#### Principles used to guide peacebuilding practitioners in a Quranic school intervention in Chad and Niger:

- ≡ Assurance that Islam and religion in general have positive values, especially that the main message is peace and justice.
- ≡ The Islamic peace education framework is the only relevant way to engage the Madrassa system.
- ≡ Islam and Muslims are misperceived and misunderstood by non-Muslims.
- ≡ There is an intra-Muslim challenge which prevents or obstructs change.
- ≡ Building trust and rapport with the teachers is a necessary step that should not be compromised.
- ≡ Quranic school teachers are the experts in Quranic interpretations, not the external team of trainers.
- ≡ The trainers will not impose any change, but all the work will be done by the teachers themselves and any change will be made with the full agreement and consensus of the group.
- ≡ The intervention should include improvement of school infrastructure and conditions.
- ≡ Maintaining Quranic schools’ framework and core curricula, while avoiding theological debates.

(Abu-Nimer et al. 2016).

<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to capture this process, 25 Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding International Peacemakers identified certain trends in “successful/high-impact” techniques. Many included existing techniques and framing, in addition to some new approaches. See the Peacemakers seminar July 2016 report, <https://tanenbaum.org/>

<sup>17</sup> This was observed by many FBO participants in KAICIID meetings (2015-2017, especially in Nigeria) and by UNIATF.

When interreligious peacebuilding practitioners or organisations are engaged in CVE/PVE initiatives, there are various principles that can guide their work to ensure that the core values and assumptions are maintained without compromising their credibility.

For example, several principles were integral in implementing a programme by the Salam Institute for Peace and Justice in Chad and Niger to enhance the capacity of Quranic school teachers to integrate values of peace, diversity and nonviolence. The principles were derived taking into account the sensitive context: the participants are under continuous threat from Boko Haram, affiliated groups and other political and religious factions which oppose any foreign non-Muslim intervention in their context; participant schools are also marginalised and neglected by their governments, lack basic classroom amenities and are misperceived and labelled as hubs for terrorism and violent extremism. The teachers and their principals were highly suspicious of the programme's intentions and motivations so it was necessary to build trust.

It is obvious that these principles are not new to participatory development or effective peacebuilding practices. Nevertheless, they were implemented with a commitment to empower the Quranic school teachers and with respect for their faith, providing a dialogical space that allows transparency, honesty and critical thinking.

## 5 Conclusions and Implications for Peacebuilding and CVE/PVE

Policy-makers, donors and other communities of practice (development and humanitarian relief) have moved from denying and avoiding the inclusion of religious leaders and institutions to exploring the relevance and feasibility of engaging religious leaders in their operations.

CVE/PVE has also evolved to become one of the main avenues that religious leaders and interreligious peacebuilding practitioners are expected to engage with. In the context of the mounting pressure from states, international donors and IGOs, maintaining the core peacebuilding paradigm values and ethics (especially interreligious dialogue and peace) is a current challenge. Torn between further marginalisation due to lack of resources, changes of donors' agendas or loss of relevance among their constituencies, peacebuilding practitioners have to make hard choices in terms of their engagement with the CVE/PVE "industry".<sup>18</sup>

There are a number of lessons that can be learned from the experience of advocating for a greater engagement of religious leaders with both policy-makers and development and relief practitioners and ensuring their credibility and connectivity to communities.

1. **Follow the principle of inclusivity** in representation by insisting on multi-religious and multi-intra-faith group designs. In any given conflict that has a religious dimension, there are many religious entities and representations in each region which need to be included in the process.
2. **Keep it real:** When interfaith and faith-based representatives and policy-makers meet, they often like to emphasise a discourse of harmony based on the notion that there is or was strong and peaceful coexistence between religions in the context. This tendency to avoid discussion of controversial issues, especially those relating to national policies regarding religious freedom, self-determination, etc., can damage the authenticity of the programme for participants who are affected by the conflict on a daily basis.

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<sup>18</sup> A term used by some peacebuilders, referring to the pressure they experience to incorporate CVE frameworks in framing their proposals to secure funding, as well as to the very high level of international and national spending on CVE/PVE programmes.

3. **Delve deeper** into analysing structures of violence, not only the symptoms. Insist on analysis of the root causes of the problem. Ensure that the participants are able to understand and explain their short- and long-term solutions. This also includes the deeper analysis of religious identity and its components as possible aspects of the structures of violence.
4. **Integrate a “culture of peace” discourse:**<sup>19</sup> The interreligious peacebuilding network is an integral part of the global movement and actions to achieve a culture of peace and challenge the Realist paradigm that assumes selfishness, competition and violence as a necessary part of human nature. Allocating a programmatic space for a “culture of peace” discourse injects optimism and human connectedness.
5. **Adopt a language of faith** as a way to capture the spirit of the initiative. Using mainly technical and mechanical or security approaches to peace and conflict resolution affects religious leaders’ credibility. When interreligious peacebuilders avoid their own language of faith, derived from their spiritual and religious traditions, they lose part of their constituency.
6. **Adopt human security lenses:** When working in interreligious peacebuilding, use a human security framework instead of the narrow military and Realist security framework. Human security strategies and analytical frameworks can assist in preventing the silencing and manipulation of communities through the security-driven CVE/PVE agenda.
7. **Engage policy-makers** in interreligious peacebuilding designs: Currently there is a historic opening in many political systems to engage religious agencies and FBOs. This is an opportunity for mutual learning and exchanges that can break stereotypes, build trust and foster beneficial working relationships between the two worlds of religion and politics.
8. **De-Islamise interreligious peacebuilding** work by not only including other faith groups in the design and framing of the issue but also by seriously examining other drivers of conflicts in the given context.
9. **Develop practical interreligious peacebuilding tools** that can respond effectively to challenges when dealing with policy officers and programmers who lack basic religious literacy, causing them to be tense and apprehensive when asked to approach or engage religious agencies. Building tools and frameworks that reflect the uniqueness of interreligious peacebuilding, as mentioned earlier, can bridge this gap.
10. In addition to the obvious approaches to state-building, both institutional (governance, rule of law, education, etc.) and local (religious and cultural), **include methods based on peace, dialogue and forgiveness, which are necessary for CVE/PVE to become a transformative intervention.** We cannot address the deep-rooted, intractable and structural forms of violence in MENA and elsewhere without making serious attempts to build trust in the message and messengers.

The above features require interreligious peacebuilding practitioners to be equipped with specific tools to allow them to access religious communities and to facilitate their engagement with other partners. This will build peace and harmony within and among their diverse constituencies and enable them to cope with the pressure of imposing CVE/PVE frameworks on their communities.

Finally, it is essential to recognise the importance of recent mutual collaborations and outreach to interreligious and intra-religious agencies of peace and dialogue by policy-makers (reflected in the hundreds of conferences, training workshops, research projects being held or launched every month around the globe in concerted CVE/PVE efforts). This has genuine potential to bring about a historic shift in national and global strategies for responding to social, economic and political problems. This is especially true if interreligious peacebuilding agencies are capable of sustaining their efforts and engaging wider audiences among their followers while avoiding the pitfalls of many of the current CVE/PVE approaches.

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<sup>19</sup> “Culture of peace” is a concept within peace studies and peacebuilding that aims to replace a “culture of violence”. Structural changes are required to ensure that a culture of peace can become the guiding paradigm for human relations (see Boulding 2001 and the Introduction to this chapter).



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# Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices

A Gendered Lens on PVE

Sanam Naraghi Anderlini

## Content

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Extremism in the Age of Pluralistic Identities</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Celebrating the Alternative: Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The Critical Role of Gender Identity</b>	<b>28</b>
4.1	Gender in the ideology of violent extremisms	28
4.2	Gender in recruitment	30
4.3	Gender as a unifying identity to counter and resist extremism	31
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>35</b>

# 1 Introduction

Despite news of the decimation of Daesh/ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the spectre of violent extremism in its various forms remains central in the global security discourse. For good reason: extremist ideological movements that either overtly use or advocate for violence, or implicitly condone it in pursuit of their cause, continue to threaten peace and security in communities across the world. As the Global Terrorism Index (GTI)<sup>1</sup> indicates, 2016 may have seen a decline in the overall number of deaths due to terror but more countries are now affected. In 2015, 65 countries worldwide experienced a terror attack. By 2016, the number had risen to 77 – some two-thirds of all states globally. While the countries most affected by extremism in 2014 – notably Pakistan, Nigeria, Syria and Iraq – have seen the biggest declines in deaths, among OECD member states, there was a 67% increase in attacks and an increase of nearly 600% in deaths between 2014 and 2016. In the US alone, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), there were some 917 hate groups operating across the country in 2016, including 193 Black Separatist groups. The overwhelming majority were white supremacist groups, with anti-Muslim groups experiencing a 197% increase in numbers just between 2015 and 2016.

Internationally and at the United Nations, the momentum to develop national action plans on preventing violent extremism (PVE) persists. Some governments are embracing the agenda, recognising the scale of the problem. As Mohammed Abu-Nimer also notes in his lead article, for others, PVE is the topic du jour that brings financial or political advantages, particularly given the budgets that traditional bilateral donors are allocating to the cause. There is also much debate about the process by which the plans are being designed, developed and implemented. In some contexts, state security authorities are taking the lead, with little involvement of other sectors or civil society. Elsewhere, advocacy from the grassroots and the global community is fostering more inclusive processes. In the case of Kenya, the national strategy was adopted but it lacked any mention of the gendered dimensions of violent extremism, so a women-led coalition of organisations has undertaken extensive consultations to develop a shadow or annex plan in the form of a ‘Women’s Charter’ to address the gaps in the existing plan.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite the myriad policy directives and action plans to prevent and counter this phenomenon, there is still no agreed definition of what ‘violent extremism’ means.<sup>3</sup> In the United States in particular, incidents of mass shootings that involve white men as perpetrators are typically categorised as ‘lone wolf’ attacks or are described in terms of young men with mental health problems, while those involving Muslims are labelled as terror or extremist attacks. Hate crimes by right-wing groups, many of them overtly or implicitly affiliated with white supremacists and representing over 70% of terror attacks in the US since 9/11, receive little attention, on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, excessive force by security actors against minorities has not resulted in commensurate justice for the perpetrators or in security sector reform measures to reduce the incidents of abuse significantly.<sup>5</sup> In other words, domestically and in foreign policy, as Abu-Nimer (2018) also notes, politics dictates which crimes or locations and which forms of violence are labelled as violent extremism and thus deserving of attention and resources.

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1 See <http://globalterrorismindex.org/>.

2 The International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) that I run and members of the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) have provided support to the Kenyan women’s groups as they advocate for the Women’s Charter.

3 Naz Modirzadeh: “If It’s Broke, Don’t Make it Worse: A Critique of the U.N. Secretary-General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism”, *Lawfare*, 23 January 2016, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/if-its-broke-dont-make-it-worse-critique-un-secretary-generals-plan-action-prevent-violent-extremism>.

4 Amy Sherman, “Fact-checking Cory Booker’s statistic on attacks by white nationalist hate groups”, *Politifact*, 18 January 2018, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2018/jan/18/cory-booker/fact-checking-cory-bookers-statistic-attacks-white/>.

5 Haeyoun Park and Jasmine C. Lee, “Looking for Accountability in Police-Involved Deaths of Blacks”, *The New York Times*, 3 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/07/12/us/looking-for-accountability-in-police-involved-deaths-of-blacks.html>.

The media, meanwhile, has honed in on the use of extreme and often public violence, such as beheadings, suicide bombings and random terror attacks on civilians. But *extreme violence* and attacks on civilians are neither new, nor unique to such groups. They were evident in the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s, when militias hacked off people's limbs. They were a feature of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, which kidnapped boys and girls and forced them to kill and maim their own relatives and neighbours. Many states perpetrate acts of extreme violence, including some against innocent civilians. In addition, neither the purported economic and political goals and desire for territorial control nor the transnational nature of contemporary violent extremist movements are unique. The socialist and liberation movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were also transnational, and had a mix of economic, socio-political and ideological goals. Finally, as the 2017 GTI indicates, there is a correlation between incidences of violent extremism and levels of brutality and abuse by state security actors across a range of countries. The 2017 mass attack and deportation of the Rohingya in Myanmar led by the Buddhist-majority state army and supported by Buddhist militias is a case in point. In the case of Iraq, the US-led coalition bombings against ISIS in Mosul have reportedly resulted in over 3200 deaths.<sup>6</sup> This, too, concurs with the observations of local activists quoted in Abu-Nimer's paper (2018, 6), who say: "We have had political violence and mass crimes for decades." In effect, in international policy circles, the acts of extreme violence are not the primary concern. Reactions are dependent on who the perpetrator is, and where the violence is occurring.

There is, however, one critical differentiating factor: today's violent extremist movements use manipulation of visceral human identities. Their strategy to mobilise by co-opting and warping issues of ethnicity, race, religion and gender – across national borders, combined with the easy connectivity provided by technology – makes them a unique modern force. Doing so in an age when most societies, communities and even individuals are extremely diverse and pluralistic in nature, and many people have 'fusion' identities due to mixed marriages, migration and greater attention to gender identities, etc., further increases the potential threat they represent to the social cohesion and domestic peace architecture of countries globally.

In responding to Abu-Nimer's framing article, this paper offers points of agreement and difference in an effort to deepen our collective understanding of the phenomenon of violent extremism and the responses needed to enable effective transformation. It does so first by offering a conceptual shift to move beyond limitations of the current terminology and discourse. Second, it provides an overview of the relevance of identity to VE with particular attention to the centrality of gender to the ideology, recruitment and action of violent extremists, as well as the importance of women in particular in countering, preventing and providing clear alternatives to such groups. In doing so, it challenges Abu-Nimer's assertion (2018, 7) that the inclusion of women is often externally driven and that they are thus being instrumentalised. While I agree with Abu-Nimer's views on the need for an integrative approach to religious agencies, his lack of attention to gender perspectives is notable; I therefore also argue for caution. Too often, religious institutions – even the more moderate ones – are at odds with principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. Thus, while their inclusion in P/CVE efforts is essential and in many cases is occurring at the grassroots, their legitimacy or authority should not be elevated above those of women- or youth-led organisations and others active in this sphere. Experience from international mediation efforts indicates that while the legitimacy of women's human rights defenders and peacebuilders is often questioned, that of religious leaders is assumed.

In sum, however, I concur with Abu Nimer's call for a transformative lens anchored on PVE. The discussion and recommendations below offer a framework for a shift in the discourse and practice of C/PVE to embrace the issues of identity and articulate an agenda that is not only 'against' extremism, but also pro-peace, resilience, equality and pluralism (PREP).

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6 Jack Moore, "Mosul Battle: U.S. Coalition, Iraq Killed Ten Times More Civilians Than They Claim", Newsweek, 20 December 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/mosul-battle-us-coalition-killed-ten-times-more-civilians-it-claims-753349>.

## 2 Extremism in the Age of Pluralistic Identities

When the UN issued the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (UN 2016), a notable omission was an agreed definition of 'violent extremism'. Given the inherently political nature of the challenge (as noted above), it is understandable why it was difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, if resources are being ploughed into the agenda, there is at least a need to articulate the parameters and characteristics of the phenomenon that we seek to prevent or counter, and the alternative that we want to instil and establish.

So how can we define or characterise 'violent extremism'? Across the range of violent extremist movements that exist, there are shared features. Such movements tap and seek to elevate one core identity as being superior to all else. Where religion is used to recruit, for example, the tactics are to emphasise their target's religious identity (e.g. Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism) while diminishing other aspects such as nationality, ethnicity or cultural heritage. Movements that use race apply similar tactics. In the US, for example, white supremacists are by definition advocating for the supremacy of 'white' people and the separation of races. They denigrate mixing of the races and portray themselves as victims or as facing existential threats. In effect, even if an African American or an Arab adhered to their economic or political views, by virtue of their race, membership of such movements would either be denied to them or would be conditional upon their subscribing to their own subjugation and diminished status.

The rigid interpretations of religious, cultural, national, ethnic or sectarian identity that extremist movements espouse aim to foster deep 'bonds' between their followers and recruits, while fomenting divisions with and exclusion of others. This normalisation of intolerance and disrespect for people of different ethnicities, religions, gender or nationalities lays the groundwork from which the more radicalised and violent forms of extremism can grow.

Extremists present their religious or ethno-racial framings as 'the truth' and seek to undermine and discredit other manifestations of that faith or culture. In particular, they take aim at the moderate and syncretic practices that typically accept, respect and integrate diversity.

These movements recognise the importance of formal educational spaces to impart their worldviews, values and ideologies. They are present in schools and universities, religious institutions, and social and mainstream media. While they claim to teach or adhere to ethics and morality, they are teaching a sense of 'otherness' – us against them – that implicitly (and increasingly explicitly) condones bigotry and racism and lays the foundations for acts of violence.

The rise of extremist identity-based movements cloaked in the mantle of faiths and ethnicities is also a result of the phenomenon of extreme pluralism evident within countries and communities worldwide. Various factors have contributed to this state of extreme pluralism. On the one hand, structural economic policies that have fostered the opening of markets, privatisation and globalisation have catalysed migration on a hitherto unprecedented scale – across and within countries. Urbanisation is also a factor and an outcome, as people from different traditional backgrounds merge into crowded settings. Often, they are caught between being untethered from the social norms that moderated values and actions, while encountering new norms and practices.

Hyper-connectivity via technology has also contributed to this state of extreme pluralism – enabling people from far corners of the world to be linked with each other, to sustain the past or create new relations. But while this virtual connectivity has led to the creation of new imagined communities based on identity, it is also shredding the physical connectivity that existed in traditional communities. Instead of fostering greater cohesion and integration, it contributes to separation.

In addition, progressive forces that have sought to be inclusive and accepting of all forms of diversity have an impact. With different forces shedding light on and emphasising aspects of identity, we are all becoming more conscious of our own multiple identities – be it our gender, sexuality, age, race, ethnicity, religion or physical ability, to name a few. At its best, this exposure to differences in culture and human experience fosters greater empathy, relatability and respect among people. Each can be a bridge to another person in ways that in the past we may have found ‘unrelatable’.

But it is also prompting internal crises for people and communities. At a national level, the fear is manifested in the debates about national identity such as ‘Frenchness’ as raised by Marie Le Pen’s extreme right-wing party, the ‘British values’ that have been a consistent theme in the UK’s political and social discussions, or the “make America great again” slogan that is tied so inherently with the alt-right movements. These issues are also reflected in debates about the content of educational curricula, as many people consider the rising diversity in the citizenry as a threat to and dilution of hegemonic national or religious identities and the values associated with their states and societies.

At the community level, the fear of losing identity or losing status, evident among white supremacists on the one hand and minority diaspora or displaced communities on the other, can lead to defensive protection of and adherence to restrictive traditional practices. Diaspora groups, for example, often remain frozen in history, while in their nation of origin practices evolve and change.

At an individual level, especially for young people from minority backgrounds, it can be a struggle to find acceptance of their layered and complex identities. As a discussion with former ISIS affiliates in the UK highlighted in 2015, the issue of mixed and plural identity can heighten vulnerability to recruitment. “Many young British Muslims are confused about where we fit in the world,” said one discussant. Another reflected: “Women can find the issue of identity particularly difficult. What does it mean to be British, Muslim, Somali, Ethiopian?” For some, though, the situation is more clear-cut: “They no longer have to wrestle with are you this, are you that – you’re a Muslim.”<sup>7</sup>

Herein lies the challenge: is a boy or girl born in France to originally Algerian parents, whose faith is Islam, French, Muslim, Arab, North African, Algerian or all of the above? What happens when he/she self-identifies in one way, but is identified or categorised by his/her community or society at large in other ways? If they and their communities’ histories are absent from school history books, literature, the arts or other subjects, they may be drawn to external sources to understand and assert their identity. The pull into one overarching communal religious identity is pervasive and strong.

Addressing it requires the will to tackle some uncomfortable truths. In Europe, for example, this may mean discussions about the history of colonialism and the economic contributions of the colonised states to the wealth of the colonisers. These are discussions from which many governments still shy away. But such a process can also be joyful. For example, the art, music, architecture and mythology of South Asia could be integrated into schools’ curricula for the arts and literature. Perhaps the best example of this exists in the food and restaurant sector, where chefs willingly embrace fusion by combining the flavours and styles of different cuisines. If the will exists to engage in such discourse, the ways forward are endless and ultimately transformative.

However, if formal educational spaces do not provide a means of understanding pluralism or discussions about the similarities and differences across faiths and cultures, then external forces fill that void. Identity-based movements are exploiting these spaces to promote their ideals and norms, and some veer to the extreme.

Herein lies the paradox: the principle of freedom of expression, which is at the heart of liberal democracies, has enabled the rise of the very same extremist and regressive forces that now challenge the liberalism and pluralism of societies in which they flourished. The formal and informal spaces, including

7 Joanna Witt, “Why Do Young Women Want To Join Islamic State?”, *The Guardian*, 27 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2015/jul/27/guardian-live-why-do-young-women-want-to-join-islamic-state>.

social media, which influence and inform today's youth, are thus at the frontlines of the struggle against extremism and for social cohesion, inclusivity and pluralism (Alava et al. 2017).

While the challenges are significant, it is also critical to ensure a balanced and practical perspective. In most contexts, the clear majority of the population – youth or otherwise – are *not* engaged in or attracted to the extremist ideologues and the drive towards violence. But the media and policy community tend to ignore them, including the very many who are active and vocal against extremism in their own settings. We take much of this for granted. But we need to value and celebrate this peaceful pluralistic majority.

