

A Way Forward in Transforming Violent Extremism

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

Mohammed Abu-Nimer

www.berghof-handbook.net

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.

References

- Abu-Nimer, Mohammed** (2018). Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding, in: Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism. Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 13. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
- Anderson, Mary B.** (2000). Options for Aid in Conflict: Lessons from Field Experience. Boston, MA: CDA.
- Botha, Anneli and Mahdi Abdile** (2017). Radicalization and Boko Haram – Perception vs. Reality. Revenge as a driver, the role of female soldiers, and the impact of the social circle in recruitment.
- Catholic Relief Service** (2017) A Gender-transformative Resilience-based Approach to Building Functional Organizations.
- El Sayed, Radwan** (2018). Religious Institutions and the Challenges of Extremism and Terrorism: The long view, in: Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism, Berghof Handbook Dialogue 13. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
- Ernstorfer, Anita** (2018). Effective Approaches to Preventing Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Systems Perspective, in: Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism, Berghof Handbook Dialogue 13. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
- Galtung, Johan** (1969). Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167-191.
- Jekta, Maral** (2018). Engaging with whom? Opportunities and Challenges of PVE approaches in Germany and Iraq, in: Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism, Berghof Handbook Dialogue 13. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
- Naraghi Anderlini, Sanam** (2018). Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices: A gendered lens on PVE, in: Beatrix Austin and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) Transformative Approaches to Violent Extremism, Berghof Handbook Dialogue 13. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
- Search for Common Ground and Al-Hayat Center for Civil Society Development - RASED** (2016). Women and Violent Radicalisation in Jordan. Amman: UN Women and Jordanian Commission for Women.

About the author

Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer, International Peace and Conflict Resolution program, School of International Service, American University, is the former Director of the Peacebuilding and Development Institute at American University. He also is a Senior Advisor to KAICIID (International Dialogue Centre, Vienna, Austria) and has conducted interreligious conflict resolution training and interfaith dialogue workshops in conflict areas around the world, including the Middle East, Northern Ireland, Philippines (Mindanao), Chad, Niger and Sri Lanka. In addition to his articles and publications, Dr Abu-Nimer is the co-founder and co-editor of the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*.