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SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

Georgia Holmer

Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective

Summary

- Counter violent extremism (CVE) is a growing and evolving realm of policy and practice that faces several significant challenges in implementation, stemming in part from its origins in the security and defense arena.
- Long versed in the challenges of conflict prevention, the peacebuilding community and its related methods and practices can help develop a more expansive understanding of violent extremism and its causes and a more localized, inclusive, and sustainable approach to countering it.
- The peacebuilding community already contributes in many ways to the prevention of extremist violence and the CVE agenda through programs designed to prevent conflict, strengthen rule of law, and promote peace, tolerance, and resilience.
- Suggested best roles for the peacebuilding community in CVE are to support a nonsecuritized space for and build the capacity of civil society and to help reform the security bodies charged with counterterrorism and CVE.
- CVE policy and global security efforts, in turn, may help provide the impetus and enabling conditions for effective peacebuilding. Closer collaboration between the two domains, with coordinated and clearer lines of engagement, would advance efforts to prevent extremist violence.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the understanding of how and why individuals engage in violent extremism and terrorism has evolved and become more nuanced, as have the tools to prevent these threats. A field of policy and practice called counter violent extremism (CVE)

About the Report

This report explores the nexus of counter violent extremism (CVE) and peacebuilding and is written for counterterrorism and CVE experts and peacebuilders. Underpinning this report is the assumption that a stronger bridge between practitioners from both worlds would contribute to a broader understanding and more effective practice of countering violent extremism. The U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) supports CVE objectives by developing and implementing training and capacity building programs for civil society and police and security services in conflict and postconflict areas.

About the Author

Georgia Holmer is a senior program officer in USIP's Center for Gender and Peacebuilding, where she leads the Women Preventing Extremist Violence Project (WPEV).

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has emerged that focuses on countering the pull of terrorist recruitment and influence by building resilience among populations vulnerable to radicalization. As the domain of CVE continues to mature and expand, moving further upstream to address root causes of extremist violence, much of the work touches the realm of peacebuilding.

Peacebuilders, through their broader agenda of conflict prevention, also focus on countering extremist violence. Violent extremism is a driver of conflict, and violent extremists are often spoilers in peacebuilding efforts. Peacebuilding and CVE work increasingly intersect, though approaches and practice in the two domains often differ. This report bridges that divide by exploring complementary spaces and the limitations in their overlap.

A New Understanding

Counter violent extremism is a realm of policy, programs, and interventions designed to prevent individuals from engaging in violence associated with radical political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and groups. Whether it exists as a subset or evolution of counterterrorism (CT) policy and practice depends on where one sits. In the same way that the legal and policy definitions of terrorism vary across U.S. agencies and international organizations—and reflect the mandate, scope, and role of those entities in countering it—the term violent extremism means different things in different contexts.[1] Significantly, CVE emerged from and does, for the most part, remain parked—programmatically and conceptually—in the international and national security policymaking community as part of a broader effort to counter terrorism.

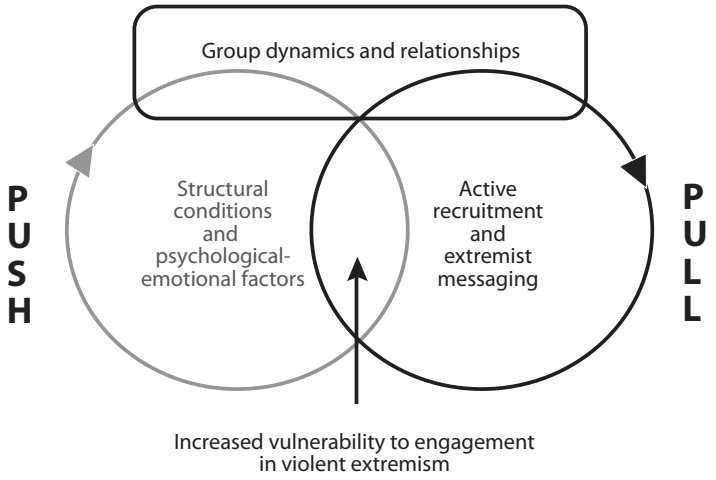
The shift to prevention began as a concept after 9/11, spurred in large part by the changing nature of terrorism and the advent of decentralized actors and self-radicalized small groups and lone wolves. This affected the ways in which the international community worked to counter the threat but also increased awareness that the pursuit and apprehension of terrorists was—and is—a different functional problem than the prevention of new recruits. The shift in emphasis to CVE engagement was also guided by the realization among policymakers that some CT approaches had indeed exacerbated the threat and added new recruits to the ranks of terrorist groups and movements.