### 3 Celebrating the Alternative: Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism

We need to focus more attention on better understanding the experiences that enable young and old alike to embrace pluralism, equal rights and peace, and recoil from intolerance and bigotry. In other words, as much as we need to make infertile the breeding ground for extremism, we must also sow the seeds that foster cohesion and enable us to acknowledge our own and each other's plural identities. This is why the framing of both 'countering' and 'preventing' violent extremism, while necessary, is not sufficient. These terms state what we are 'against'. Even prevention – which, as Abu-Nimer says, is a framework to enable more comprehensive approaches – is problem-, not solution-oriented. A health analogy is helpful in explaining this shift. If a person has a bacterial illness, they are cured with antibiotics to counter and fight the bacteria. Prior to becoming ill, we seek to prevent diseases by offering immunisation. But these measures are encompassed in broader efforts to ensure good health, such as maintaining levels of hygiene, good exercise and nutrition.

Applied to the C/PVE agenda and to move towards a truly transformative agenda, as Abu-Nimer also suggests, we need a conceptual shift to define what we aspire to. If visceral identity and relations based on faith, gender, familial, ethnic or national ties are being exploited to foster exclusion and division, then the multiple identities that bind us across the divisions need to be recognised, articulated, elevated and celebrated. Drawing on ICAN's work with its grassroots partners and members of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership in over 35 countries, and building on the human security and women, peace and security frameworks already formulated in international policy, I offer the framework of PREP – peace, resilience, equality and pluralism.

The *peace* component refers to adherence to non-violence and limitations on the use of security forces and violent means to address the threats, and prioritising attention to social cohesion and development. At a minimum, instead of counter-terrorism (CT) strategies driving practices, incorporating P/CVE efforts and subsuming the majority of the resources, CT and the related security interventions should be a component of a broader PREP strategy. This would also mean a commensurate reallocation of resources away from CT and towards non-violent efforts.

Attention to *resilience* is needed from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, it is essential to foster religious and cultural literacy so that people are resilient against the messages of extremist rhetoric and teachings. Where religion is being exploited, this includes pushback against the fringe and extremist versions, and dissemination of moderate interpretations. Where race and ethnicity are drawn upon to create a mythical past, multi-perspective history is needed. On the other hand, resilience also encapsulates the need to teach and foster multiple skills among young people, so that they can withstand shocks and



crises. This includes education and skills development for income generation and livelihoods, as well as the psycho-social skills needed for self-care in times of uncertainty and vulnerability.

Fostering respect and *equality* among people – based on gender, race, ethnicity, economic status or other factors – is also critical. Given that violent extremism is part-rooted in the notion of superiority that allows for the justification of violence and subjugation of others, instilling a sense of equality and respect for others is essential. But it cannot be rhetorical. States have to demonstrate their own respect for their citizenry by adhering to the universal principles of human rights. Their security and intelligence apparatus must respect people’s rights. Laws must be reformed or adopted to ensure equality and end discrimination.

Finally, attention to fostering *pluralism* and respect for the multiplicity of identities is essential. It can generate innovation and creativity through the interactions between cultures and religions. More significantly, by encouraging recognition of plural identities, we can foster increased ‘relatability’ and empathy rather than division. As Bushra Qadeem, a Pakistani school principal who introduced peace education into her curriculum notes, teaching students the value of diversity is essential. One simple method she uses for younger children is to divide them into two groups, providing one group with a bag filled with candy in an array of colours, while giving the second group a bag with just yellow candies. The children are instructed to produce a piece of artwork depicting a garden, using their candies. As one group produces a monochrome image of the world, the other a multi-coloured one, the result is immediately evident. Through this one simple exercise, the children see the value of diversity and the fact that it is a reality in life, yet it is taken for granted.

In sum, to achieve the transformation to which Abu-Nimer refers, the paradigm has to evolve. What started with counter-terrorism and shifted to CVE then PVE needs to move towards PREP: peace, resilience, equality and pluralism. CT and C/VE should be encompassed within that broader goal.

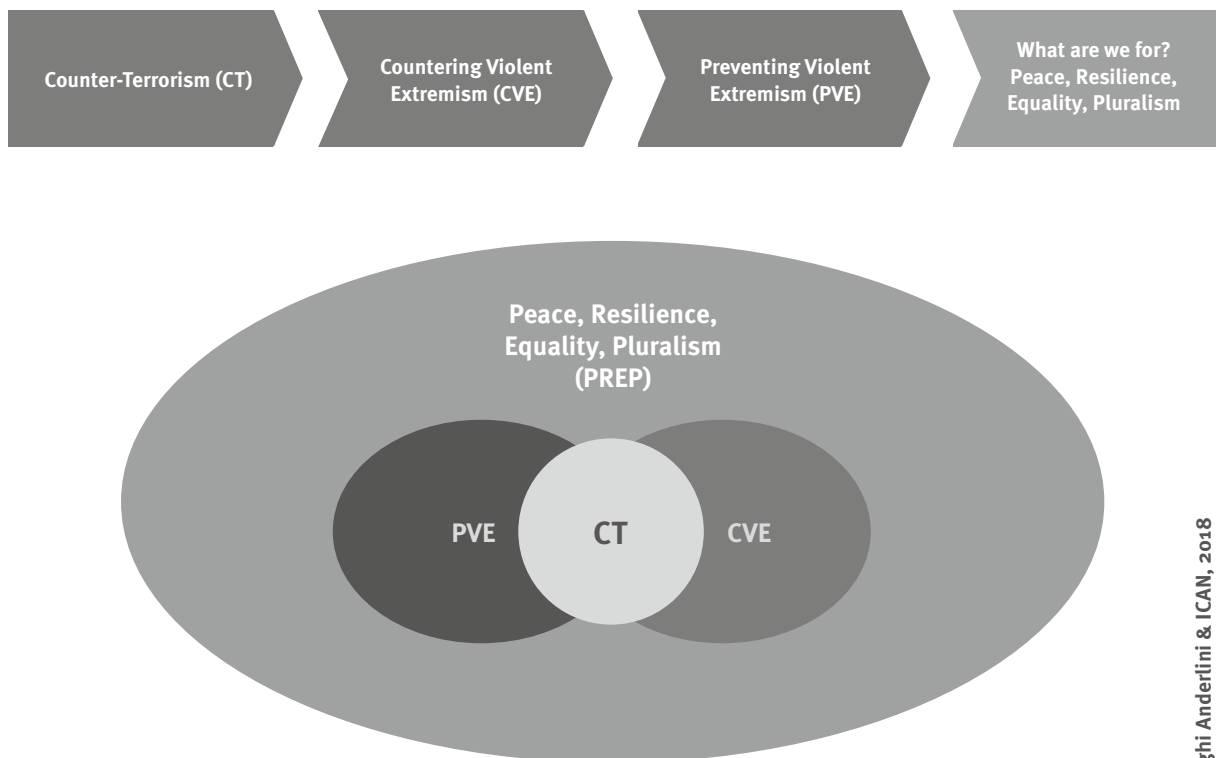


Figure 1: Evolving the paradigm: PREP

## 4 The Critical Role of Gender Identity

Abu-Nimer acknowledges the importance of an integrated approach that is inclusive of gender and minority perspectives. But he makes three questionable assertions. First, he conflates ‘gender’ with women and lists them alongside minorities, whereas women represent 50% or more of the population: “The steps towards engaging religious agencies strongly resemble those of other areas: racial and ethnic studies, gender, peacebuilding and other fields working *with marginalised minorities*.” (Abu-Nimer 2018, 7, emphasis added.) Second, he claims that women and other marginalised groups have been instrumentalised in this agenda, noting “the early steps were mostly in the form of symbolic involvement of gender, racial minorities ...” (ibid.). Finally, in making the case for more robust inclusion of religious agencies, he assumes that the other sectors – notably women – are already fully integrated and resourced, while religious actors are still excluded.

The discussion below provides an alternative perspective on these assertions, by demonstrating the centrality and restricted definitions of gender norms to contemporary VE movements. This is evident in the ideologies, their recruitment tactics and actions, and in the forces that challenge and counter their spread. But it is yet to be fully integrated in the responses or resources provided by international actors.

### 4.1 Gender in the ideology of violent extremism<sup>8</sup>

The control, co-option, coercion and subjugation of women are central features of the ideology of VE movements today. Long before violent extremism became a concern for the international peace and security community, women and particularly women’s human rights defenders were warning about its escalation and impact.<sup>9</sup> Globally since the seminal Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, there has been a rising backlash against women’s rights across cultures, religions and regions. Women’s basic physical and legal rights and security are at the centre of these ideological battles. In each instance, the vociferous minority has made significant strides into mainstream debate and daily life. Women are facing new challenges, ranging from limitations on reproductive health rights in the United States, to girls’ access to education as witnessed in the attacks on schoolgirls in Pakistan and Nigeria, to the accelerated spread of the hijab and niqab among Muslims who previously did not adhere to such dress codes. But the attacks on women were long ignored by the policy and security elite globally because violence against women has been victim to cultural relativism, as policy-makers have either ignored or explained it away as cultural norms and practices. Such violence has also been ignored by security actors, as in principle, the abuse, subjugation or even murder of women is not deemed to be a threat to national or international security.

Thus the targeting of and impact on women are not accidental or ‘collateral damage’. They are deliberate, tactical and strategic. In non-western settings, conservative and extremist movements typically tie concepts of women’s rights to notions of ‘western’ immorality and feminism as an extension of colonialist politics.<sup>10</sup> The more extreme movements create boundaries between women and men, manifested through legal and physical means, including the regression of women away from the public space and life. They promulgate rigid understandings of religious texts that define what it means to be a good wife, daughter or woman.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This section contains excerpts from a 2015 paper co-written by the author for a UN Women Experts Group meeting. The full paper is available at <http://www.icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Extremism-in-the-Mainstream-UNW.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Cassandra Balchin with Deepa Shankaran, “Exposed: Ten Myths about Religious Fundamentalisms”, *awid women’s rights*, 31 October 2008, <https://www.awid.org/publications/exposed-ten-myths-about-religious-fundamentalisms>.

<sup>10</sup> The tensions surrounding women’s rights and colonialism are addressed in various publications, including Commonwealth Secretariat (2005).

<sup>11</sup> American national security expert, personal communication, September 2013.



Similarly, the status of men is clearly articulated, and there is often a clear implication that women are under the protection (and, by extension, ownership) of men. This is nowhere more evident than in the sexual enslavement and exploitation of women.

The ideology taps into different norms of masculinity. On the one hand, it elevates the notion of patriarchy such that men are dominant and women subservient to them. On the other hand, this entitlement is fused with notions of men as warriors and protectors of a 'cause'. This lays the foundations for violence, for it is justified as a means to an end for a higher cause. Writing about the role of women in America's white supremacist movements, Elizabeth Gillespie McRae notes "the central role ascribed to white male sexual and status anxiety and lust for dominance in fomenting organized white-supremacist activities".<sup>12</sup> She further states that a key argument against desegregation was the "narrative that saw white women and girls as vulnerable (to black men), and white men as protectors – a story line that simultaneously elevated white men and rendered women helpmates and beneficiaries, not activists".

In the *public sphere*, using the pulpit and media, the targeting of women who are outspoken or contradict the edicts and ideology is either condoned or encouraged. Often women are blamed – the way they dress, the places they frequent, their mannerisms or the fact that they are alone – for the physical attacks they endure. The mainstream and social media platforms are powerful tools that fringe actors use to convey their viewpoint. In the *political sphere*, women are accused of indecency and often face threats to their lives for daring to speak out or enter politics. The movements also draw on and use women strategically in politics and propaganda. They recognise the social influence of women and their ability to mobilise at grassroots levels. They also recognise and enable women's roles as caretakers and homemakers. They recruit or co-opt them into their political structures to espouse their regressive views on matters of gender equality. For example, the Salafi Nour party in Egypt claims to support women's education and social work but does not encourage women's leadership as politicians. "The women give lectures to young or older men," writes Walid Salah, but "they have to talk from behind a black curtain or address the audience from another room through loudspeakers."<sup>13</sup>

In the *legal sphere*, the suspension of equal rights legislation and introduction of discriminatory laws are both a means and an end for conservative as well as extreme movements. Governments, even if not religious in nature, appease movements and conservative forces by supporting and often promoting pushback on women's rights. The issues vary across regions, but the impetus to control women's bodies and legal persona is shared. The unholy alliance of states and extremist ideological movements was firmly addressed in the July 2017 report by the UN's Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights, Karima Bennouna, which included submissions from 54 countries (UN 2017). In remarks about her findings, Bennouna states, "The political practice of partnering with non-violent extremist groups are also marked as a cause of concern ... Governments that cite cultural practices while objecting to women's rights defenders are 'aiding and abetting extremism'". She further noted, "In many places where governments have strategies for what is called combatting violent extremism ... they sometimes base strategies on partnering with what they deem to be 'moderate extremists' or fundamentalists of various stripes ..." But she warned, "Governments must not make the mistake of thinking they can use so-called 'non-violent extremism ... The highest price for such blunders is paid by women", explaining that "[o]ften these so-called non-violent extremists espouse a discourse of discrimination against women that ... ends up producing a great deal of violence against women."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, "The Women Behind White Power", *The New York Times*, 2 February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/02/opinion/sunday/white-supremacy-forgot-women.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Walid Salah, "Egypt's Islamist Parties Are All About Marriage, Not Politics for Women", *Al Monitor*, 26 April 2017, on <http://www.newageislam.com/islam,-women-and-feminism/egypt-s-islamist-parties-are-all-about-marriage,-not-politics-for-women/d/110938>.

<sup>14</sup> Karima Bennouna, "Statement", UN General Assembly, New York, 25 October 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22331&LangID=E>.

## 4.2 Gender in recruitment

We take it for granted that the majority of fighters and adherents to extremist movements are young men recruited and groomed by older men. But why? What attracts them? What makes them vulnerable to recruitment? There is significant research being done currently on the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors associated with radicalisation. The reality is that there are countless variables and significant differences from one context to the other. Economic incentives are relevant in some settings, especially where poverty is rife and jobs are few, but they are not the common denominator across countries. Other socio-political and psycho-social factors are more evident.

Many of those who join and support these movements have borne the brunt of decades of state corruption, poor governance, repressive regimes and poor development policies (ICAN 2017). Although they come from various socio-economic classes, they have witnessed or experienced rising inequality and absence of opportunity to live dignified lives (UNDP 2017). As young men, they are facing a challenge of fulfilling their own socially circumscribed or ‘gendered’ roles such as being good providers and husbands. Yet many lack the skills or education needed to compete in a competitive and often service-oriented workplace. They also find themselves in competition with women – often better educated – for the few scarce jobs that do exist. As noted in the 2017 UNDP report, “Journey to Extremism”, the majority of respondents who were recruited into violent movements expressed high dissatisfaction with the government, including the “belief that government only looks after the interests of a few”, and had “low level of trust in government authorities”. As the report shows, “[g]rievances against security actors, as well as politicians, are particularly marked, with an average of 78 percent rating low levels of trust in the police, politicians and military.” In addition, “Those most susceptible to recruitment express a significantly lower degree of confidence in the potential for democratic institutions to deliver progress or meaningful change.” (UNDP 2017, 5.)

Religious motives also play a role. There is a consistent lack of religious literacy across many settings. So young men who are religious are being lured with extremist religious ideology that implicitly and explicitly condones the use of violence or discrimination against ‘outsiders’ or ‘others’ in the name of God, or ethnic or racial supremacy.

There is also deliberate outreach and recruitment of women. In general, women’s involvement in armed ideologically-driven movements is not a new phenomenon. Women have been active in many of the leftist and national liberation movements of past decades across Latin America, Africa and Asia. Although statistics are difficult to find, women are likely to have made up as much as 30%-40% of such militant movements. For example, they comprised some 30% of the Sri Lankan Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).<sup>15</sup> Among the demobilised members of Nepal’s Maoist movement, some 20-40% were female (Marks 2017). They are often motivated by their need to assert agency and garner respect for contributing to a greater – preferably just – cause. Many also join to avenge crimes committed against them by state actors, or abuses suffered by their families and male relatives.

In the case of current movements that claim the mantle of Islam, the recruitment of women is evident in a number of ways. In Pakistan in 2008, a radical Sheikh on local radio stations recruited the mothers of young men by railing against the injustice and corruption of the state and offering the promise of a just and equitable Islamic society. The women donated their gold and encouraged their sons to join the Pakistani Taliban movement. Also in Pakistan, the growth of women-only madrassahs – religious schools (with funding from various sources, including Gulf Arab states and individuals) – has provided a steady flow of women who are educated in regressive, Wahhabi-style interpretations of Islam. The curricula are designed by men with three key goals: to educate girls to be ideal mothers, train them to perform their domestic chores, and ensure women preserve and transmit conservative Islamic traditions and beliefs to their offspring. In recruiting women, economic benefits are often an enticement. In Pakistan, Paiman Trust

<sup>15</sup> LTTE, Mapping Militant Organizations Project, Stanford University, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/225> (as at 8 July 2015).

identifies, engages and deradicalises women affiliated with extremist groups. Many of them earn incomes sewing suicide belts, believing that they are thus fulfilling their religious duty.<sup>16</sup>

Quality of life is a clear enticement in other settings too. Among some women affiliated with Boko Haram, there has been reluctance to leave the movement. As one woman noted, she had ‘slaves’ who “washed, cooked, and babysat for her”. Another woman interviewed was also frank about the benefits. “There was 100% better treatment as a wife under Boko Haram. There were more gifts, better food, and a lot of sex that I always enjoyed.” For those who had never had access to any education, the mandatory Quran classes were welcome as an opportunity to learn.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the recruitment of young women (mostly under 18) in Europe reflects the tensions that second- and third-generation migrants in particular are experiencing. The pressures are immense from all sides. At home and within their communities, they may be pressed into conforming with conservative and submissive notions of femininity – to heed the guidance of their parents and live restricted lives. While they may seek greater freedom of choice and agency, the hyper-sexualised society they live in also puts pressures on them. These tensions around gender conformity mixed with a sense of alienation, desire to belong and have a clear identity, and contribute to a greater cause are factors that make them vulnerable to recruitment.

It is notable that movements that espouse discriminatory attitudes towards women are making a great effort to recruit them and seem to offer not only a sense of empowerment but also freedom from social and even sexual restrictions. Meanwhile, states that claim to stand for gender equality and women’s rights often recede into paternalism and their own forms of nationalism when it comes to issues pertaining to minority women, especially Muslims. The hijab ban across European countries is a case in point. Legislation to ban various women’s covering and clothing is at odds with concepts of freedom of expression, the right to choose and gender equality.<sup>18</sup> France’s burkini ban in 2016 was a particularly notable moment of discrimination.<sup>19</sup> In the UK, the government has done little to improve police capacities for dealing with so-called ‘honour’ crimes, including murder, rape and mutilation that affect women from various minority communities.<sup>20</sup>

### 4.3 Gender as a unifying identity to counter and resist extremism

If women’s rights defenders and peace activists were the first to feel and see the rise of extremisms, then women-led organisations active in promoting peace and security have also been the first to mobilise in resistance to the exclusionary ideologies and offer alternative, more inclusive interpretations of religious texts and visions for their societies. Because addressing violent extremism is a sensitive and securitised issue in most settings, it is not the domain of traditional development and rights groups. Among women’s movements too, only a subset of organisations that are involved in peace and security work engage in these efforts. But they do so bringing a rights and peacebuilding lens to their efforts. Depending on the setting, the labelling of their work may vary. Where the state provides space for overt P/CVE work, women’s organisations also work under this umbrella. But in many contexts, they engage in P/CVE work under the softer umbrella of social harmony or development.

What is notable (as illustrated in the table below) is that women-led organisations that are active in this sphere of work have parallels with the extremist movements. Like them, they are locally rooted. They are trusted because of their track record of service to their communities, addressing grievances or aspirations.

16 ICAN and Rana Allam, “These Pakistani Women Are Cutting Off Extremists’ Resources – One Thread at a Time”, Ms. Magazine Blog, 24 January 2018, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2018/01/24/pakistani-women-cutting-off-extremists-resources-one-thread-time/>.

17 Hilary Matfess, “Rescued and Deradicalised Women are Returning to Boko Haram. Why?”, African Arguments, 1 November 2017, <http://africanarguments.org/2017/11/01/rescued-and-deradicalised-women-are-returning-to-boko-haram-why/>.

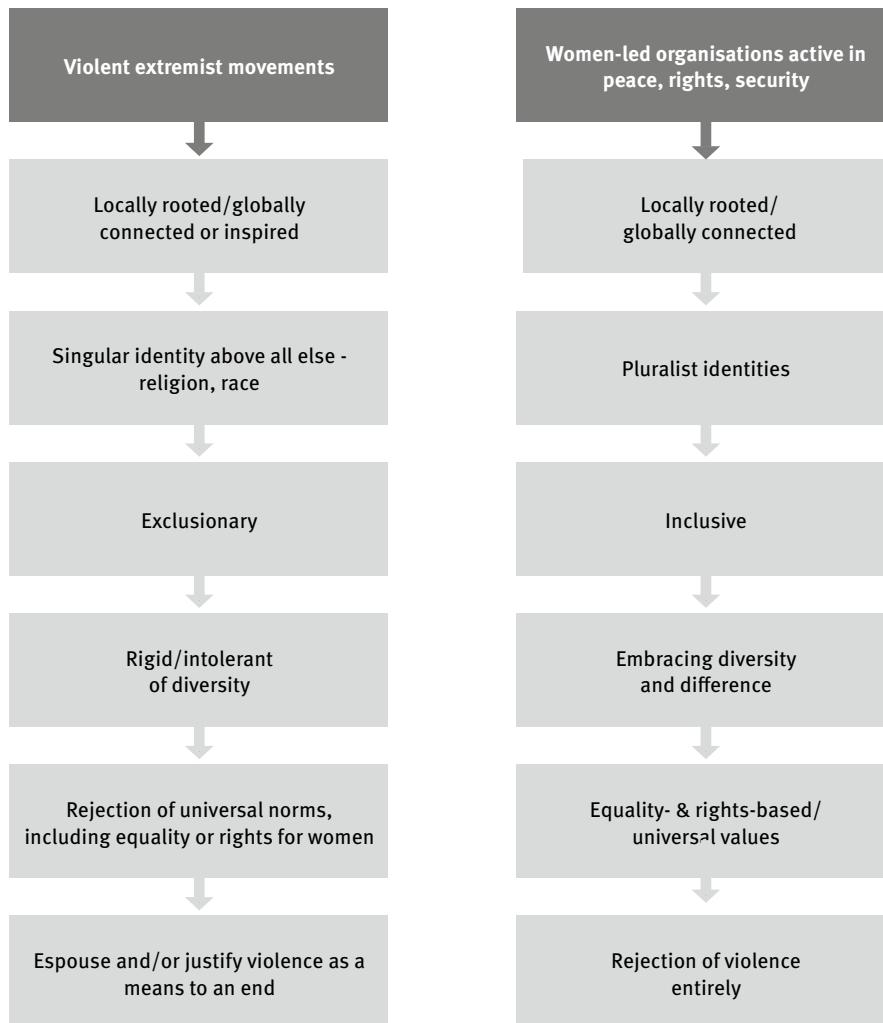
18 Matthew Weaver, “Burqa Bans, Headscarves and Veils: a Timeline of Legislation in the West”, The Guardian, 14 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/14/headscarves-and-muslim-veil-ban-debate-timeline>.

19 Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, “In Riyadh and the Riviera, women have to fight for the right to be themselves”, The Guardian, 27 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/aug/27/burkini-ban-riyadh-riviera-women-fight>.

20 Tracy McVeigh, “Theresa May wrong to link ‘honour’ killings and terrorism, say campaigners”, The Guardian, 23 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/23/theresa-may-wrong-link-honour-killings-terrorism>.

Because they are of the community, they have an understanding of the context and cultural nuances of their settings, and are thus able to adapt their messages and their activities to fit local needs and evolving changes. Many of their leaders are charismatic and respected for their education and religious scholarship.

But precisely because they are trusted and recognise the aspirations and grievances of their communities, yet offer a non-violent, pluralistic alternative approach that is also religiously and culturally credible, they pose a key threat to extremist movements. However, their potential is as yet unfulfilled. Their efforts are often circumscribed because they lack resources to expand and the space for civil society activism is shrinking. Internationally, they still have to fight to be recognised.

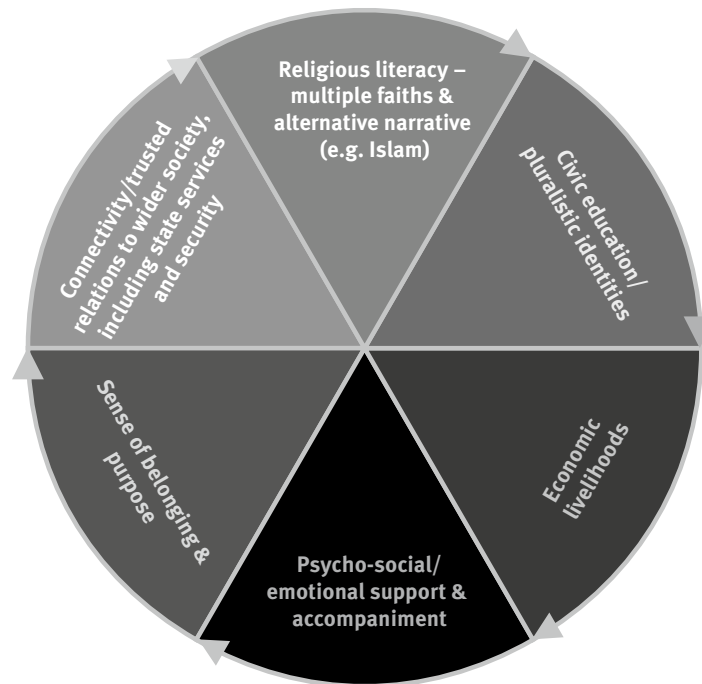


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Table 1: Locally rooted, globally connected: women-led peace and security organisations and their violent extremist counterparts

Equally of note is that when such locally rooted groups are connected ‘globally’ – for example, through the evolving Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL)<sup>21</sup> – they demonstrate that despite the differences across countries and cultures, the basic ingredients of what they are offering in their approaches to P/CVE, deradicalisation and rehabilitation are strikingly similar (see Figure 2). For example, in Iraq and Pakistan, local women have pioneered programmes that combine religious literacy with psycho-social support and continued mentoring, livelihoods and skills training and thus provide an alternative unit to which young men can belong.

21 See <http://www.icanpeacework.org/our-work/womens-alliance-for-security-leadership/>.



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Figure 2: Shared components of P/CVE programmes run by WASL members across different country contexts

Yet they face a multitude of challenges. Their capacity for developing and implementing long-term strategies is often limited by the need to respond to more immediate crises and challenges on the ground or to tightened security conditions. They are hindered by attacks from national security apparatuses and a lack of recognition from the international policy community. Too often, despite the commitments made in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000)<sup>22</sup> and UNSCR 2242 (2015)<sup>23</sup> and rhetorical support for women's leadership and participation, the perspectives and experiences that women bring forward are categorised as 'women's issues' or disconnected from peace and security and, now, PVE-related debates and decisions. The narrative of western-based scholars and NGOs that claim women are being 'instrumentalised' further exacerbates the situation as it denigrates the expertise, innovation and courage of women at the frontlines of the struggle against violent extremism, who offer critical lessons and solutions. In this regard, Abu-Nimer's framing of international approaches that commence with instrumentalisation and shift towards compartmentalisation, but rarely reach the necessary integration, is also applicable to the experiences of women-led organisations. Their situation is doubly challenging as often other civil society sectors, notably the religious institutions, are also reluctant to engage women on an equal footing.

#### Box: Al-Ferdows Foundation's work on demobilisation and rehabilitation in Iraq

In 2015, after 20 years of community service to war widows and children and promoting peace in her province of Basra, Fatima Al-Bahadely found her teenage sons at direct risk of recruitment into militias. Drawing on her religious and cultural knowledge and her community ties, she initiated a deradicalisation programme to demobilise and rehabilitate youths from militias. Al-Ferdows did this by providing the young people with a mix of religious literacy while working to promote their positive involvement in their communities and encouraging them to return to school (for the younger cohort). Impact: In three months they deradicalised and rehabilitated 150 youths from militias. Much of the success is due to the trust and legitimacy that Fatima Al-Bahadely had nurtured.

For more information, see [www.icanpeacework.org/our-work/innovative-peace-fund/](http://www.icanpeacework.org/our-work/innovative-peace-fund/)

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

<sup>23</sup> See [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2242.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2242.pdf).

## 5 Conclusions

When viewed through the lens of core identities such as ethnicity, religion and gender, the phenomenon of violent extremism becomes more distinguishable from other regional and transnational ideological movements. Such a lens also reveals that focusing on ‘violent’ extremism is not enough. The ideologies that foment hate and bigotry must also be tackled, as their spread into the mainstream provides the space for violence to take root and become normalised. It is a fine line, of course, because as is evident in many countries, the threat of terror and extremism is already being used to shut down legitimate dissent and threatens freedom of speech and expression, particularly as it relates to criticism of state actions or demands for human rights. Indeed, many states are already using the P/CVE agenda to shut down civic engagement and civil society organisations. But the spread of bigotry and intolerance through words and ideas – often directed first at women and minorities – creates an environment where violence can fester, erupt and shift from the extremes into the mainstream of society. These tensions between ‘hate speech’ and ‘freedom of speech’ must be recognised and addressed. Equally, there is an urgent need to embrace and celebrate the plurality of identities that exist in every society, so that people – especially the young – can see an equally dignified representation of their heritage, different cultures and religions in the societies in which they were born in and contribute to.

Second, the international policy and security community needs to take the gender lens more seriously as it is a very effective ‘early warning’ indicator of rising extremisms. The violence that extremist groups and individuals condone and perpetrate against women and marginalised communities but gets little attention or is framed as ‘cultural’ is the same phenomenon that metastasises and spreads to become the high profile ‘terrorism’ or ‘violent extremism’ that gains attention. In the United States, for example, the correlation between violent actors (mass shooters) and their history of domestic abuse is widely noted. However, the issue dates back much further. As Ayesha Imam, Jenny Morgan and Nira Yuval-Davis wrote in 2004 about Algeria, “[w]e need to bear in mind here that violence against women did not start with the terrorism of the early 1990s ... Women were targeted by Muslim fundamentalists long before that. In the early 1980s ... the first victims of religious and political violence were women. Vociferous Friday sermons at the mosque focused on women and their bodies ... Young male Muslim fundamentalists attacked female students on university campuses with the tacit approval of the police, who did not intervene to protect women ... [I]n June 1989, a group of fundamentalists set fire to the house of a divorced woman who lived alone with her children ... The silence and complicity of the state comforted and even encouraged Muslim fundamentalists in their virulent attacks against women ... As early as the 1980s, women were warning that although Muslim fundamentalists were targeting them first, this violence would soon reach men too if nothing was done. Yet the secular state did not do anything to protect women.” (Imam et al. 2004, 119ff.)

Related to this is recognition of the work that women’s pro-peace and pro-rights organisations are engaged in. They offer a powerful counterweight to the rising extremist movements, and their vision is rooted in peace, resilience, equality and recognition of pluralistic identities. Indeed, a vibrant and independent civil society is vital to PVE, as it provides space for moderate and constructive critique, dissent and voice. But to thrive, civil society organisations need a conducive legal and financial environment. They must not be squeezed between threats from the state and attacks from extremist movements.

Third, if the agenda and this area of research and work are confined to ‘countering’ or even the more expansive ‘preventing’ of violent extremism, it will be limited and ineffective. Extremist movements recruit by promising desirable alternatives to people’s grievances. They also tap into the aspirations of youth and women. *Simply being against them is not enough.* The international community must heed the call of civil society and articulate and stand by a set of values and principles that promote peace, resilience, equality and pluralism (PREP), are rooted in dignity and offer non-violent practical alternatives. The extremism phenomenon cannot be addressed simply through security, governance or other ‘siloes’ approaches. Reform is needed in the economic, education and social spheres and should be approached in a holistic manner.



Finally, significant policy changes are needed. As Abu-Nimer says, it is not enough to either instrumentalise or compartmentalise by calling for support to women’s NGOs, youth or other civil society on the ground, and implicitly putting the burden on their shoulders. It is essential to listen and heed their advice regarding urgent policy and programmatic changes that are firmly in the realm of state responsibility. Civil society can work alongside and in complementary form to states and multilateral institutions. Indeed, CSOs such as women’s organisations often have unique strengths and value to contribute, but they cannot bring sustained change on a sufficient scale without governments being fully on board. It is a case of needing a ‘whole of government’ and ‘whole of society’ approach. One starting point can be fostering a shared understanding of the phenomenon and recognition of the fact that extreme pluralism is not only the context in which ideological extremism is rising, but also the source of the best and most creative solutions and pathway for the future.

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# Engaging with Whom?

Opportunities and Challenges of PVE Approaches  
in Iraq and Germany

Maral Jekta

## Content

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Increasing Engagement with FBOs? The Example of Iraq</b>	<b>38</b>
2.1	Pitfalls of engagement	38
2.2	Secular actors: a chance to de-Islamise the conflict	40
<b>3</b>	<b>Challenges facing the International Media Development Sector</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Civic Education and the Role of Primary Prevention: The German Case</b>	<b>42</b>
4.1	Current PVE debates in Germany	43
4.2	“Live Democracy!”	44
<b>5</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>References and Further Reading</b>	<b>46</b>

# 1 Introduction

Mohammed Abu-Nimer's *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding* (2018) is a significant contribution to the ongoing debate about the set of Counter-Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) concepts. His longstanding expertise as an academic researcher and practitioner in the field of conflict resolution and dialogue for peace is reflected in the combination of theoretical reflection and insights into peace practice in his lead article.

In it, he provides a detailed account of policy development regarding the above-mentioned concepts and explores their impact on multinational agencies, international governmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). The consequences of security- and military-oriented Counter-Terrorism approaches implemented following the terror attacks on 11 September 2001 (9/11), especially in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, are now undisputed, whereas the negative effects of CVE and PVE are still debated.

As Abu-Nimer describes in the lead article, however, the discourse among practitioners and researchers is gradually shifting towards a more critical discussion about both concepts. While national and international actors are facing a set of challenges and problems integrating CVE and PVE into their development and peacebuilding programmes and are articulating some of these problematic aspects, three of Abu-Nimer's recommendations are particularly relevant, but are not adequately reflected in the ongoing debate. They are, firstly, his critique of a lack of sincere engagement with religion, its identity components and faith-based organisations (FBOs); secondly, his demand to de-Islamise CVE and PVE; and, thirdly, the identification of CVE as a result of the "Realist" power paradigm, which contrasts with a culture of peace discourse driven by the "Idealist" paradigm.

In my comments on the lead article, I welcome the opportunity to review these points by firstly discussing Abu-Nimer's suggestion to engage more seriously with religious agencies and actors, using Iraq as an example. I will examine in what way religion and its identity components are being integrated in project structures of international NGOs (INGOs) in Iraq and the limitations of this approach. In this context, I will argue that the emphasis on de-linking religion from the CVE/PVE debate and focusing more on root cause analyses (Abu-Nimer 2018, 13) is much-needed. Unlike Abu-Nimer, however, I will argue in favour of increased engagement with *secular* organisations and movements, which are currently held in high regard by Iraqi citizens and are at risk of being instrumentalised by rival conflict parties. In a second step, I will support many of the arguments presented by Abu-Nimer in relation to the perceived deficiencies of CVE/PVE approaches by presenting their negative impact on practitioners in the field of international media development. Finally, I discuss the German Government's 'Live Democracy!' to support the call for a holistic 'idealism' approach in PVE.

## 2 Increasing Engagement with FBOs? The Example of Iraq

### 2.1 Pitfalls of engagement

The reasons for the poor quality of democratic governance in Iraq and its iterative conflict dynamics are many and varied. Ethno-sectarian violence and tensions between Sunnis, Shi'as and Kurds still shape the political landscape and society today. It is undisputed that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and failings in governing the country after the military victory unleashed a set of deep structural, legal and political problems, which provided the breeding ground for political violence, violent extremism and the resurgence of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014.

The sectarian, quota-based system applied by the US-backed Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 in setting up the Iraqi Governing Council<sup>1</sup> (Jakob 2016, 265) resulted in political actors mobilising religious and ethnic identities to generate public backing for political influence. Until recently, most of the parties mobilised their constituencies through identity politics and sectarian differences rather than around political programmes (Al-Qarawee 2014). And still today, state and non-state actors with rival sectarian factions are competing for control and influence in a complex power-balancing exercise by mobilising religious identities (Mansour 2017, 4).

Sectarianism is also exacerbated by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry over power and influence in the region since 2003. Both major powers raced to fill the post-war vacuum left behind by the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. Although the nature of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is not solely sectarian but also driven by geopolitical, nationalistic and ideological factors, there is a sectarian dimension to the conflict, which both powers have cultivated for their own benefit.<sup>2</sup>

In Iraq, the power struggle resulted in political, economic, social, religious and military interference. From 2003 on, Iran combated the US presence and Saudi influence in Iraq through its support to Shi'a militias and political parties that follow a sectarian strategy. At the political level, Iran is directly funding Shi'a parties, encouraging sectarian identity politics, and supporting political developments along sectarian lines (Nader 2015, 5). The sectarian strategy is also pursued in the military domain, where Iran provides many of Iraq's 50 Shi'a militias with money, weaponry and training.<sup>3</sup> At a religious level, the Iranian government supports low-ranking Shi'a clerics such as Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabai, the deputy head of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militant group, who propagate Iranian ideology in Iraq and lessen the influence of more independent but influential clerics such as Ali al-Sistani (Nokhostin Mosaabebe, based on Nader 2015, 4).

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, disseminates ultra-conservative Wahhabist ideology by funding madrassahs, mosques, educational institutions and centres, and fellowships for Islamic scholars, missionaries, academics and journalists worldwide (Chen 2017, 19). Furthermore, direct funding of armed Sunni extremist groups, such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, and the direct intervention against Shi'a Houthi militias in Yemen aggravate the ongoing ethno-sectarian fighting in the region in general and in Iraq in particular.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, developments in Iraqi domestic politics and broader regional conflicts, which have been shaped over 'confessional' differences such as those which have fuelled Shi'a-Sunni sectarian tensions, both can be regarded as the main reasons for Iraq's instability and the ongoing ethno-sectarian conflict.

Even though the success of violent extremism groups, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the so-called Islamic State (IS), is not solely the result of identity politics, it is evident that the strengthening of religious Shi'a-Sunni affiliations has added to existing Sunni grievances.<sup>5</sup>

Leaving aside the question whether the influence of religious leaders such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani or Muqtada as-Sadr has in the first case improved or in the latter case worsened the conflict dynamic, the

<sup>1</sup> The Iraqi Governing Council preceded the Iraqi Parliament (Council of Representatives).

<sup>2</sup> Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Iranian-Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry", Blog Post, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Boston, MA, 25 October 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, between 2003 and 2007, Iran supported the Mahdi Army, the militant wing of the Sadrist party. Furthermore, many of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), or Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi, are affiliated to the Islamic Republic of Iran and collaborate closely with Iran's Quds Force, the paramilitary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. They include Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Saraya Taleaa al-Khorasani, Kata'ib Imam and the Imam Ali Brigades. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi and Jonathan Spyer, "Iraq's Shi'a Militias and Iran", pundicity. Informed opinion & review, 15 January 2015, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/15773/iraq-shia-militias-and-iran>.

<sup>4</sup> Kimberly Kagan, "The Smart and Right Thing in Syria", Hoover Institution, 1 April 2013, <https://www.hoover.org/research/smart-and-right-thing-syria>.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the collaboration of Sunni insurgent groups with IS was not due to ideological overlaps, as none of them shared IS's long-term objectives for Iraq (Adnan/Reese 2014, 4), but due to their unheard grievances linked to strong perceptions of exclusion and unfairness.

answer to the question whether increased engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organisations can help in effectively responding to extremism remains complex.

While events such as the Conference on Interfaith Dialogue for Social Cohesion in Iraq, hosted by the World Council of Churches in December 2017, can provide a basis for constructive interfaith dialogue and help to identify and analyse the role of religious leaders in “restoring inclusive multi-religious and multi-cultural communities in Iraq”,<sup>6</sup> the focus on religion as the source of – and the answer to – violent extremism is an obstacle to discussion of how these entities can make a genuinely effective contribution to transforming the conflict in Iraq. Furthermore, when planning to cooperate with religious leaders or organisations, INGOs have to consider realistically which of these leaders are open to cooperation and where their limitations lie. In addition, INGOs should take into consideration that religious and ethnic affiliations are present to a certain extent in many (religious or secular) organisations.

Having worked in and on Iraq for six years, with a focus on media development, I have found that even though FBOs are not always chosen as cooperation partners for international NGOs, the choice of most project partners and participants is based on ethno-sectarian and/or religious categories rather than a completely secular perspective. Religion and members of religious groups are therefore always integrated as staff, participants or partners during project implementation. Given the fragmented social fabric in Iraq, this approach is considered necessary and aims to ensure equal participation and reflection of society, but it suffers from a number of pitfalls.

Although the various groups within Iraq are represented in project structures, the question of the possibilities and the limitations of their influence on the root causes of violent extremism has to be considered. Iraq is currently facing various challenges, ranging from acts of revenge by Shi’a militias toward the Sunni communities in former IS-held territories, to infighting among different Shi’a political parties and the question of how to deal with Iranian-backed Al-Hashd al-Sha’abi militias. All these challenges can fuel further radicalisation and violence. Partners involved in peacebuilding projects have limited capacity to tackle these issues due to the weak state and a political system that is captured by elite groups.

In addition, some civil society organisations, whether religious or not, are drawn into the country’s political trench warfare. In some cases, the affiliation to a certain religious group (for example to a militia) can cause serious problems during collaborations.

Furthermore, very few of the organisations working in the field have a peacebuilding approach at all. In its 12<sup>th</sup> issue, the Civil Society Dialogue Network Discussion Paper published by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) notes: “Iraqi civil society actors lack expertise in mediation and conflict transformation theory and practice, [which] may limit their ability to implement peacebuilding programmes effectively” (EPLO 2017, 3). This means that training and support in mediation and conflict transformation tools are not only needed in a religious context for organisations with a religious background but are required by all peacebuilding actors.

Taking the limitation of FBOs and the challenges and existing needs of other CSOs into account, the question is to what extent increased support for and cooperation with religious organisations alone would be able to contribute to effective PVE approaches.

## 2.2 Secular actors: a chance to de-Islamise the conflict

It is undisputed that violent extremist groups elevate exclusive religious identity above other shared cultural identities to reach those who feel humiliated, discriminated against and deprived on a socio-economic level. In Iraq, groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State particularly address Sunni grievances, while Shi’a militias address resentments harboured by their respective constituencies.

But since 2015, nationwide anti-government protests – organised by a broad cross-section of Iraqi society, ranging from secular and religious movements to individuals, liberals and communists – also reflect concerns and distrust towards religious parties. Although the protests are hijacked or opposed by the Shi’a militias with

6 World Council of Churches (WCC), “Iraqi religious leaders call for restoring religious and social cohesion”, 15 December 2017, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/iraqi-religious-leaders-call-for-restoring-religious-and-social-cohesion>.



various ambitions, “there are signs that secular movements in Iraq have an opportunity to effectively convey their philosophy to the electorate”.<sup>7</sup>

For instance, after the defeat of IS in Anbar, an originally Sunni-majority province in which tribal and religious leaders could hitherto influence the electoral behaviour of residents, locals are now turning away from them, suspecting them “of preparing the ground for extremism”.<sup>8</sup>

With the upcoming elections scheduled for May 2018, Iraq’s Shi’a, Kurdish and Sunni parties are less able to line up their constituencies in accordance with identity politics, or ethno-sectarian rivalries. Most of the parties are now implementing new campaign strategies by avoiding religious topics and emphasising secular themes.<sup>9</sup> Many religious parties even collaborate with secular movements. For instance, the Sadrist Movement of the Shi’a religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr, involved in killings during the sectarian civil war in Iraq between 2006 and 2008, is running with the Iraqi Communist Party and the Sunni-led Iraqi Nationalist group.

In light of these developments and given the increased risk of the exploitation of secular movements, the need to support and integrate *all relevant* Iraqi state and non-state actors in PVE-peacebuilding processes becomes apparent. Religion is only one attribute of individuals in a society and cannot cover the entire scope of its population’s identity. The support and inclusion of secular actors may help to generate alternative discourses around conflict sources, away from the allegedly insuperable antagonism between Shi’a and Sunnis.

### 3 Challenges facing the International Media Development Sector

Abu-Nimer (2018, 1) points out that “the emergence of violent extremism as a central framework and priority adopted by most Western and non-Western government agencies” has affected various actors in the field of peacebuilding.

The CVE approach in particular has been widely acknowledged in North American and European countries’ policies to counter extremist narratives in the framework of a global information war. Given the fact that tools underlying the concept are similar to strategic communication tools, particularly in counter-messaging campaigns, it is not surprising that media development implementers came under pressure to integrate these concepts into their programme architectures. The inclusion of the concept in policies has increased since 2016, when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) determined that certain activities undertaken for the purpose of preventing extremism were now eligible as Official Development Assistance (Miller 2017, 1).

As a consequence, international media development organisations had to analyse how their work could contribute to strengthening strategic communication.<sup>10</sup> This had profound implications for recipients, who are now facing various challenges. Some organisations fear, for example, that funds previously earmarked for media development organisations are going to be shifted to strategic communication or media projects that actively counter extremist propaganda.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the realignment in donor policies conflicts

7 Safwan Al-Amin, “The Future of Secularism in Iraq”, Atlantic Council’s MENASource News, Analyses, Perspectives, 14 September 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-future-of-secularism-in-iraq>.

8 Kamal Al-Ayash, “Down With The Elites: Anbar’s Social Status System Changed Irreparably By Extremism”, Niqash, 22 August 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/society/5841/>.

9 Ali Mamouri, “Iraq’s Islamists dump religion for upcoming elections”, Al Monitor, 21 January 2018, <http://newageislam.com/islamic-world-news/iraq-s-islamists-dump-religion-for-upcoming-elections/d/114021>.

10 Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), “Countering violent extremism debate: Origins, efforts, and challenges”, GFMD News, 14 June 2017, <https://gfmd.info/en/site/news/1127/Countering-violent-extremism-debate-Origins-efforts-and-challenges.htm>.

11 *ibid.*

with the regular objectives of media development. Strategic communication is aimed at shaping the target audience's perceptions and behaviour. The goal of media- and communication-focused development strategies in peacebuilding, on the contrary, is to promote dialogue and cooperation between different factions in conflict areas, encourage political debate, shape opinion building processes in civil society and support these processes with capacity development measures and training.

The Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)<sup>12</sup> dealt with this topic thoroughly in an open letter addressed to donors, policy-makers, security agencies and private communication businesses, in which the challenges organisations are facing and the resulting demands are broached. The challenges highlighted include (1) a growing threat to the independence of the media in development and transition countries, (2) the misuse of current CVE/PVE approaches by autocratic regimes for silencing opposition and dissent, (3) the erosion of the credibility of plural and independent media systems, (4) the endangering of the lives of field staff working on media development programmes on the ground and (5) the short-term evaluation of project outcomes according to securitisation aspects, instead of the long-term evaluation of activities. The demands expressed by the authors of the letter therefore include the following: (1) avoid mixing media assistance and messaging, (2) avoid the weaponisation of media and civil society by mainstreaming CVE in human rights and development activities, (3) invest in serious and independent research to deepen the understanding of the effectiveness and impact of CVE and counter-narrative activities, and (4) adopt a human rights-based approach in line with do-no-harm principles.<sup>13</sup>

Most of the problems and demands outlined here are equivalent to those Abu-Nimer points out in the lead article. The GFMD clearly states that the methods are not applicable to media development as a peace practice since the goals of CVE conflict with those of media development. The challenges media makers in Iraq, for instance, were facing against the backdrop of the rise of the Islamic State (IS) required a totally different approach.<sup>14</sup>

The pressure to deal with such issues through a CVE lens blurs the view of the real causes of extremism and is posing major challenges for media developers, who have to work within the logic of security and prevention instead of media freedom and pluralism.

## 4 Civic Education and the Role of Primary Prevention: The German Case

One major difference between German and international PVE approaches can be ascribed to the role of civic education. Civic education has a central place in Germany's democratic system. It can be described as a means to "encourage critical reflection among German citizens [...] to sensitize them to history, politics and democratic values [and] to promote active citizenship, which foresees societal and political participation" (BPB 2012, as cited by Berczyk/Vermeulen 2015, 94). In light of the history of the Nazi regime, right-wing extremism has been regarded as a fundamental threat to the democratic system since the end of WW2. Civic education, in terms of its conceptualisation, is therefore based on prevention. Policies targeting and preventing expressions of

<sup>12</sup> Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) is a network of journalism support and media assistance groups; see <https://gfmd.info/>.

<sup>13</sup> Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), "GFMD Workshop: Mediadev, CVE & Counter-Propaganda: Where is the problem?" GFMD News, 11 July 2016, <https://gfmd.info/en/site/news/957/GFMD-Workshop-Mediadev-CVE-counter-propaganda-Where-is-the-problem>.htm.

<sup>14</sup> Opposing the IS group's media machinery were Iraqi journalists with little or no access to IS-controlled territory. They received censored or no information from official sources in the Iraqi military and government and had to rely on information from family members working with the army or from social media. The potential for Iraqi journalists to become dependent on information disseminated by the IS group or other conflict parties, such as the Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi – also known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), an umbrella organisation for 40 predominantly Shi'a paramilitary and military forces – and thereby inadvertently becoming propagandists for the extremists was immense. Propaganda against the IS group was also being produced. In fact, some politicians have even gone so far as to suggest that any media that did not support the government's fight against the IS group must themselves be considered terrorists.

extremism have been supported by the Federal Government since 1992 and have been widened to include the promotion of democracy since 2001.

In Germany – in contrast to other European countries – a relatively clear distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention has been developed in recent years (Ceylan/Kiefer 2018, 61-72). Primary prevention programmes are closely related to civic education. They address the whole of society and all potential factors which may contribute to the dynamics of radicalisation leading to violence of any type. Primary prevention programmes aim at self-development, knowledge transfer, skills building and empowerment (ibid., 65). In contrast to secondary and tertiary prevention programmes, which target those who are at risk of becoming or are already radicalised, primary prevention through civic education fosters the resilience of all members of the public to extremist ideologies by various means. This approach attempts to circumvent the risk of stigmatising Muslim communities and to be resource- and not deficit-oriented.<sup>15</sup>

## 4.1 Current PVE debates in Germany

Abu-Nimer argues in his lead article that PVE requires more than the fight against violence and terror in terms of Counter-Terrorism. He recommends an in-depth analysis of local circumstances and root causes of violent extremism for the purpose of peacebuilding in general and interreligious peacebuilding in particular (Abu-Nimer 2018, 18-19). Essentially, then, the aim of peacebuilding in the context of preventive measures is to strengthen societal structures by addressing more complex social and economic inequalities. In the German case, it is clear that structural and socio-economic factors play a role in processes which lead to extremist actions. Feelings of discrimination, social marginalisation and exclusion, powerlessness and hopelessness are identified within the research landscape as potential factors in radicalisation or orientation towards religious extremist ideologies (Müller/Nordbruch 2016: 19). Similar to the international developments which Abu-Nimer outlines, Germany went through the development from Counter-Terrorism to CVE to PVE with an emphasis on deconstructing ideologies.

Currently, the latter approaches, which take the more structural and often less visible causes of violent extremism into account and aim to tackle the multiple causes, figure prominently in the German discourse. It is widely recognised that right-wing and religious extremist theories can only be challenged with a pluralistic, inclusive and socially just democratic model.

This orientation is also due to problems resulting from conventional preventive approaches. The problems correlating with such approaches adopted so far in Germany correspond with those discussed in the lead article. For example, (1) concerns are shared by civil society actors about the relationship between those involved in education and youth work, on the one hand, and police and security agencies, on the other. Furthermore, challenges and problems resulting from PVE approaches include (2) the potential for infringement upon civil liberties, (3) the stigmatisation of the Muslim community in particular (i.e. by targeting and racial profiling), (4) institutional forms of anti-Muslim bias and discrimination, (5) the mistrust of affected communities and their fear that these programmes are primarily for the purpose of monitoring, (6) the reframing of local capacity building programmes in various fields in accordance with CVE/PVE language and terminology, and (7) the measurements of the results according to objectives sought rather than, for example, according to intended and unintended consequences.

## 4.2 “Live Democracy!”

The “Live Democracy! Active against Right-wing Extremism, Violence and Hate”<sup>16</sup> programme was introduced by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth as part of the Federal

<sup>15</sup> Of course, secondary and tertiary prevention approaches are being pursued at the German federal and state level in addition to primary prevention (Ceylan/Michael 2018, 61-74).

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.demokratie-leben.de/en/federal-programme/about-live-democracy.html>.

Government Strategy to Prevent Extremism and Promote Democracy. The programme, launched in 2015, will run until 2019. Its approach seems promising: in addressing the problems mentioned above, its strategy differs from previous ones in that it embraces the idea that the promotion of democracy and its values must be the focus of efforts to prevent extremism. The programme thus tackles the causes by a) applying the group-focused enmity (GFE) approach,<sup>17</sup> which addresses different forms of extremism, group-related hate and ideologies of inequality, b) promoting civil participation and democratic behaviour at local, regional and national level and c) recognising civil society organisations in various action fields as important actors.

Within the programme framework, several measures are combined at various levels. In order to build sustainable structures, one programme area covers three sub-programmes: In “Local Partnerships for Democracy”, 265 towns, cities, municipalities and rural districts are supported to develop strategies for the promotion of democracy and diversity. At the federal level, 16 Democracy Centres are being funded, whose services comprise the development of policies and strategies in relevant fields, the coordination of local activities, and mobile victim and exit strategy counselling. In the programme area “Structural development of nationwide NGOs”, selected non-governmental organisations are receiving long-term support to professionalise and hence to institutionalise their services. In addition, funding is being provided for pilot projects – in six thematic areas – which are pursuing new approaches in promoting democracy and preventing radicalisation. The thematic fields include radicalisation prevention, prevention and deradicalisation in prison and probation, projects on selected aspects of group-focused enmity and strengthening democracy in rural areas, the promotion of diversity at the workplace and in society, and promotion of diversity in the educational sector.<sup>18</sup>

The programme provides funding for partners working in various fields, including Muslim organisations and communities such as the Council of Muslim Students and Academics (RAMSA), a Muslim women’s education centre (MINA), Schura, the Islamic religious community in Bremen and the Cologne branch of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB). Most of their funding from “Live Democracy!” is provided for radicalisation prevention projects.

While the intention of collaborating more closely with such organisations is a good start, there are still many pitfalls. Concerns are being raised by Muslim actors about the lack of funding in fields other than radicalisation prevention. The explicit and monothematic linkage between Muslim organisations and deradicalisation could add to the stigmatisation of the Muslim community in general. Projects promoting social participation among young Muslims beyond the logic of prevention do exist but are rarely recipients of public funding; for example, the regular youth work carried out by Islamic organisations in most cases depends on private funding or voluntary work. The financial shortcomings of these organisations, however, cause many problems. Volunteers and imams often lack educational skills and qualifications, for example (Charchira 2017, 304-305). Furthermore, many Islamic organisations do not meet the formal requirements to be eligible for recognition as an official religious community and are thus excluded from the benefits associated with this status.<sup>19</sup> The valuation of these institutions could be very important (*ibid.*, 312). Many young Muslims identify with their mosque community, which they see as authentic and safe, and hold theological and spiritual services provided by them in high regard. Funding projects in other fields could help in extending youth work beyond prevention (*ibid.*).

<sup>17</sup> GFE is a concept that describes a syndrome of antagonism against out-groups based on the ideology of unequal status. It describes the interrelationship between negative attitudes and prejudices towards groups identified as “other”, “different” or “abnormal”. It is based on the premise that people who reject one out-group also hold the same negative attitudes toward other out-groups (Küpper/Zick 2014, 242).

<sup>18</sup> Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, “Live Democracy! Active against Right-wing Extremism Violence and Hate, <https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/93488/e2475074ed5761fddd1bfa619e68d123/demokratie-leben-aktiv-gegen-rechtsextremismus-gewalt-und-menschenfeindlichkeit-englische-version-data.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> The criteria which must be fulfilled for recognition as an official religious community are “a) Permanency, shown through a constitution and a sufficient number of members; b) Clear membership rosters, in order to determine which pupils are entitled to attend religious instruction; c) Representative who can define the religious principles and represent them; and, d) Not subject to influence by state institutions.” (Berglund 2015, 16).

Another problem results from the need to specify a target group within project architectures. Even though primary prevention targets society as a whole, in practice, it is often Muslims and migrants who are the focus of preventive measures. Implementers thus unintentionally contribute to rising anti-Muslim discourses in Europe and the United States, which in turn play into the hand of extremist groups.

Given the fact that the programme is still in its initial phase, it is possible that these shortcomings can be addressed in the next phase, provided that the programme is continued in its present form by the new government. In retrospect, there are signs that concerns from civil society actors have been taken into consideration by official bodies. Under the previous programme, only 5 percent of funded projects were implemented by Muslim civil society organisations, whereas in 2017, 28 percent of implementers were from the Muslim community.

Furthermore, various channels built into the programme's architecture allow the integration of feedback from practitioners and researchers. Throughout the programme, selected practitioners are invited to attend consultation sessions with the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. Analysis and evaluation of all programme areas are conducted through research centres working in the field of youth and extremism prevention.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Ministry is funding the BAG RelEx<sup>21</sup>, an advocacy group of civil society actors working in the field of religious extremism prevention. The overall purpose of the group is to provide a platform to facilitate exchange and to guide and coordinate the members' inputs, also towards the funding organisation.

The political situation in Germany will also determine whether and how the recommendations are taken into account. With the right-wing AfD in Parliament, difficulties are to be expected. As of 28 March 2018, the AfD has already submitted a parliamentary interpellation comprising 236 questions about the programme<sup>22</sup> and there are concerns that Members from the mainstream parties will side with the AfD.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Mohammed Abu-Nimer argues that PVE approaches as they are conceptualised now are not designed to be transformative. Indeed, if agencies and policies follow the current approaches without adjusting their programmes, PVE approaches will not contribute effectively to preventing violent extremism. However, the question remains whether the focus on religion is the best cure for violent extremism.

I would agree with Abu-Nimer by emphasising that the local "reading" of the conflict and the actors is important. Depending on the local context, the involvement of religious actors or organisations may or may not be necessary for transforming conflicts caused by violent extremism. In fragile states like Iraq, where religion is also used as a tool for organisation and mobilisation, the identification of underlying patterns (Jakob 2016, 255) and relevant state and non-state actors from secular backgrounds is more important. These actors could facilitate dialogue as part of reconciliation and peacebuilding processes, help peacebuilding practitioners to understand what citizens envision as crucial, and contribute to the re-formation of an active civil society beyond sectarian divides.

In countries with functioning governance structures, like Germany, on the other hand, the involvement of FBOs and religious actors must be pursued as an important contribution in light of the absence (or exclusion) of such groups from political representation. Even though in Germany religious organisations and representatives of religious communities are taken into account in prevention approaches, there

<sup>20</sup> The Ministry commissioned, for this purpose, the German Youth Institute (DJI), which receives academic support from the Institute for Social Work and Social Pedagogy (ISS) and Camino, an institute for evaluation and quality development.

<sup>21</sup> The acronym stands for „Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft religiös begründeter Extremismus“ (BAG RelEx).

<sup>22</sup> See <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btd/19/010/1901012.pdf>.



are still limitations to their role in activities. Approaches like “Live Democracy!” are moving in the right direction but need to improve the conditions for the engagement of religious organisations.

Ultimately, preventive concepts can only work if the root causes of extremism are tackled at various levels. The improvement of social conditions, the provision of equal opportunities for all members of society, anti-discrimination and participation cannot only be the result of CVE or PVE activities. Improvement in these various fields has to be initiated by civil society actors from various fields, and should not be reduced to CVE/PVE language or logic. As violent extremism has various root causes, religion can play a role, but it cannot be *the only* solution.

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# Effective Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism

A Peacebuilding Systems Perspective

Anita Ernstorfer

## Content

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>On Terminology</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>How can a Peacebuilding Systems Approach help to increase Effectiveness of P/CVE Initiatives?</b>	<b>52</b>
3.1	Analysis	52
3.2	Programming	55
3.3	Understanding and mitigating unintended impacts – the need for conflict sensitivity	56
<b>4</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>References and Further Reading</b>	<b>59</b>

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# 1 Introduction

This response to Mohammed Abu-Nimer's *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding* is focused on the question of what makes prevention of violent extremism approaches effective. It will explore in more detail some of the points raised in the lead article related to an insufficient understanding of structural drivers of violent extremism (VE), the limited evidence base and research in relation to the 'prevention' or 'countering' of violent extremism (P/CVE), unrealistic donor expectations, and weak and externally imposed programme designs. It specifically responds to the encouragement of Abu-Nimer's request to "delve deeper" into analysing structures of violence, not only the symptoms (Abu-Nimer 2018, 17).

This article will explore how to maximise the potential for positive peace impacts of different approaches to preventing violent extremism by applying principles from the peacebuilding field and a systems perspective.

The article does not focus on the debate whether P/CVE initiatives should exist or not. Neither does it engage more deeply with the question of what role interreligious aspects play in this area. Rather, it takes a practical approach, based on the premise that political extremism and rapidly changing forms of violence have been a concern in the peacebuilding field for a long time (Steenkamp 2014)), and that we need to understand the phenomenon of 'violent extremism' alongside other forms of violence. Violent extremism has received renewed attention in recent years, often with a focus on extremist groups operating in the name of Islam, and in this guise often lacks the 'sincere engagement' of religion and its identity components that Abu-Nimer talks about, thereby steering close to the unhelpful 'Islamisation of CVE/PVE' he critically highlights.

The perception that P/CVE is establishing itself as a distinct 'field' makes many peacebuilding organisations uncomfortable as the understanding of what constitutes effective 'P/CVE' engagement remains blurred within and across policy fields. Many fear a securitisation and instrumentalisation of established development, governance or peacebuilding approaches. There is also the question of what is different in P/CVE programming, compared to other established peacebuilding, conflict prevention or development approaches that intend to address structural drivers of violence.

In any case, at least for the foreseeable future, significant levels of policy attention and funding will be focused on P/CVE programming. The peacebuilding community has much to offer to positively influence this debate and practice, from two perspectives: (i) by applying key peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity principles to the P/CVE debate and how policies and programmes are shaped, and (ii) by applying its learnings from effective conflict prevention and peacebuilding engagement to ensure that the modalities in which P/CVE initiatives are designed and implemented actually increase their potential to become transformative interventions in the contexts and communities in which they are applied (see also Search for Common Ground 2017).

The principles and practical lessons of what constitutes effective and relevant peacebuilding (an approach characterised by principles of Do No Harm as well as 'listening' and a local ownership and accountability approach to international assistance (Anderson et al. 2012) are highly relevant for the P/CVE debate. If adopted and taken seriously in policy and implementation, they could significantly influence P/CVE approaches.

At the same time, the peacebuilding community has learnt that examining the effectiveness of individual projects and programmes is not enough if the objective is to strive for broader impacts on conflict systems at the 'Peace Writ Large' level – the broader societal-level peace, beyond results in specific sectors or regions. Achieving systemic impacts requires a significant shift in how engagements are strategically conceived at policy levels, designed, monitored and evaluated, and funded. As has been explored in various contributions by the Berghof Foundation over the years (Körppen et al. 2011, Körppen et al. 2008, Wils/Unger 2006), a systems approach to peacebuilding requires a very different level of commitment and

engagement amongst donors, implementers and local partners to understand how organisations can move beyond measuring project outputs to understanding the broader impacts on the conflict context systems in which they operate – and how they can collaborate with others to achieve collective impacts. This approach seems highly relevant as we grapple with the P/CVE challenge.

## 2 On Terminology

To clearly lay out one’s use of terms is of more than academic importance in the often heated debates about VE. This article uses ‘prevention and countering’ of violent extremism (abbreviated to ‘P/CVE’) as a combined framing to describe initiatives that intend to address the structural drivers of violent extremism – as opposed to security-focused counter-terrorism efforts (often aimed at addressing manifestations of extremist violence) or specific ‘deradicalisation’ efforts focused at the individual level.

The distinctions laid out in the table below are important in this regard:<sup>1</sup>

<b>Prevention or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>≡ Address the structural drivers of the conflict and of extremist tendencies.</li> <li>≡ Create resilient communities, by building immunity to recruitment by violent extremists, by catalysing community-based cohesion.</li> <li>≡ Deter and disrupt recruitment or mobilisation and assist with reintegration of former violent extremists.</li> </ul>
<b>Counter-Terrorism (CT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>≡ Deter, disrupt and isolate groups that use terror.</li> <li>≡ Train and equip state security forces to fight terrorist groups.</li> <li>≡ Increase the state’s capacity to prepare, prevent, protect and respond to terrorism.</li> <li>≡ Interdict and prosecute through law enforcement.</li> </ul>
<b>Deradicalisation Counter-radicalisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>≡ Counter-radicalisation/Deradicalisation is a cognitive transformation of behaviours away from extremist ideological positions and from the aspiration to use violence as a means to achieve specific goals.</li> <li>≡ Actions by which radicalised individuals and processes are contained and minimised, and radical messages are co-opted and/or refuted.</li> </ul>

The response article discusses P/CVE initiatives that focus on drivers of violent extremism, while drawing some conclusions about common counter-terrorism approaches from a systems perspective.

<sup>1</sup> See also Alliance for Peacebuilding 2015.

## 3 How can a Peacebuilding Systems Approach help to increase Effectiveness of P/CVE Initiatives?

This section will explain how a systems approach has the potential to address many of the conceptual and ethical flaws and challenges found in current P/CVE practice, including those pointed out in the lead article.

### 3.1 Analysis

It is now well understood in the peacebuilding field that conducting thorough conflict analysis is critical to designing peacebuilding engagements that are relevant and address key drivers of conflict in a given setting. At the same time, the understanding and available literature on the drivers of violent extremism have also significantly developed over the years. Recent work from the Royal United Services Institute (Khalil/Zeuthen 2016) offers the following typology for understanding patterns of violent extremist behaviours, all of which vary depending on the specific context:

- ≡ **Structural motivators** can include repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality, discrimination, a history of hostility between identity groups, external state interventions, etc.
- ≡ **Individual incentives** can include a sense of purpose (which might be generated through acting in accordance with perceived ideological tenets), adventure, belonging, identity, acceptance, status, material enticements, fear of repercussions by violent extremist entities, expected rewards in afterlife, etc.
- ≡ **Enabling factors** can include the presence of radical mentors, access to online radical communities, social networks with extremist associations, access to weapons, a comparative lack of state presence, an absence of family support, etc.

Most conflict analyses focus on structural conflict causes of violence, and many of those might also be drivers of violent extremism, depending on the context. At the same time, there are specific drivers of violent extremism, mainly at the level of individual incentives and specific enabling factors, which most ‘regular’ conflict analyses can overlook when they focus on socio-economic and political dynamics rather than analysing the behaviour of individuals or social networks. *Understanding the relationships and dynamics between structural drivers, individual incentives and enabling factors* is a key requirement for the design of relevant P/CVE interventions.

*“Nothing can justify violent extremism but we must also acknowledge that it does not arise in a vacuum. Narratives of grievance, actual or perceived injustice, promised empowerment and sweeping change become attractive where human rights are being violated, good governance is being ignored and aspirations are being crushed.”* (UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism 2015)

In many contexts, however, the understanding of how structural conflict dynamics interact with individual incentives and enabling factors is limited. In many conflict settings, other dynamics, e.g. around organised crime (as in the North of Mali), play into the already complex mix of conflict and violent extremism – and these relationships and dynamics need to be analysed and understood. An understanding based solely on individual incentives to join extremist groups, without insights into the broader political economies and conflict systems in which those incentives are embedded, will likely lead to poor programming that addresses symptoms rather than structural drivers.



Systems analysis can be particularly useful to understand the relationships between structural motivators, individual incentives and enabling factors, as well as the dynamics between such drivers of violent extremism and broader socio-economic and political conflict drivers in each context. A systems model identifies interactions in multiple directions, and can reveal causal connections amongst all associated factors, whereas traditional approaches to analysis often consider linear cause-effect relationships. This kind of analysis permits a wider understanding of multiple causes, rather than a single ‘root’ cause, as well as more complex chains of attribution that can take into account multiple efforts by different actors.

Abu-Nimer in his lead article puts forward key P/CVE programmatic challenges, including the (sometimes questionable) real added value of P/CVE initiatives compared to structural factors: “The question to ask is what the added value is of these programmes, considering factors such as collapsing educational institutions, corruption, discriminatory governance and lack of a national vision, lack of policies to ensure the basic collective and individual freedoms, control and censorship of media and territorial occupation systems” (Abu-Nimer 2018, 6/7). In his assessment, current P/CVE initiatives sometimes ignore the “deep-rooted infrastructural factors driving violent extremism” (ibid.). As an example to concur with and illustrate this point further, the following macro-level systems analysis of national-level conflict dynamics in Syria from 2015/2016 shows how dynamics around non-state extremist actors interrelate with other core conflict dynamics in Syria (ARK 2016).

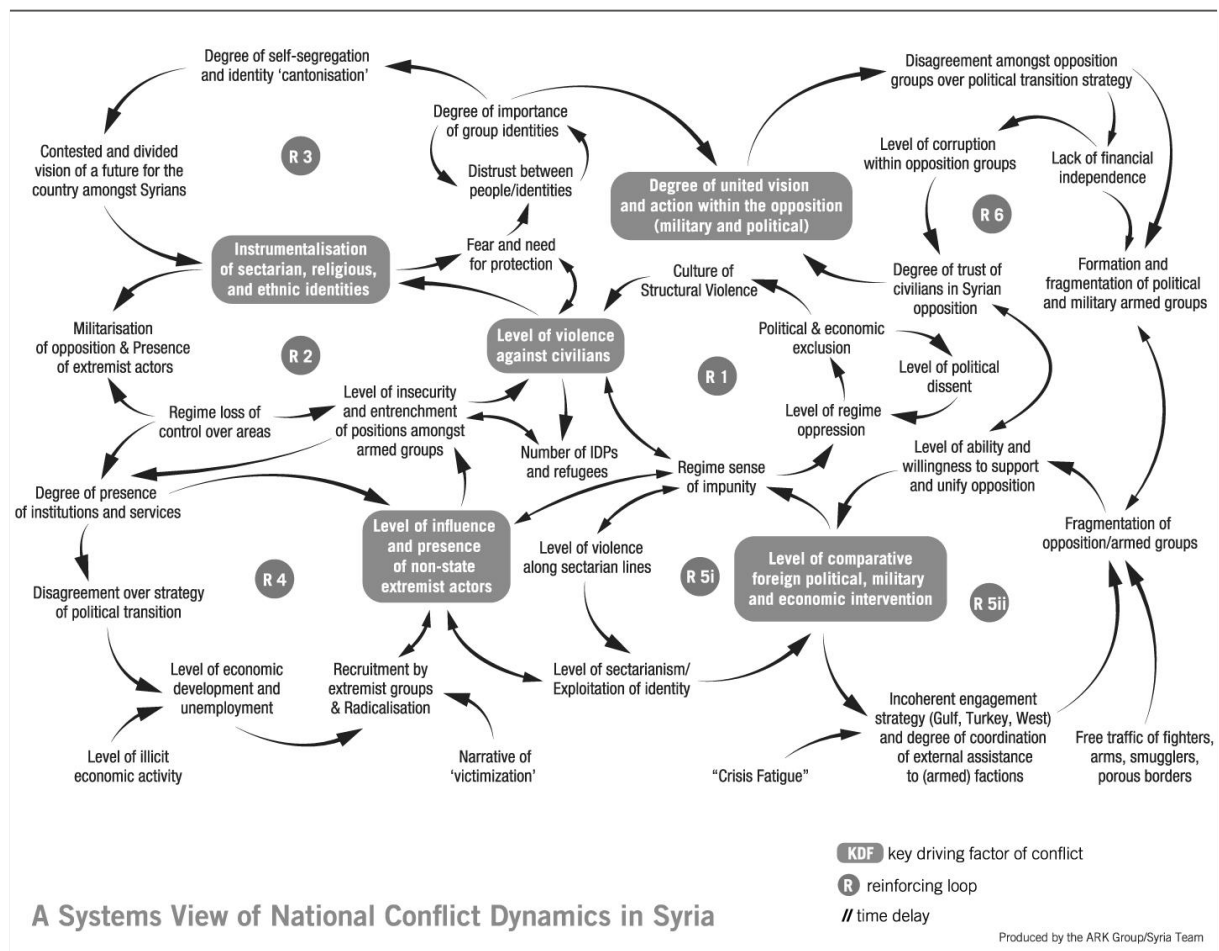


Figure 1: A Systems View of National Conflict Dynamics in Syria<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> **Disclaimer:** To illustrate some of the points made in this article, elements of a national-level systems analysis on Syria, which was produced with the ARK Group DMCC, will be used. CDA facilitated the participatory workshop in 2015 that led to the initial analysis, which was then further refined by the ARK team and published in 2016. The content of this analysis does not represent the author's or CDA's views or position on the Syrian conflict.

This systems map, developed through a participatory analysis process initiated by the ARK Group Syria and facilitated by CDA, shows interlocking vicious circles (“reinforcing loops” in systems thinking terminology), organised around five key drivers of conflict<sup>3</sup> (highlighted in green) – the level of influence and presence of non-state extremist actors being one of them.

It should be noted that this analysis was not produced with the explicit intention to focus on the linkages between structural drivers, individual incentives and enabling factors of violent extremism. The starting point was to understand the bigger picture, macro-level conflict dynamics in Syria, with violent extremism dynamics as one important element – but with a focus on understanding how the various conflict factors connect and relate to each other. As this is a macro-level analysis, it should be noted that the various dynamics in relation to different groups active in Syria were summarised in the map as one group. This map cannot be fully understood without the accompanying narrative in the report itself, which also spells out in much more detail the different dynamics within and amongst the various Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups, as well as ISIL.

A further P/CVE programmatic challenge that hinders lasting results, as Abu-Nimer points out, is the “securitisation of CVE/PVE and the question of whose security” (Abu-Nimer 2018, 6). Many P/VE initiatives are in fact concerned with ‘fighting’ specific groups and reducing the role and influence of violent extremist groups. As the above systems map shows, however, directly trying to address the ‘level and influence and presence of non-state extremist actors’ (as one of the key drivers of conflict) will necessarily result in rather short-term approaches. They will likely focus on rule of law or security – ‘addressing the symptom’ but neglecting the underlying structural dynamics.

The ARK team conducted a detailed stakeholder analysis of local, national and international stakeholders to understand how particular stakeholders and groups drive or counterbalance these dynamics. The team also produced an analysis of possible positive balancing dynamics (not represented in this map, but available in the full public report).

As illustrated in this example, good systems analysis helps to challenge some common assumptions found in P/CVE programming, and helps to move beyond some of the common analytical, conceptual and ethical shortcomings found in many – certainly not all – P/CVE approaches. These assumptions and shortcomings include the following:

- ≡ In most contexts, violent extremism is not the only expression of violence. Violent extremism is part of a wider system of violence or organised crime, which takes many forms – both physical and structural. Some P/CVE initiatives, for example counter-messaging and deradicalisation programmes, are very focused on individual-level change and aim to address violent extremism as though it were the only type of violence that matters. Systems analysis will help to understand the relationships between drivers of violent extremism, individual motivations for recruitment, and other drivers of violence in a given context.
- ≡ Similarly, ‘Islamist extremists’ are not the only actors perpetrating large-scale violence, even though much of the current P/CVE debate seems to convey that impression – and hence ignores that extremist violence is a problem across different faith groups. Abu-Nimer rightly speaks about the limited media coverage and recognition of programmes that address violent extremism motivated by Jewish settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories, white supremacist groups in the US, Sri Lankan and Myanmar Buddhism, or Indian Hinduism in Gujarat or Kashmir (Abu-Nimer 2018, 11). These complex systems of violence involve many different actors and perpetrators. The P/CVE (and even more so the counter-terrorism) field is disproportionately fixated on non-state and Islamist actors and rarely pays sufficient attention to the role of governments (internal and foreign influences) in enabling violent extremism. Again, systems analysis will challenge those assumptions and provide a more holistic and comprehensive picture of important dynamics.

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<sup>3</sup> A key driver of conflict is a conflict factor without which the overall conflict situation would be significantly different – or would not exist.

Finally, the key drivers of violent extremism and conflict are not all found within a particular country's national borders. Many of them originate or are significantly influenced from the outside. P/CVE and counter-terrorism efforts are often prone to point towards other countries and cultures as the sole source of the problem. Systems analysis will help to identify the role of internal as well as external actors in driving and fuelling conflict and violent extremist dynamics. Going back to the analysis of systems dynamics in Syria, the different roles of external actors (such as the US, Russia, Turkey or the Gulf countries) and their political, economic and military influence become visible as playing a fundamental role in the conflict dynamics in Syria – and in relation to supporting, maintaining and undermining specific dynamics around violent extremism.

*“The disparate and, at times, divergent interests, motives, and perceptions of conflict dynamics of the opposition’s main external backers (Turkey, US, UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) has resulted in weak strategic coordination of [...] international and regional assistance to armed factions, which in turn has played a significant role in weakening and fragmenting the more moderate of the armed groups backed by these foreign states.” (ARK 2016, 46)*

Systems analysis helps to understand possible leverage points to change such conflict systems, and to better understand intended and unintended impacts of programming. A key challenge for peacebuilding practitioners in this regard is the question of how to engage, with whom and to what extent, given the proscription by governmental counter-terrorism laws – and the finding in the peacebuilding field that it is critical to engage the ‘hard to reach’ for sustained peacebuilding progress.<sup>4</sup>

The following two sections will explore in further detail how systems analysis can help to design more relevant and effective P/CVE interventions, including thoughts on how to avoid and mitigate unintended negative impacts.

### 3.2 Programming

The above systems map shows the shortcomings of past counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency approaches and how they address the symptoms, and often target specific individuals, rather than the structural drivers of conflict and violence. Understanding how the presence and role of extremist actors and behaviours, in the case of Syria, are influenced, for example, by the instrumentalisation of religious, sectoral and ethnic identities, structural violence, the absence of governance institutions and rule of law, access (or lack thereof) to economic development opportunities, or the influence of foreign powers clearly points to the limitations of an approach that focuses on ‘fighting’ specific groups, rather than addressing structural drivers and motivators. Furthermore, such counter-terrorism approaches can undermine efforts focused on addressing these structural conditions.

*“Abandoning a comprehensive strategy in Syria, however, and engaging with Russia in the fight against Nusra and ISIS without explicitly making that cooperation contingent on a clear, defined process of political transition in Syria, would have major shortcomings. It would do little to address underlying sources of radicalism, further compromise prospects for a negotiated transition, and virtually guarantee that Obama will bequeath to his successor an open-ended Syria conflict that continues to destabilize the Arab east and Western Europe.” (Heydemann 2016)*

A peacebuilding approach to P/CVE, on the other hand, has the potential to leverage existing positive dynamics in conflict situations, grounded in local knowledge and approaches that are often missing in most counter-terrorism strategies. As part of the Syria systems mapping, the team identified various ‘factors for peace’: for example, effective governance approaches at local levels (such as the presence of ‘local councils’ in some areas), or the influence of local civil society initiatives (see above graphic from AKR

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dudouet 2010 on engagement with proscribed armed groups.

### Most critical Factors for Peace /against Conflict

**Level of local governance actors' commitment to public interest** — Degree of presence and effectiveness of local administrations and public provision institutions (e.g., local councils)

**Level of citizen engagement with civil society organisations in regime and opposition held areas** — Existing civil society initiatives (education, women's participation, capacity building, awareness)

Group 2016). Understanding how P/CVE interventions can support such positive local dynamics, rather than undermine them, is a critical condition to make such efforts effective. At the same time, many P/CVE and especially counter-terrorism efforts do not follow a conflict transformation or peacebuilding logic, but a security-policy logic. Abu-Nimer highlights this by proposing that methods based on peace, dialogue and forgiveness are essential for CVE/PVE to become transformative interventions (Abu-Nimer 2018, 17).

A further programming challenge is that while there is some research on why certain communities decide not to join violent acts in the middle of ongoing civil wars but to 'opt out' of violence (Anderson/Wallace 2013; Hancock/Mitchell 2007), there is currently very limited knowledge of why certain communities are more resilient to *violent extremism* than others. This could be an exciting and important area of investigation to further inform P/CVE approaches. It might also significantly challenge perceptions about the roles of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. 'Local solutions' to P/CVE may look very different from what externals can offer – or be willing to accept.

A systems approach to effectiveness also helps us to move beyond the '*attribution*' versus '*contribution*' challenge from a monitoring and evaluation perspective. Rather than asking whether a different 'end-state' at the macro level has been created (and can be attributed to a specific programme), it asks whether and how change (facilitated by a specific programme) in one part of the system influences – or fails to influence – other parts. This focuses the question of accountability for impact not on the achievement of a planned end-state, but rather on whether and how programmes have leveraged change in the system, and therefore are likely to affect how the system behaves – hopefully in positive ways (Woodrow/Chigas 2011). In that sense, systems analysis is also a unique foundation to understand broader impacts beyond individual projects and programmes towards achieving *collective impacts*. At the same time, peer learning and sharing experiences, and gathering and sharing impact evidence amongst organisations, remain more challenging in the P/CVE field than in others, due to high levels of sensitivity and risk awareness around this topic.

### 3.3 Understanding and mitigating unintended impacts – the need for conflict sensitivity

Systems analysis helps to understand intended and unintended impacts on the conflict dynamics from a macro-level perspective, important for all violence prevention work, including prevention of extremism. First and foremost, it helps explain how external actors and actions become part of the system itself – and how they can influence existing dynamics positively and negatively. Development and peacebuilding initiatives *can* have a positive impact on the structural drivers of violent extremism if the key drivers are properly understood, if programming corresponds with the key drivers identified, and if the engagement is implemented in a conflict-sensitive way.

*“An important practice of the peacebuilding and development worlds is the do-no-harm methodology, which helps practitioners think through the short- and long-term effects of certain initiatives or programs on a community. [...] Such consideration would add value to the implementation of CVE projects, especially those – such as community policing efforts – that are borrowed from and tested in more developed contexts [...].” (Holmer 2013)*

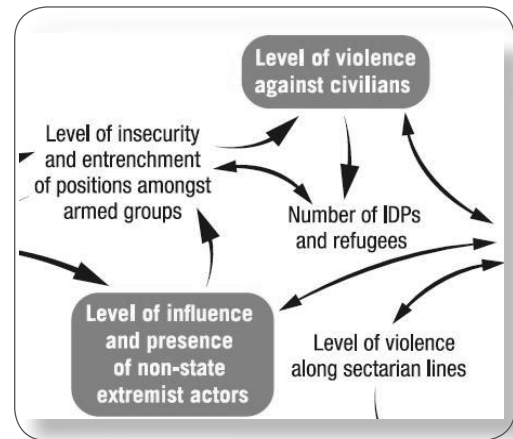
For P/CVE initiatives, the same ‘Do No Harm’ principles should apply as in other violence prevention or peacebuilding interventions, from conflict-sensitive individual actions to organisational processes and behaviours ideally influenced by the RAFT principles: Respect, Accountability, Fairness and Transparency (CDA 2016).

Often, conflict sensitivity comes into play at the project and programme level, once policy and macro-level strategic decisions have been taken. However, for conflict-sensitive P/CVE programming to be effective, it is paramount that conflict sensitivity principles are applied early on during policy and country strategy planning.

We can refer to the systems map in *Figure 1* to illustrate this point. Much of the international assistance for Syria is concentrated on assistance to Syrian IDPs and refugees in neighbouring countries. Humanitarian assistance needs to consider the broader conflict dynamics and, from a violent extremism perspective specifically, needs to understand the types of influences that extremist actors exert at different levels.

Failure to do so is likely to produce sub-optimal results of assistance, or potentially harm partner and beneficiary populations – as well as the staff of aid organisations. This also points to the need for more holistic intervention strategies.

It is important to be aware of certain ethical and practical tensions between conflict sensitivity and many P/CVE approaches. Conflict sensitivity aims to take an impartial approach to the parties in conflict. It recognises that all interventions in a conflict context interact. Therefore, no interventions in a conflict context can be neutral. Rather, programmes aim to be as impartial as possible. On the other hand, the violent extremism debate forces policy-makers and practitioners to label individuals or groups as ‘extremists’, which implies a judgement about the legitimacy of that individual or group as well as a distinction in terms of the tactics such individuals or groups employ. A conflict-sensitive approach is concerned with not worsening tensions or violence, and with finding opportunities to contribute to peace and justice, which applies to all parties in a conflict. P/CVE is concerned with one or more specific groups in a conflict – the violent extremist or terrorist group. Even though in some contexts there might be efforts to find negotiated agreements with such groups, very often the aim is to undermine their existence or disrupt recruitment. It is important to understand these nuances and distinctions to effectively implement conflict-sensitive programming in contexts with high levels of violent extremism.





## 4 Conclusions

The peacebuilding community is currently divided in its positioning and approach to P/CVE. There are those who condemn the P/CVE agenda and framing, given all its related and perceived risks for staff and the perceived securitisation of development and peacebuilding work. Then there are those who creatively ‘reframe’ some of their programming approaches to qualify for P/CVE funding at country level – with varying degrees of scrutiny on related go/no go decisions. Furthermore, there are organisations which try to find a middle ground, by influencing the P/CVE policy debate in a practical way to make the available funding more likely to have a positive impact, applying principles and learning from peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity practice over many years. One could argue there is a moral obligation for peacebuilding practitioners to influence P/CVE policy and practice to avoid risks and threats to the same communities in which many peacebuilding organisations already operate.

Peacebuilding actors will need to work together very closely if they want to influence the P/CVE discourse and programming according to peacebuilding and conflict-sensitivity principles. No single peacebuilding actor will be able to do this alone. The systemic approaches outlined in this article might provide a useful entry point to discuss strategic cooperation between funders, policy-makers, and implementers at both the policy and the programmatic level.

For this purpose, much more evidence on what constitutes effective P/CVE programming is required. While there are emerging efforts to increase the evidence base on drivers of violent extremism and the emergence of effective approaches (Allan 2015), there is currently no systematic evidence base on what works and what doesn’t (and why and how and for whom), shared between organisations engaged in this space. There is much to be learned from the peacebuilding field, but there are also independent learnings required on the specifics of P/CVE engagements and related policy coherence and programmatic effectiveness questions. This will need to include applied research, more systematic, systemic and shared analysis across international and local stakeholders, and more evaluations and assessments that go beyond ‘project effectiveness’ and really analyse the impact of P/CVE interventions on conflict and country systems. The impetus for such a larger, systemic focus cannot come from project and programme levels alone: including such thinking and approaches at the level of decision-making on policies, country strategies and funding will be essential ‘to move the needle’ on P/CVE. Needless to say, all of this will only be useful if there is real willingness to learn from past and ongoing engagements, and possibly to adapt current P/CVE approaches.



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# Religious Institutions and the Challenges of Extremism and Terrorism

The Long View

Radwan El Sayed

## Content

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Rise of Religious Extremism: Emergence and Impacts</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>National States, Official Religious Institutions and Radical Islamic Groups: The Contest for Religious Authority</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Religious Institutions' Responses to the New Era of Violent Extremism</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Confronting Violent Extremism: Challenges and Ways to Move Forward</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>References and Further Reading</b>	<b>68</b>

# 1 Introduction

In his lead article “*Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism: The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding*”, Mohammed Abu-Nimer makes a timely contribution to discussions on the efficacy of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) bodies and programmes. One prominent argument he makes refers to the role of religious leaders and religious institutions in transforming violent extremism (Abu-Nimer 2018, 7ff.). While I agree with this argument, I think it deserves particular attention and further consideration, particularly in relation to a practical approach. I also think that it should be looked at beyond the question of potential cooperation of religious leaders in data- and intelligence-gathering to help security agencies, which often dominates public debate. Although this might be true to an extent, it is also true that religious leaders and religious institutions have a very genuine interest in developing and strengthening their own prevention approaches. A securitised approach or “instrumental” involvement of religious leaders in P/CVE efforts would certainly undermine the constructive role religious leaders and religious institutions can play, as Abu-Nimer rightly argues. Based on the genuine interest, the constructive potential and the current window of opportunity, I would like to dig deeper into the question as to what religious institutions can really do and what they are currently undertaking, and give some practical recommendations as to how they could be strengthened in their prevention efforts, based on my own experience.

My own background is that of a scholar of Islamic Theology. I first studied at the Religious Institute in Beirut, and then pursued my studies at the Faculty of Theology at Al-Azhar University. I acquired a PhD from Germany and lectured at several Arab, Islamic and Western universities where the main subjects were jurisprudence, theology, exegesis and political thinking, as well as history and modern Islamic groups. Over the last few years, I have focused also on providing practical recommendations and supporting dialogue attempts with religious institutions in the field of prevention of violent extremism. Therefore, I hope this text will contribute to understanding and confronting challenges in the religious domain and strengthen the constructive potential of prevention by religious leaders and institutions.

This article will trace how religious institutions have dealt with the phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism since the early 1970s and the role these institutions have recently played in C/PVE programmes. My essay intersects with the discussion in the lead article on the lack of clear long-term strategies and tool kits that assist religious institutions to participate effectively in C/PVE programmes without threatening their credibility with their constituencies. (1) This includes the necessity of empowering the religious institutions to develop tools and frameworks that use the language of faith and reflect their spiritual and religious traditions. (2) Based on the impact of a certain securitisation of C/PVE approaches in the region on the religious institutions and their constituencies, I am convinced that it is important for religious institutions to rebuild the trust with their constituencies based on the principle of inclusivity and enhanced outreach efforts.

## 2 The Rise of Religious Extremism: Emergence and Impacts

Islamic religious institutions have confronted major challenges in the context of religious extremism, which has developed into violent extremism and terrorism. Across the region, the religious institutions were surprised and shocked by the strong emergence of violent extremism in the early 2000s. They neither expected nor were they prepared for the task of addressing this issue because they lacked the vision as well as the structures, capacities and tools to do so. To understand the reasons for the weakness of religious institutions in this regard, it is

important to trace and look at the role of religious institutions across history and how they evolved in their respective political and social contexts. In my reading, there are two main factors as to why religious institutions have been unable to cater to the needs and address questions of the contemporary world. One of these factors is rooted in the relationship between the religious institutions and the developing nation-states and their different trajectories across the region. In simple terms, these relationships between nation-state and religious institutions range from following the guidance of the nation-states blindly or even exploiting these institutions to support the doctrines of the state in some countries to the exclusion or marginalisation of religious institutions in other countries. Ultimately, however, both relationships, “subordination” or “side-lining”, led to increased dependency of these institutions on the state and to the adoption of the state’s security-based approach to deal with the phenomenon of violent extremism. The second factor relates to these institutions’ attempts to promote intellectual and religious reform, which led to attacks upon these institutions from two sides: from “rival” Islamic groups, and from nationalist and leftist groups. While some of the Islamic groups accused religious institutions of violating the religious heritage, nationalists and leftists blamed them for being stuck in the past. While religious institutions were busy protecting the Islamic traditions and heritage against these attacks, fundamentalist groups were seeking to exploit these institutions’ weakness by promoting extreme interpretations of concepts such as “Jihad” and “Takfir”<sup>1</sup> with the aim of developing radical ideologies as a basis for seeking dominance over the Islamic sphere.

Against this background and being caught by surprise, the primary reaction of many Islamic religious institutions was initially limited to issuing fatwas condemning violence in the name of religion. They further argued and constantly reminded people that extremist groups such as Al Qaeda or Daesh are just like the old “Kharijites”<sup>2</sup>, who fought against the authorities; they thus provided religious interpretations out of the current context. This, in my view, was a major underestimation and misunderstanding of the danger and impact of the emergence of these extremist groups, which is rooted in history. It took some time for the importance of addressing and preventing violent extremism under the leadership of the religious institutions to be recognised.

Since the rise of violent extremism in the 1970s, accusations have been levelled at these religious institutions by the authorities, intellectuals and the media. Some blamed them for being powerless vis-à-vis the supposedly increasing attractiveness of more radical discourses, while others have accused them of complicity. As previously stated, I would argue that it was weakness on the part of the religious institutions and not connivance. Religious sheikhs themselves have become victims and were killed by violent extremists, either because they were considered to be agents of the state and security authorities or because they were accused of following an ‘improper’ religious path. Moreover, these institutions for a long time did not take part in the states’ strategies to fight extremist groups; this was, however, not rooted in sympathies of the sheikhs of these institutions with the ideologies of violent groups, but stemmed from their lack of understanding of the phenomenon and its threat to religion.

The initial impression of religious institutions’ sheikhs, and perhaps some politicians too, in the 1970s was that these extremists were no more than political opposition or a protest phenomenon among poor and marginalised young people, clad in a religious guise. Based on this reasoning and in the political context of the time, they considered that these phenomena should be dealt with through the security institutions. Meanwhile, the security forces were incapable of dealing with these phenomena on their own and sought to add the religious dimension to their security tools. The security forces thus tried to convince

<sup>1</sup> Jihad and Takfir are two concepts that have been subjected to numerous research studies and fatwas since they were hijacked by many political and religious groups over the ages to justify various forms of violence. Jihad can refer to internal and external efforts to be a good Muslim or believer and to informing people about Islam. And the greater Jihad is the spiritual struggle within oneself against sins. Takfir is to accuse someone of disbelief and polytheism.

<sup>2</sup> *Kharijites* were a former Muslim group that appeared in the first century of Islam and set themselves apart from mainstream Islam with their radicalised ideology. One particular characteristic of *Kharijites* is their excommunication of any Muslim who commits major sins or any Muslim who does not agree with them. There is therefore no room for disagreement within these fanatical groups; anyone who does not agree with their methodology of interpreting Islamic sharia is automatically threatened.

the sheikhs that these young people had a religious vision, or at least their senior cadres had. It took some time – as well as a re-reading of the texts inciting violence which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (AlMawdudi<sup>3</sup>) – before some scholars began to notice that this violent extremism could not be understood as a mixture of psychological problems and political protests, as many had previously assumed, but that a particular vision of religion was indeed being adopted and promoted.

Nowadays, governments in many Arab countries are in the process of consolidating national statehood; religious institutions have realised that in order to fulfil their mandate and protect their pivotal role with the communities, they have a genuine interest in complementing these efforts by developing a contemporary religious discourse, which entails an understanding that reconciles religion with civic values such as citizenship, national unity and co-existence<sup>4</sup>.

### 3 National States, Official Religious Institutions and Radical Islamic Groups: The Contest for Religious Authority

The tendency of radical groups to refer to the verses of Quran or Hadith as their main religious foundation was the starting point for violent action. Over decades, the phenomena of radicalisation began when the well-educated devout (those having or showing strong religious commitment) developed their vision and understanding of the holy script according to their own interpretation of the different texts, despite their lack of religious education and the ability to deal with such complicated texts. Additionally, these interpretations were strongly influenced by the positions of these devout individuals on pressing issues of the time, such as colonialism and the evolution of modern nation-states. Gradually and outwardly, these devout began to react to different political events that took place after 1919, creating a new stream of religious thinkers with a political discourse whose content and tools differed from those of the mainstream national discourse. In Egypt, for instance, the main focus of many activists was to expel the British, end the occupation and establish a nation-state based on a modern constitution and political parties. In 1922, a constitutional monarchy was created and Egypt was striving to follow in the footsteps of other modern states. Meanwhile, religious groups were being formed and created; the above-mentioned devout were the core of these groups. Furthermore, in accordance with their understanding of their faith, these religious groups took a negative view of the socio-political developments and the formation of new nation-states (in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine). All these events and dynamics have enabled these religious groups to develop an alternative discourse with religious “flavour”.

How did the Arab and Islamic authorities deal with official religious institutions between the 1950s and 1980s? There were three forms of cooperation: in the military and in progressive countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Algeria, Indonesia and Pakistan, the focus was on weakening these institutions, which were regarded as very traditional and unable to deal positively with these countries’ modernisation programmes; there was also an aversion to alignment with the Soviet Union. Major Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco have

3 Sayyid Abu A’ala Mawdudi was a Muslim philosopher, jurist, journalist and imam. His numerous works covered a range of topics such as Quranic exegesis, hadith and history. He developed his own vision of interpreting holy texts in a political frame, which we now call Political Islam. Mawdudi’s theories influenced the rise of some Islamic regimes (Sudan 1980) as well as the original ideologies of Egyptian Muslim brotherhood.

4 Examples of the involvement of religious institutions in rebuilding the nation statehood: (1) Training of sheikhs on human rights values in Jordan. (2) Training of sheikhs on international humanitarian law in Lebanon.



preserved and strengthened these institutions, but also forced them to comply, whereas smaller countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Mauritania opted for neutrality or indifference.

Additionally, the eruption of violence in the name of Islam was directly and strongly influenced by the different incidents that radically changed the socio-political and, to some extent later on, the geopolitical discourses and dimensions in the region. Religious groups (this term refers to groups that operate beyond the official religious institutions) had a role to play by either initiating or supporting this radical change. To clarify this point, some events inspired religious groups, such as the success of the Iranian Revolution and the emergence of a theocratic state. In addition, these events did not have an impact on the official religious institutions or the new emerging challenges. On the contrary, the loyalty of the official religious institutions towards the state remained undimmed and, accordingly, their popularity suffered. The best example to demonstrate the inability of the official religious institutions to counter radical religious groups, during the first stages of religious violence, was their intellectual stagnation towards the two main emerging concepts; “Islam is Religion and State” and the “Absolute Divine Sovereignty”, which were the basic foundation on which religious groups lobbied and advocated for their religious discourse as the one and only alternative to weak, dependent and infidel states. Both concepts have created a deep division in Islam, especially amongst some Sunni streams, which to some extent were inspired by the developments in Iran to legitimise violence and establish their own theocratic state. Nevertheless, this development and the repercussions of the two concepts were not dealt with immediately by the religious institutions, as explained above. Other actors, such as the Americans and the Pakistanis, even supported or exploited these groups in their ongoing conflicts with the Soviets in Afghanistan and against communist parties in Sudan and Indonesia. Simultaneously, the importance of these official institutions for the authorities faded as these states opted for a securitised rather than an intellectual approach to deal with radical groups.

## 4 Religious Institutions’ Responses to the New Era of Violent Extremism

Nonetheless, prior to the incidents of 11 September 2001 and the evolution of „Islamic terrorism“ into a global phenomenon, as well as the war against it, the relatively strong religious institutions in Egypt, Morocco and Saudi Arabia did not see any need to engage in an intellectual war against extremism. Once they realised the real danger of these phenomena, after the rise of Al Qaeda and Daesh, and considered these groups as a rift in religion, these countries recognised the important role of religious institutions in transforming violent extremism and began organising conferences and seminars to condemn extremism and terrorism in the name of religion. They also discussed correcting the religious concepts to which extremists and terrorists adhered, such as their interpretations of the application of Sharia, Jihad and rebellion against the state, and aggression against civilians in the land of Islam and worldwide. They also worked on reviving the relations with major international religious Christian institutions. The Jordanian religious institution and Al-Azhar in Cairo in particular have crossed these boundaries with declarations against violence, calling for national unity, a civil state, citizenship and freedom.

## 5 Confronting Violent Extremism: Challenges and Ways to Move Forward

All these efforts mentioned above were of crucial importance, especially in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. But much remains to be done. There is a lack of clear long-term strategies and tools that help religious institutions to participate effectively in C/PVE programmes without threatening their credibility with their constituencies. There is thus a need to empower religious institutions to develop tools and frameworks that use the language of faith and reflect the spiritual and religious traditions – as Abu-Nimer has mentioned in his article (Abu-Nimer 2018, 10, 17) Moreover, the securitisation of some C/PVE programmes has affected the relations between religious institutions and their constituencies and there is a need to rebuild trust, following the principle of inclusivity and dialogue, while avoiding the pitfalls of securitised approaches.

Religious institutions have not started the process of structural reform yet, although it is much-needed and a principal matter that has future implications and prevents the formation of new generations of extremists and terrorists. In this regard, I have drawn attention to these issues in some of my research, using two terms in this context:

- 1) *Qualification*: this implies acquiring new knowledge and tools for re-reading religious texts, exploring new phenomena in societies and the drivers of extremism, studying the global atmosphere surrounding Islam, examining the situation of new Islamic communities in Europe and the world, and identifying the drivers behind the growing Islamophobia. Moreover, there is a need to develop new media tools and channels that serve to spread the messages of moderation and take into account the evolving discourse of youth.
- 2) *Rehabilitation*: the term describes a process aiming at assessing and reforming religious programs, curricula and educational concepts in schools and universities. Both, in Islam and in politics and sociology, there are controversies about reform of religious and societal discourse. Many attempts to introduce change or adapt new concepts were rather destructive (e.g. on the one hand, how “Jihad” was reinterpreted by some groups, how an application of Sharia is advocated for or how the state is being subjugated to religion by other groups, yet also, on the other hand, how religious reform is often demanded based on applying a European approach which does not fit or reflect the context and conditions in Arab countries or superficial criticisms of the kind that “Islam is the problem”). Perspectives on these issues could not be further apart between more extremist Islamist currents and radical secularists. Allowing the space for more radical voices to overshadow a more nuanced discussion, religion has become an element of division, not an element of unification. What is needed, therefore, is to revise the content of religious discourse based on a moderate middle ground, catering to the needs of the contemporary world and allowing for reform beyond the dichotomy between the more radical or secular concepts mentioned above. Additionally, we need to re-evaluate and renew religious curricula in schools and universities in order to face the new challenges imposed by modernity and globalisation and to keep up with their fast-paced development.

I am aware that many committees and working groups were established to serve this purpose; nevertheless, Qualification is an essential prerequisite to Rehabilitation. This is not due to the fact that extremists and terrorists are Islamic schools and universities graduates; in most cases they are not. Extremist and violent ideologies have emerged outside religious schools and universities. Professors, teachers and imams, who address students and people, should be equipped with up-to-date knowledge and training and should be supported to adopt attractive modern discourse, both in private and on public, a situation which remains inexistent yet.

Various prevention efforts and activities were initiated by religious institutions over recent years and attempts are being made to build the capacities of religious institutions and their staff in this regard. The King Abdullah II Institute for the Training and Rehabilitation of Preachers and Imams in Jordan aims to convey a modern message of peace and tolerance in Islam. The same experience is evident in the Egyptian Ministry of Awqaf where the training centre for imams aims to hone their skills and build their capacities to disseminate the

right moderate teachings of Islam as well as to combat terrorism and extremism. During my participation in a conference on „Reading the Islamic heritage between the guidelines of comprehension and the trivialities of delusion<sup>5</sup>“ at the Faculty of Theology at Al-Azhar University, professors from Sharia and Islamic studies departments in Egypt, Iraq, Morocco and Saudi Arabia delivered lectures which promise good beginnings and develop new preventive strategies. In my contribution, I advised that missions outside the country should be intensified. I also advised expanding the criticism of the tendency to take the Holy Book (Quran) literally and critiquing the fundamentalist tendency in the religious discourse. I encountered opponents as well as enthusiastic supporters. The traditional religious ideological doctrine has been fractured, and it is necessary to work on promoting a religious jurisprudence compatible with modern lifestyles, and then develop a worldwide jurisprudence suitable for this age as well as the wider world, as other religions try to do, in particular Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

Nowadays, there are numerous calls for regional exchange of experience and lessons learned and working together on developing joint strategies to renew religious discourse, religious education, issuing of fatwas and general religious guidance. The cooperation between religious institutions in Arab countries has already begun; yet there is still a need to benefit from the experiences of institutions such as Al-Azhar and its observatory, Dar al-Iftaa in Jordan and other Islamic institutions, as well as an urgent need to build common strategies and approaches across the region.

In my capacity as an advisor to the Mufti of the Republic of Lebanon, I have been advocating for intensifying such dialogical attempts over the past few years. Under the Mufti’s auspices, a process was initiated to increase the outreach of the religious lead institutions in Lebanon, for example by professionalising its media and web tools, to strengthen the dialogue capacities of its affiliated imams and to invest into the strategic development of Dar al-Fatwa, the religious institution representing the Sunni community at government level, to prevent radicalisation in the future. This process has been implemented with technical support and facilitation from Berghof Foundation since 2015.

With the election of Sheikh Abdel-Latif Deriane as Mufti in 2014, a window of opportunity had opened to strengthen and support the moderate line of thought, traditional to Sunni Islam in Lebanon. Opting for an inclusive and conciliatory approach, the Mufti strongly promoted the values of peaceful coexistence, pluralism and moderation as the religious leader of the Sunni community in Lebanon. Some of the main initiatives launched over the last few years include a process to strengthen the tools and capacities of religious media in promoting the moderate messages of Islam in an attempt to increase the attractiveness of the moderate discourse to the daily contexts of Dar al-Fatwa’s constituencies. Lebanon has further benefited from enhancing exchanges with Dar al-Fatwa’s counterparts at the regional level and renowned regional flagships such as the Egyptian Al-Azhar through conferences, continuous exchanges and occasional training for Dar al-Fatwa sheikhs.

Worth noting in this context are a conference held on the role of religious media in preventing extremism (<https://bit.ly/2FfZQ04>) to strengthen moderate Islamic discourse across the region, and a conference on strengthening the role of religious institutions in peace and dialogue processes (<https://bit.ly/2jpSMjT>). Further practical examples include training events for Dar al-Fatwa media personnel at Dar al-Ifta in Jordan and continuous workshops held in Lebanon with Dar al-Fatwa’s media department and radio station. Various strategy-building processes have been initiated in key thematic areas for the prevention of extremism, including religious education methodologies and religious counselling of prisoners. Involving a wider range of representatives and experts in such dialogical strategy-building processes is key in order to ensure a broad support base for such initiatives, which cater to the diversity of voices in and around the religious lead institution as well as in the constituencies concerned. Based on this consideration and the crucial role of enhancing outreach and interaction with local communities, imams, sheikhs and personnel of religious institutions and organisations have received basic training in conflict transformation methodologies, dialogue facilitation and mediation.

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5 For more information: <https://bit.ly/2Hui7Nm>

While these efforts have been important in laying some groundwork for intensifying the role and constructive potential of religious institutions in strengthening societal cohesion and taking a lead role in preventing extremism, much more needs to be done based on the ownership, capacities and genuine interest of the religious institutions and their leadership personnel. For these efforts to succeed, it is crucial that the lead religious institutions continue their efforts to rebuild trust with their constituencies, to take a bridge-building role between societies and state institutions and to invest in the capacities of their personnel and the young active members of the religious communities surrounding them. Concerted efforts of this kind will be crucial for fulfilling the guiding role of moderate Islam at the local, national and regional level to prevent a re-emergence of extremist groups over the decades to come.

## 6 Conclusion

The work of religious leaders alone is not sufficient to counter the challenges facing our religions and societies, no matter how far the efforts of religious institutions can go. As Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer stated, we need to join the efforts of intellectuals, media professionals, research institutes, academics and strategic studies centres. However, this paper focused on clarifying the crucial role of religious institutions as they continue to carry out four tasks: leadership of devotion, religious education, fatwa and general religious guidance. They are all necessary tasks in the process of modifying and widening the concepts and refuting dissidence and waves of extremism.

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# “What’s actually needed is to invent new terms”

A Conversation about Radical Religious Norms and Experiences from the Balkans

Rudine Jakupi, Garentina Kraja, Rrona Kamberi,  
Redion Qirjazi, Sefer Selimi, Romario Shehu,  
Sead Turcalo, Nejra Veljan with Beatrix Austin  
(interviewer)

This is an edited conversation with a team of researchers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia who are researching issues of radicalisation, violent extremism and prevention in the region and their respective countries (for further information on their background see *About the Authors and Interviewees*). The interview was recorded in Sarajevo on 27 March 2018 and edited for brevity and clarity.

Berghof Foundation works with the researchers interviewed here in the context of the participatory research project “Opportunities for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) in the Western Balkans”.

## **I’d like to start by asking whether there were aspects or propositions in the lead article that you found particularly convincing, or that you really disagreed with?**

*Romario Shehu, Albania:* The most interesting aspect of this paper for me was the importance given to the state-building process, specifically strengthening democracy, human rights and rule of law. Violent extremism is a symptom of deficiencies in these areas, which are the root causes of the problems. So instead of making C/PVE a pillar in itself, it is better to integrate it into the main process of state-building. This approach is very appealing to me, and reading the author’s views made it more persuasive.

*Rudine Jakupi, Kosovo:* I found Mohammed Abu-Nimer’s proposal to involve local imams in PVE approaches very convincing, because I think this is the only way forward when we talk about *religious* extremism in this sense. It is important to include the main actors who can actually provide some sort of counter-narrative to the extremist narratives.

*Sefer Selimi, Macedonia:* I found it very interesting when he talked about the lack of tools to maintain everybody’s credibility in terms of their engagement in these activities: “clear strategies and toolkits on how best to build mutual engagement on PVE/CVE without threatening each other’s [...] identity and constituencies are lacking” (Abu-Nimer 2018, 9). That makes a lot of sense, because many politicians, policy-makers and NGOs want to maintain their secularity, their reputation and their adherence to the principles of a secular state, and at the same time the imams’ credibility should not be in question because of their engagement with policy-makers in CVE and PVE.

*Sead Turcalo, Bosnia:* The entire article resonates strongly with the way I am thinking about PVE and CVE activities, starting from the point that most of us, not just in the region but throughout the world, are still at this first stage (Abu-Nimer 2018, 3ff.). So even if we speak about PVE and CVE activities, we

are mostly just countering terrorism. In a way, the entire violent extremism issue has overshadowed peacebuilding processes for quite a few years. Another important point applicable to our region is a sort of instrumentalisation of religious communities, especially Islamic communities. They are not really brought into the process as actors; they are just like tools that are used in the process. What I found most impressive and important about the article is Abu-Nimer's call for a change in the terminology used, so that we do not fall into the trap of "Islamising" all of the PVE activities. Most of these PVE or deradicalisation programmes that he mentions – I remember the programme from the United Kingdom (Abu-Nimer 2018, 5) but it is not the only one – fail because they are set up in a way that addresses just one community. Then this community is afraid of even taking part in this project because it feels oppressed and put on the spot, *stigmatised*. We really do have this securitisation of the entire process and we should bring it around to communal politics and local politics.

*Nejra Veljan, Bosnia:* What I liked the most, beyond including imams as peace actors and not only as 'rhetorical weapons', was the idea of including interreligious dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2018, 10), because the potential for violent extremism exists in all countries. It can be manifested in different forms, as a right wing or left wing extremism, separatism or religiously motivated extremism, but bloodshed and the scars are what it leaves on society. I think that the problem with radicalization and violent extremism is a global problem. In Bosnia, though, it is painted as this big threat that is coming from the Muslim community. For example, right-wing political rhetoric in the country keeps overblowing the alledged threat to Serbs and Croats (i.e. Christians), not only by Salafist, but by Muslims in general. I think interreligious dialogue would have a great influence, so you can tackle it from different sides.

*Garentina Kraja, Kosovo:* In one of his guidelines for interreligious programmes, Abu-Nimer mentions an institutional approach, so as not to create "star" imams who you "put on show" and instrumentalise (ibid.). However, the nuances within these institutions are left aside. I think the general assumption is that these institutions are homogeneous, yet we are finding that they are not. So you take an institutional approach, you want to involve 'the Islamic community' in the work, for example, of the peacebuilding programmes. But this Islamic community is not even a formed body that thinks the same way and acts the same way everywhere: one day they call for contributions to support the people in the Land of Sham,<sup>1</sup> and the next day, they ask the members of their community to distance themselves from these same people. People leave based on that first statement, they join Al-Musra initially and then IS, and then the next day, under pressure from various players, including state actors, those who have encouraged them have to withdraw their statement. I agree that we see the Islamic communities holding a lot of weight in our societies, especially through local imams – but I don't think we have a complete picture unless we account for the nuances inside these institutions. These are not homogeneous, top-down, 'orderly' institutions. Within these institutions, you have very different schools of thought, very different opinions about what an interreligious dialogue is, or how or what Muslims should or should not be like within a country.

*Sead Turcalo:* Yes, involvement of the Islamic community should definitely be tailored to specific countries and localities. For example, we have differences in the region: I know that the Islamic Community in Bosnia-Herzegovina has a wider reach than is the case in other countries, because it never had the kind of corruption scandals that some of the others had. However, I also wanted to express concern that some of the things proposed are not feasible. We speak about state-building – Romario mentioned it – and it's true that without state-building it's very hard to implement peacebuilding initiatives. But on the other hand, starting from state-building is not a feasible idea in implementing any programmes in the region right now. We have been in state-building processes for 20 years. And we are not able to re-start the entire state-building process. We should actually take smaller steps and then, as Garentina mentioned, through many small steps build the institutional approach which in the end is needed to deal with the issue of violent extremism.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Land of Sham" is a term which the Islamic Community in Kosovo uses to refer to Syria and Iraq (an Arabic notion for the Levant).



*Sefer Selimi:* I would say politicians, states and societies are somehow afraid of a scenario in which the religious communities were involved in every aspect of life, because they are often seen as elements that can be manipulated. Even I have a lot of suspicion regarding how much or at what point religious leaders should be involved in everyday life. I think there should be a clear distinction between the state and religious life.

*Rudine Jakupi:* In the case of Kosovo, we were talking about how the national strategy was drafted without the inclusion of the people on the ground, without having people express their opinions. You’re talking about religious communities, about youth, you’re talking about women – you are talking about a very local community, you’re talking about very small communities. But that’s what the national strategy<sup>2</sup> in Kosovo is about. So how can you draft policies without including the people whom they are meant for? Without addressing their needs, without knowing what their needs are and what kind of problems their communities face? And whether we like it or not, religious communities are an important actor *and* factor in addressing violent extremism. Unless you include them in the discussion and in drafting policies that are meant for them, you won’t have sustainable solutions, in my opinion. That’s why the article really resonated with me. There is one box which says: “Asking Muslim leaders for a blessing or to issue a fatwa in support of a policy and not including them in policy-making is *not* community engagement.” (Abu-Nimer 2018, 15) I agree with that.

*Sefer Selimi:* Just to clarify, I totally agree with that. That’s why I emphasised what Abu-Nimer said: we need clear strategies and toolkits that show how to keep everybody’s credibility within a society. We should include them, but to what extent should be discussed.

*Rudine Jakupi:* I also wanted to talk about the role of international organisations. Abu-Nimer talks about it in the part about integration and the interreligious programmes, and he says that the international organisations have completely missed the point. And I have to agree with that as well. International organisations took a very Westernised perspective, especially in the Balkans, with the grants and the programmes that they structured. But when you have civil society organisations that rely on grants and look actively for donors, they write project proposals that actually fit what the international organisation is looking for. So even the projects implemented by the local CSOs don’t necessarily fit the local context and the needs of the communities.

**The interesting point that Sefer also raises is that it has to be okay for both sides to want to keep their identities – so somebody who feels that secularism, or gender equality, or human rights standards are really important has to find their space to express that. That’s the tension, or the balance that is difficult to strike, because for some the fear may be that by bringing the faith-based organisations back in, they would have to give up what to them defines their identity.**

*Redion Qirjazi, Albania:* I wanted to focus on inclusiveness (of imams, marginalised communities, etc.) and unpack that a bit. Yes, it is important to include the policy-makers at the different levels, or any other community leaders – they could be imams, they could be organisations or the new municipality – but I think this raises the question of strategy. And in my opinion, such a strategy should be very adaptive and multi-layered. Because not all problems are community problems, some are also policy-related and at the national level; that’s where you need the laws, and you need the general framework that enables community leaders to operate. At the same time, it is important that the structures and processes are well-defined, meaning who can contribute to what: what can imams, religious leaders do; what can schools do, what can organisations, CSOs do, all that. If we have that multi-layered approach to strategy, then it can be more effective: the state has its role, policy-makers are included in that part, they listen to the local problems, they transform them, they convert the policy so they get feedback, and so on.

**Who would steer this type of strategy? Who would be the lead or the driver?**

*Redion Qirjazi:* Again, the multi-layered approach also applies here. We do have to address the issue, which is violent extremism. And in our countries, we have a national coordinator for countering violent

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<sup>2</sup> Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalisation Leading to Terrorism 2015-2010, Kosovo, 2015: [http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY\\_parandalim\\_-\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/STRATEGY_parandalim_-_ENG.pdf).

extremism, and a national strategy. The problem with the national strategy<sup>3</sup> is that it does not fit many of the issues that we are facing in our communities, from what I have seen so far. It is almost a ‘copy and paste model’. I mean, it’s a great model, but it does not fit the context. Again, you need to unpack that and bring it to the local level. You need to have different layers, and basically any solution should be context-oriented. So it might be the national coordinator who coordinates the whole process, while being involved in local communities at the same time. In many cases, the reason why the coordinator is not particularly effective is that the institution does not have the ability to *direct* policy. It is not proactive, it is reactive. And it is reactive because, first, government does not set up any budget for it, and second, much of the steer comes from the international donors. Recently, they have been worried about the foreign fighters who are returning. So I am betting that in the next six months or year or so, there are going to be a lot of projects focusing on how we are going to deal with the returnees.

*Garentina Kraja*: Well I hope so, because I feel no one’s thinking about them...

*Redion Qirjazi*: Right, but what I am saying is that for certain countries that might not be a problem – for Montenegro, for example. However, they are going to be dealing with the same projects in Montenegro as, say, in Kosovo or Macedonia because that is what the donors are pushing. They’re setting the agenda.

*Rrona Kamberi, Macedonia*: I wanted to point out something else related to the imams. In Macedonia, based on my experiences and interviews, my dilemma is about the educational background of the imams in the country. My impression is that they do not focus strongly on the psychological and social fields in their education; they are more firmly trained in the spiritual. And I don’t know if they could offer the right ‘products’ to deal with these problems.

*Nejra Veljan*: We need to accept the fact that even though we are aiming to live in a much more democratic and secular society, not all of the people are aiming for that. A lot of the people who are turning to this form of radicalism are the ones who were searching for guidance in their lives, religious guidance because it is easier for them to be told how to behave and to be given all of the answers. It’s much easier to behave in a certain way and not think about the outcomes. So I think the imams, at the local level, can help a lot, because, for the vulnerable persons who are looking for guidance, imams from the Islamic Community can have a sustainable role in preventing them from searching answers from Youtube imams.

*Rudine Jakupi*: Or have the state offer an alternative, so you have two alternatives to choose from: increase critical thinking within your educational curricula, or offer some type of alternative that comes from the state as well, not only from the religious communities.

*Garentina Kraja*: There are two contradictions in the recommendations that Abu-Nimer makes (Abu-Nimer 2018, 16ff.). He talks about how we should not shy away from interreligious controversies, so when we are having an inter-faith dialogue, not to gloss over the differences, because this is usually what happens. It’s true, in every interreligious dialogue you have the stakeholders come out and talk about cultural harmony and co-existence and tolerance. So he says, do not gloss over the controversies. But then he emphasises that in these processes you need to adopt a “culture of peace”, a discourse of peace. So do we gloss over these differences, and sweep them under the carpet, for the higher goal of peace, or do we actually tackle them? He makes a similar argument when he is talking about the educational programmes, or the Quranic peace-makers and the schools in Chad and in Nigeria, I think, where he says it’s good to emphasise positive values of Islam, but steer clear of the theological debates. Can we do that, actually? I mean, that is almost like talking about peace in the abstract in our peacebuilding initiatives, in our state-building: talk about our common future together, but let’s not talk about the fact that different ethnic groups use veto powers to undermine the state ... it kind of undermines the whole idea of open debate, so I am not sure how realistic a proposition that is if you have that contradiction built in.

*Sead Turcalo*: I would argue that we lack a legal culture and political culture in all of our societies and only when we have developed these cultures can we speak of a culture of peace. And some of the ideas

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3 “Albanian National Strategy: Countering Violent Extremism”, Albania, 2016; <http://tinyurl.com/y8ey8wqm>.

that Abu-Nimer proposes are not really feasible. First, the international community never learned from the region why our state-building processes produced fragile states and not consolidated, democratic states. It’s because there has never been any sort of local ownership. And as for PVE programmes, it’s good that they are in their infancy: maybe we could change them at some point so that more local ownership exists in these cases, that’s one idea. Second, too much of the burden is placed on the shoulders of the Islamic community. The Islamic community – and Redion mentioned it – should have their role, but there are many points where some of these vulnerable groups are outside of the reach of the Islamic community. For example, most of the young converts to these radical ideas have just left high school, and when they leave high school they are out of reach for the Islamic community. That’s the point where the rest of society and the state and the public institutions come into play, to offer some alternative. Finally, it is important, as Abu-Nimer highlights, that those who create policies and PVE programmes actually understand theories. Abu-Nimer speaks about realism, idealism (Abu-Nimer 2018, 14), and it’s very important. I know that my students are sometimes bored when I speak about how important theories are, but they are really important. If you build a PVE programme only on this realist paradigm, you are just bringing in the security dimension. As he pointed out, peacebuilding activists are almost too eager to accept these types of programmes, even if they counter all of the ideas they promote in peacebuilding initiatives. These donor-directed programmes are not limited to the Western Balkans, it happens in many places: nobody in the US seems able to get any funds without describing peacebuilding initiatives in terms of countering violent extremism (Abu-Nimer 2018, 2). You see, the state is not doing anything to understand what the problems are.

*Rudine Jakupi:* I just wanted to add to what Sead was saying because, for me, that was one of the most interesting parts of the article. CVE just kind of restores security. For example, the referral mechanism in Kosovo is based on that idea, but the idealist would say it undermines basic human rights, because people feel like they are under constant surveillance. Which they are in a way. The aim of the referral mechanism is to identify people who are at risk. And how do you do that? You have indicators for what an individual at risk may look like, right? So you have people aiming at, in the worst case, girls who wear hijabs, for example, you have people aiming at boys with a long beard and short trousers, which then breaches their basic human rights. It’s really a clash of theories in this case. And practitioners don’t really see that, they don’t really understand.

**Theory and paradigms – in our discussion, we have also talked several times about how fraught terminology is. I wanted to invite you to share some of your thoughts about the kinds of terms that are applied in your countries and in the region. When might they become problematic?**

*Redion Qirjazi:* Starting from the state institutions, they really see it from a very security-focused perspective. Just to mention one example, I was at a workshop with former foreign fighters in Kosovo in February, with members of the security services, intelligence services, the police and counter-terrorism force present. Their view of the issue is quite exclusively through a lens of (legal) deterrence: “he’s a terrorist”, “he’s an extremist”, that’s the terminology ... We were discussing what happens when this foreign fighter took a ten-year-old kid with him and the kid’s still in Syria, and the answer was, “We’ll put him in jail”. A lot of the civil society people there asked: “What do you mean, he was 10 when he left, he is now 15, maybe...,” to which the response is: “Well, he is of age, so you can do that.” But when you go down to the local level, they are much more careful, they don’t want to make it an “Islamic” issue because they know it has actually been leaning quite a lot in that direction. So they are much more careful in saying: we engage with different communities, religious communities, we have activities here and there. And then when you go talk to the religious leaders, they generally do have this fatigue with constantly being asked, having to explain, “Listen, this is not really the way of Islam”. So they try to push it away a little bit ...

**What are other people’s thoughts?**

*Romario Shehu:* Due to the numerous terrorist incidents, there is a growing number of people who prefer not to show that they are practising Muslims, because they want to avoid possible prejudices. This was reflected in our focus groups; when I invited some practising Muslim to participate in our focus group with Muslim practitioners, they asked me not to invite them because they did not want others to take note that they were

practising Muslims. This is a common reaction and it mainly derives from the fear of being stereotyped by state or society. There is another problem to be mentioned, and that is the national security services' approach toward the families of foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs]. During our interview with a representative of the Muslim Community of Albania [MCA], he told us the story of a father in Pogradec (one of the three cities in Albania with the highest number of FTFs) whose son travelled to Syria. This father was under constant surveillance by the security services and that was detrimental to his mental health. He asked the MCA representative to talk to the security services and tell them he has no contacts with his son, so they would leave him alone. He said, "I'm suffering because my son is not here. Please tell them to not make it harder for me. If they do not have information about him, how can I?" Our interviewee said that after a couple of months this father passed away as a result of depression. So it is very important for the security services to apply a better approach when dealing with the families of FTFs. Pressuring them does not solve the problem; it just makes matters worse.

*Nejra Veljan:* The problem that I have is with the media and how they portray this problem. Sensationalist reporting about the foreign fighters and on alleged terrorist threats in BiH really make it much more difficult to do field research. It is an overly politicized question, and the other two main parties (Bosnian Croatian and Bosnian Serbian) want to portray it as a „Muslim problem“. Recently a leading Bosnian Croat politician sent a letter to all NATO countries where he raised his concerns about the foreign fighters and Islamic radicalism, however when it comes to ethnic-national radicalism which stems from the leading political parties – there are no mentions anywhere. That is just one issue, where the media presents „Islamic radicalism“ as the only problem.

*Garentina Kraja:* In the article, Abu-Nimer says that you should use faith language for the CVE/PVE programmes. I disagree with that. I think it is part of the problem if you start to lace the language of the programmes and the projects in the community with the religious. We're from secular states, all of us here, so you would already be making an assumption that the people who these programmes are directed at are religious people. However, if our interviews with foreign fighters are a guide, they are recent converts who have only scratched the surface. I mean, they may call themselves religious but they are not religious most of the time. Then what the people who are going to write these projects will actually end up doing is calling foreign fighters "jihadists", and with that you are actually helping their cause. This is what media called them in Kosovo, this is what policy-makers called them in Kosovo, "jihadists", this is what they want to call themselves – when in fact, they are no more than terrorist fighters, and I am talking specifically about people who have joined IS in this case. So why afford them this credibility?

*Sead Turcalo:* First, I agree with what Garentina said: I also disagree with the use of faith-based terminology in these programmes, for similar reasons. The first is the lack of knowledge on the part of the people who write these programmes and the fact that it is just putting on the "label" of one of the religions. And for a few weeks now, I have also been thinking about changing many of the terms I have been using in my writing. For example, I talked about "radical norms" instead of "radical interpretations of Islam".

### **Could you explain the difference?**

*Sead Turcalo:* These are norms that are not the mainstream in a community. In the case of Islam as a religion, there are even *hadiths*, sayings of the Prophet, stating "nobody of my *umma* will be wrong if he agrees to the majority" – and by majority he meant the majority at one location and one time. And that's it: people we call 'radicals' don't really agree with the majority views, and we can call them adherents to radical norms. Then we have 'neutralised' this problematic way of understanding what 'radical' is. It does not always have to do with really religious people, as Garentina mentioned: these people are really young, they are converts, they don't really know anything, not one of them ... I have this group of 40 people who follow a radical Salafi preacher, and he made it possible for me to ask them why they turned to these radical norms. None of them has ever before visited a *maktab*<sup>4</sup> ... they had no idea about Islam, about the religion. They only know about the form: how to perform the daily prayers. They are just attending intensive courses,

<sup>4</sup> "Maktab" is an Arabic word meaning elementary school, primarily used for teaching children in reading, writing, grammar and Islamic studies such Quranic recitation, as well as other practical and theoretical subjects.

and so “Islamic” anything – that’s the wrong term. What’s actually needed is to invent new terms. We can keep words like radicalisation and violent extremism, but we may have to use “ISIL-inspired” ideology rather than “Islamic” ideology. This way, we open the space to differentiate from other types or varieties of radicalism, radicalisation and violent extremism, and to ‘free’ the terms from being equated to Islam. That’s something that’s really important and this article’s contribution, and our own, could be to start a discussion about re-inventing the terms used in preparing and making policies in PVE and CVE.

**One of the most interesting concepts that has struck me in your previous work is the idea of “reciprocal extremism”. I think that also goes some way to debunking the equation between Islamic faith and extremism. Could you just very briefly for the readers of this dialogue put into words what this means in the Western Balkans and how it actually adds to the dynamic, and to our analysis and understanding of the problem?**

*Sefer Selimi:* In Macedonia, for instance, we are dealing with three different extremisms, I would say. We have both Albanian and Macedonian national extremism, and we have the radical – how did you say it, Sead – the radical religious norms. We see that especially in terms of narratives, they thrive on the opposite extremism.

*Rudine Jakupi:* I have been following extremist groups in Telegram<sup>5</sup>, and what they post is very interesting. We have, I think, three extremist lines of thinking in Kosovo as well: the radical religious norms or the religious extremists, then we have the secular extremists, and then we have the national extremists – and all of them feed into each other. The ‘best’ ones at using this type of propaganda to their advantage are the religious extremists. For example, online or in Telegram, on Kosovo’s independence day, they posted a picture of the north of Mitrovica, where Serbian ethnic groups had put out big Serbian flags everywhere in the streets and had written “Kosovo is Serbia” and all of that. And so they posted that picture and wrote, “See what the Serbs are doing to us Muslim Albanians”. They use the narrative of these national extremists for their propaganda purposes (“they are discriminating against us”, “this is what they call us”, “they are calling us all terrorists, all violent extremists”, and so on), to sort of offer a sense of belonging and community to the others who are more vulnerable, offering a very simple narrative. It’s either “us” or “them” – but this doesn’t only happen to “us as Albanians”, it is not that simple; it is “us as Muslims, then Albanians”, so it is as though we are being attacked by two groups: by the Serbs and by Albanians who are secular – they use this dynamic very well.

*Sefer Selimi:* Exactly, and the same is used by the other groups. They attack both of the opposite groups to deepen the divide. And lately, we have also seen a rise of Orthodox extremism in Macedonia.

*Garentina Kraja:* Throughout the Balkans!<sup>6</sup>

*Sead Turcalo:* What we must not forget here is that these radical religious norms emerged from an enormous political radicalisation in the region, which actually escalated in our country – at least in Bosnia and in Kosovo – into war. That’s how all of this reciprocal or cumulative radicalisation actually was and is fed. Just a small detail how it works: recently, we had a story about a radical Serbian group *Srpska Cast* (“Serb Honour”). Everywhere, they posted photos from training camps, etc. A few days afterwards, one of the Salafi groups posted their video about a camp where they actually train children – not in military skills, they are taught about Salafist thinking – with men with long beards in the background and so on. That’s how it actually happens. And it happens constantly, all the time.

*Nejra Veljan:* And people are fed with this kind of information all the time.

**Can you tackle extremism in any form when you just focus on one?**

*Nejra Veljan:* No. Violent extremism is not – and has never been -- limited to one set of political views or ideologies.

<sup>5</sup> Telegram is an instant messaging service.

<sup>6</sup> One example here would be the rhetoric of the Serbian Orthodox Church and its relentless claim over Kosovo, which also has a long history. More generally, observers note the rise of a far right that blends religiosity and nationalism, especially in Serbia. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-church-kosovo/serbias-orthodox-church-to-change-name-to-stress-kosovo-link-idUSKCN1GK1XX>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/10/world/europe/european-union-balkans.html>; <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-s-national-dialogue-on-kosovo-scant-consensus-much-scepticism-04-20-2018>



## **You always have to focus on the dynamic between them?**

*Nejra Veljan*: Yes. We will always have a problem with some forms of radicalism, but it is up to stakeholders, together with society to make the process of deradicalisation sustainable. If you focus only on one form of extremism, when is obvious that some other forms of extremism are much more serious security threat, that in itself can be one of the drivers of radicalisation.

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# A Way Forward in Transforming Violent Extremism

De-Islamisation, De-Securitisation, and De-Religionisation

Mohammed Abu-Nimer

In this reflection on the responses to my lead article in the Dialogue issue at hand, I want to highlight two principles which need to be kept in mind when shaping CVE and PVE initiatives, because these principles can enhance our capacity to design more realistic and conflict-sensitive interreligious peacebuilding initiatives. First, religious actors cannot be responsible for curing the phenomena of violent extremism (VE), simply because they are not the only agencies that contribute to the emergence, dynamics or results of violent extremists' campaigns. Second, there are many other agencies of social and political change that operate in any given context where violent extremism manifests itself – and it is only in engaging together that these agencies can hope to find effective transformative approaches to violent extremism.

When applying a basic peacebuilding systems approach, like the one proposed by Anita Ernstorfer in her response (in this volume, 49ff), it will become apparent that in any given case there are multiple drivers, be it in personal, community or state conflicts. Violent extremist thinking and action are always the product and often a symptom of deeper-seated issues, in a specific society or globally. They include weak political institutions that offer limited or no public participation in decision-making; formal and informal policies of discrimination; collapse of civic services; economic deprivation; underdeveloped education systems that negate certain or all forms of pluralism; and weak professional media infrastructure that supports exclusivist discourses. Within this context, religious agencies in all their forms are frequently utilised to justify processes that prolong ignorance of the other and promote dehumanisation and moral legitimisation of violence.

It is indeed a mistake, then, to portray religion as exclusively the cause or the cure. On the contrary, without a complementary approach based on systematic cooperation and coordination between the various above-mentioned agencies that contribute to the causes of violence, formal and informal interventions to counter violent extremism will continue to provide limited remedy and only handle symptoms at best. In fact, the mistake of exclusively or predominantly linking Islam, religion or theology to the drivers of VE has shown to backfire or produce further antagonism and alienation among Muslims, especially in communities at the grassroots level. The harm is manifested in various reactions: the rejection of cooperation with external agencies, a higher level of suspicion, or conspiracy theories, enhancing the capacity of violent extremist groups to utilise these approaches in their propaganda for recruitment, and weakening other civil society or faith-based organisations which are not working on CT/CVE/PVE.

## Shared citizenship: a common framework beyond CT/CVE/PVE

There is no doubt that security measures and arrangements to prevent immediate threats of terrorist acts are necessary, especially in frontline zones. However, the massive and disproportionate investment in such security measures in comparison to investment in long-term preventive measures constitutes a severe violation of the basic rights of all citizens in such communities.

In both economically developed and underdeveloped societies, preventive and short-term (5- to 10-year) intervention should not be done without placing core values of citizenship at the heart of these strategies. The citizenship project in Iraq, as identified by Jetka (in this volume, 38), is an example of a fragile state system that has the economic potential for development, yet the failure to strengthen a common citizenship identity will always allow sectarian and religious loyalties to override the rule of law or even national security systems. The “classic secularist approach” (i.e. separation of religion from state), as proposed by Jetka and some colleagues from the Western Balkans (in this volume, 42f and 72), is not the solution. Instead, I propose developing religious and interreligious frameworks and tools to educate for common citizenship as a better way forward in such a context.

Policy-makers and religious agencies around the world are still struggling to find a healthy and balanced formula to work together and constructively engage in ways that allow the potentially positive role of religious agencies to fully materialise in an independent governance system and bridge the divide between secular and religious approaches to governance.

This challenge does not only exist in secular political systems which avoid or sideline the possible role of religious agencies and use secular human rights discourses to evaluate their relationships with stakeholders. It is also present in societies in which religion is systematically included in politics and policy-making and has been institutionalised (there are such examples in Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim societies; and Radwan El Sayed’s comment elaborates on some of the tensions in such societies in the MENA region).

In both contexts, whether working on CVE/PVE through religious agencies or with secular policy-makers, it is clear that these actors are in dire need of policy and religious literacy (again, El Sayed picks this issue up as “qualification”, in this volume, PAGE). Religious leaders need to learn more about ways to engage with policy-makers and would benefit from basic knowledge of how policy advocacy and governance systems work. Policy-makers would benefit from learning the basics about religious diversity, the meaning of religious identity, and mechanisms to engage with faith-based organisations.

Faith alone is not enough to produce policy change or change in prejudice or antireligious perceptions. Having strong beliefs, striving to do good and preaching for peace, harmony and social cohesion is certainly a positive quality. Nevertheless, for such a message to be systematically and properly integrated in policy circles, religious agencies need to develop a clear religious framework that supports shared citizenship based on respect for the fundamental human rights of all citizens. In addition, religious agencies and actors need to develop basic skills of communicating with non-religious actors outside of their own religious enclaves: writing press releases; designing social media campaigns; writing brief policy papers; providing empirical evidence to support their claims or demands for change; forging strategies of partnership and coalition building, etc. Obviously, these are the technicalities and pragmatics of building alliances to promote social and political change. First, however, religious actors and agencies need to have the inner willingness to engage with outsiders, especially secular agencies which might share the same passion for change but use completely different approaches and discourses to achieve it. Finding common understanding and interests in defining and enforcing mechanisms can ensure equal citizenship for secular and religious constituencies.

Political actors and agencies who work for CVE/PVE also need to learn basic skills: religious literacy to distinguish between the core values and ideals and the basic core practices of faith; control of inherent personal and ideological biases against faith groups; conflict analysis and mapping tools to learn about the faith-based organisations (FBOs) and religious terrain of their constituencies, etc. However, if they are open to gaining these skills, political actors and agencies might develop a genuine understanding that

religious agencies and actors have the same rights as other stakeholders in society to engage in policy advocacy and that they can be an integral part of such a process. This level of awareness paves the way to healthy interaction with most if not all religious stakeholders who want to engage with policy-makers.

Finding commonalities between such diverse forces as those who work in CVE/PVE requires sustained dialogue platforms designed specifically to identify common issues for collaboration and develop a sense of genuine respect for ideological and identity-based differences.

## **Interreligious peacebuilders and CVE/PVE: between rejection, accommodation and cooptation**

Beyond the ideological critique of the so-called CVE/PVE field (referred to, for example, by Ernstorfer in this volume), it is clear from talking to many peacebuilding practitioners that donors, governmental agencies and civil society organisations in many cases are implementing similar if not the same activities that have been labelled as peacebuilding in past decades, yet they label it as CVE/PVE in order to either gain access to funds or cater to a domestic and international political agenda.

Many peacebuilding practitioners find themselves in a moral dilemma when offered funds to implement their usual projects, but under the umbrella or framework of CVE/PVE. Among these peacebuilders, there are practitioners who engage and accept the funds but are not aware of donor politics or national and international policies of focusing on terrorism and being motivated exclusively by security concerns. This ‘coopted’ group of practitioners and organisations have willingly accepted the securitisation of the field. There are two further categories of practitioners: those who reject any engagement with CT/CVE/PVE and those who accept the funds and engagement within the discussed parameters. These practitioners have rationalised their engagement by arguing that no strings were actually attached by the donor, if they do not take the funds then other NGOs will and possibly cause harm, and that there is something good coming out of their intervention which will outweigh the negative impact of engaging with “the CT/CVE/PVE” industry.

There is no doubt that regardless of the decision on engagement or non-engagement, there are certain consequences that will manifest on the ground. Moral and ethical judgement of those who engage with such programmes as “traitors to the peace cause” or labelling those who refuse to work on such projects as “radical or obstructionist” is not useful for the field of peacebuilding and merely contributes to further divisions in local peace camps.

Thus, regardless of whether you are a rejectionist or accommodator, it is essential that we all use peacebuilding ethics in responding to and dealing with CVE/PVE programmes. As correctly proposed by Ernstorfer, the principle of “Do No Harm” can be an effective filter to sort out the risk of Islamisation and securitisation as a result of certain programmes at both national and community levels. For example, indicators of possible harm to the local community can include the following: when developing a basic manual on how to counter violent extremism, the agency only uses examples from Muslim communities or from Islamic sources; excluding other faith groups forms the entire intervention although the community is ethnically and religiously mixed; neglecting to contextualise the manifestations of VE and solely linking it to theological causes; partnering with individuals from the community who lack any religious credibility or access to mainstream religious institutions; framing CVE as dealing with “individual religious fanatics,” without any reference to structural causes of violence, etc.

## **Gender and an interreligious PVE/CVE strategy**

It is true, as Sanam Naraghi Anderlini has pointed out in her response, that gender was not addressed in a systematic way in the lead article. However, I would like to correct the impression that “in making the case for more robust inclusion of religious agencies, he assumes that the other sectors – notably women – are already fully integrated and resourced, while religious actors are still excluded” (in this volume, 28).

The main focus of the lead article was on religious actors rather than gender, ethnicity, race, culture or other forms of identity. In addition, the argument in the lead article clearly states in various sections the need for a comprehensive and transformative approach when dealing with CT/CVE/PVE. This approach is aligned with the notion of positive peace and abolishing all structures of violence as articulated by many peacemakers and scholars (Galtung 1969). It is also based on the same values of non-violence, equality and pluralism. Nevertheless, it is important to provide more clarifications on the treatment of gender in interreligious peacebuilding and in addressing violent extremism.

Similar to race, ethnicity, class or nationality, violent extremist ideology in my view transcends the gender divide. A survey of Boko Haram-affiliated female and male groups revealed, for example, that women contribute to the perpetration of violent extremist discourse and structures (Botha/Abdile 2017). However, it is also clear that due to structures of violence (lack of access to education, early marriage, economic dependency and other factors) that exist in such contexts, women can be more vulnerable and thus in need of targeted systematic intervention strategies (SFCG/RASED 2016). From an interreligious peacebuilding perspective, a resilience-based approach (CRS, 2017) to engaging women in CVE/PVE interventions is crucial in order to avoid the perpetuation of asymmetric power relations that characterise most, if not all, religious agencies (as Naraghi Anderlini correctly points out in her response essay in this volume). The resilience-based approach, when engaging religious agencies in CVE/PVE, does not need to be based on the exclusion of women (as was the case in Kenya; see Naraghi Anderlini in this volume, PAGE) or marginalised youth. On the contrary, their systematic inclusion in the intervention can be a direct or indirect strategic (?) challenge to the exclusionist discourse of violent extremism.

The challenges that interreligious peacebuilding practitioners face when attempting to address the gender issue within a CVE/PVE programme are related to the inherent structure and nature of hierarchical and patriarchal religious leadership systems. It should also be noted that in most of these formal religious institutions, women are part of the implementation system: in many cases they do a lot of the groundwork for the religious leaders. Nevertheless, in terms of their public representation they lag behind the formal male leadership.

In order to challenge religious extremist ideology, there is a need to strategically engage the highest level of actors who have the theological authority and can counter the narrative of theological extremism. For example, in an attempt to launch a platform of Christian-Muslim Arab religious leaders, the 23 Muftis and Patriarchs had to be engaged, and no women occupy such positions. Alternative ways were therefore pursued to include women in other platforms: a working-level group of these religious institutions was created and each of the religious leaders nominated a representative. At this level, five women became members of the working group (in de facto terms, the group that deals with planning). Another strategy to enhance women's participation in this platform included expanding the platform to include FBOs. In such organisations, there is often far greater participation and representation of women at the leadership level than in formal religious structures. A third strategy that has been adopted by other organisations is to create a parallel advisory group to provide input in an intervention addressed to formal religious organisations that have exclusively male representation. A fourth strategy that has been widely utilised to engage women in interreligious peacebuilding is to avoid focusing on theological discussions and instead to address day-to-day interfaith issues (such as ways of living together, including health, citizenship and education). In such interventions, the role of the formal religious leaders becomes more of a symbolic one of theologically endorsing the objectives of the intervention. Despite the limitations of such approaches to address the religious institutions' asymmetrical power structure in such contexts, women can become influential in both forming the agenda and in embedding these strategies in CVE/PVE.

Beyond the simple inclusion of a few women in the intervention and even providing them with important access to the discussions taking place in the male-dominated platforms of religious leaders, the challenge in interreligious peacebuilding with CVE/PVE, of course, is still to systematically integrate

gender analytical perspectives. Unfortunately, the presence of women around the table in such contexts does not ensure systematic inclusion, especially if the intervention design is based on tokenism.

## A way forward

When we de-religionise the phenomenon of violent extremism and expand the definition to include other forms of identities such as race, ethnicity and class, the same challenge that faces the PVE/CVE programmes in regard to the gender analytical perspective in interreligious settings exists. As Naraghi Anderlini points out: “The rigid interpretations of religious, cultural, national, ethnic or sectarian identity that extremist movements espouse aim to foster deep ‘bonds’ between their followers and recruits, while fomenting divisions with and the exclusion of others. This normalisation of intolerance and disrespect for people of different ethnicities, religions, gender or nationalities lays the groundwork from which the more radicalised and violent forms of extremism can grow.” (in this volume, 24)

I want to reiterate that for practitioners carrying out intervention programmes in the field of CT/CVE/PVE, it is essential to expand beyond the analytical framework to include tools based on transformative peacebuilding approaches. Only through these lenses can participants gain an enhanced awareness of the structural forms of violence that lead to different forms of VE. An intentional outcome of such awareness-raising is realising the need to initiate coalition building across these socially constructed boundaries of identity. This means that an interreligious peacebuilding programme operating in conflict areas will aim to develop alliances with other social change movements (focusing on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and so on) that promote justice and equality. Such alliances and coalitions cannot be formed when peacebuilders and their agencies continue to work in silos or in segregated communities of practice, divided by thematic interests or by ‘identity specialisation’ like gender, race or ethnicity. As Ernstorfer stated in her response: “Peacebuilding actors will need to work together very closely if they want to influence the PVE/CVE discourse and programming according to peacebuilding and conflict-sensitivity principles. No single peacebuilding actor will be able to do this alone.” (in this volume, 58).

For policy-makers, gaining a deeper understanding of the potential contribution of interreligious peacebuilding in responding to CT/CVE/PVE requires engagement with religious actors beyond instrumentalising them; it also means designing responses that will take into consideration the need for wider inclusion of alienated religious communities in the dominant social fabric. In the European context, this requires policies that facilitate respect and protection of new migrants and refugees who do not subscribe to the dominant secular culture. Similarly, in Muslim societies this requires the creation and enforcement of policies that safeguard the rights of religious minorities and secular groups.

For researchers and scholars who are addressing violent extremism and interreligious dialogue, it is necessary to continue to build more theoretically grounded frameworks to guide the process of integrating religious peacebuilding into the field. This means:

- ≡ articulating a solid and clear research agenda with priorities and mapping of interreligious peacebuilding and its contribution to CT/CVE/PVE;
- ≡ enhancing the capacity of practitioners and researchers to provide empirical evidence of effective intervention programmes in responding to VE;
- ≡ developing a more sophisticated, complex and nuanced set of tools to respond to CT/CVE/PVE in different settings of violent and non-violent conflict;
- ≡ developing strategic communication formats, such as policy briefs, which are accessible to policy-makers and useful in guiding their engagement with religious agencies.

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# Abbreviations

<b>CAIR</b>	Council on American-Islamic Relations
<b>CdM</b>	Club de Madrid
<b>CIDA</b>	Canadian International Development Agency
<b>CONTEST</b>	The United Kingdom's counter terrorism strategy
<b>CSO (s)</b>	Civil Society Organisation(s)
<b>CT</b>	Counter-terrorism
<b>CTED</b>	United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee
<b>CTITF</b>	Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force
<b>CVE</b>	Countering violent extremism
<b>Daesh</b>	also seen in the media as Islamic State, ISIS or ISIL
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development (UK)
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FBO(s)</b>	Faith-based organisation(s)
<b>FTF</b>	foreign terrorist fighter
<b>GFE</b>	group-focused enmity [approach]
<b>GFMD</b>	Global Forum for Media Development
<b>GIZ</b>	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH – German development agency
<b>KAICIID</b>	International Dialogue Centre
<b>ICAN</b>	International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons
<b>IGO(s)</b>	Intergovernmental organisation(s)
<b>INGO(s)</b>	International non-governmental organisation(s)
<b>IO(s)</b>	International organisation(s)
<b>ISI</b>	Inter-Services Intelligence Agency of Pakistan
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa
<b>NGO(s)</b>	Non-governmental organisation(s)
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>OSCE</b>	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>PDVI and PDVII</b>	Peace through Development programming (USAID), phase I and II
<b>PREP</b>	Peace, Resilience, Equality and Pluralism
<b>PVE</b>	Preventing violent extremism
<b>RAFT</b>	Respect, Accountability, Fairness and Transparency
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNIATF</b>	UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development and Humanitarian Work
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNotPG</b>	United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention
<b>US / USA</b>	United States of America
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>USIP</b>	United States Institute of Peace
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
<b>VE</b>	Violent extremism
<b>WCC</b>	World Council of Churches