To a large degree, and somewhat symbiotically, CVE policy has kept pace with an expanded understanding of how and why individuals become involved in extremist violence. Over the past ten years, significant social science research has advanced a sophisticated analytic framework of the dynamics of radicalization. This research has led us past simplistic explanations for terrorism, and we now understand radicalization as a fluid, nonlinear, highly individualized process *(*see figure 1*)*. The process reflects the interplay of drivers on several levels:

- push factors that include structural conditions, such as poverty, and grievances, such as lack of access to political processes or justice;
- individual psychological and emotional characteristics, such as need for belonging, dignity, meaning, or revenge, or the continuation of cycles of violence brought on by chronic conflict;
- the influence of socialization and group dynamics by family, peers, and schools; and
- the pull of active recruitment to include extremist messaging that inspires violence.[2]

What leads a young man in northern Nigeria to join Boko Haram[3] or a teenager in Kyrgyzstan to spend time with Hizb ut-Tahrir[4] or a young woman to join the ranks of the FARC in Colombia[5] are a unique and highly contextual set of circumstances,

Figure 1. Dynamics of Radicalization



grievances, and issues. And though these stories, pathways, or trajectories toward extremist violence can be carefully analyzed and understood in retrospect, no models of radicalization are predictive.[6] There is no way to determine whether an individual in certain circumstances, with a certain disposition, with certain relationships, and exposed to certain ideas will end up engaged in violence. It is only possible to gauge vulnerability to this likelihood. This reality is particularly problematic for those charged with detecting and preventing terrorism and violent extremism.

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Although the radicalization process is highly contextual, many of the push factors that relate to an individual's internal traits and psychological motivations can be universally understood.[7] Jerrold Post, Marc Sageman, and others have identified common social-psychological motivations for participating in terrorist groups and movements, such as a need for belonging and validation.[8] Others have pointed to emotional drivers, such as a desire for revenge and responses to perceived humiliation, especially in the case of suicide attacks.[9] A sense of thrill seeking and adventure also can play a part in pushing others toward engagement in violence.[10] In this way, understanding the dynamics of radicalization requires an appreciation for human psychology.

Underscoring this more nuanced concept of radicalization is an acknowledgment that there is not a direct causal relationship between radical ideas and extremist violence. Some scholars even posit that not all violent extremists are radical in their belief system, in that some have only a superficial adherence to the ideology believed to "inspire" the violent acts.[11] This is an important perspective that suggests that focusing on "countering the narrative" of extremists is only part of the solution.

This thinking is manifested in the policy shift to a "whole-of-government approach" to countering violent extremism and is reflected in the "development and security nexus" debate.[12] CVE practice has expanded to include a spectrum of interventions that range from working to counter the narrative of terrorist recruitment messaging to development projects designed to mitigate the more structural causes that make an individual vulnerable to recruitment. CVE can now be best characterized as a rapidly growing and evolving international community of practice.

However, the translation of CVE policy, as currently conceptualized, into effective practice continues to face several significant interrelated challenges:

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The problem of definition: addressing the grey. The national and international government entities charged with developing and implementing CT and CVE policy and protecting the public from security threats are appropriately limited by their jurisdictional scope and existing legal frameworks. Their focus, however, forces some artificial distinctions on the nature of the problem. Functionally, most governments, including the United States, distinguish between criminal violence and violence rooted in or associated with an extremist ideology and have separate laws, policies, tools, and organizations empowered to protect the public from these threats. In the real world, terrorist and criminal activity are often closely intertwined, and violence tied to ideologies is often politicized and linked to corruption—to the extent that violent extremist trends are sometimes deliberately manipulated or fostered by political entities. Some violent extremist movements may even enjoy broad passive popular support. Counterviolence and abuse by authorities is a further complicating factor. Violent extremism cannot be neatly packaged, and government institutions often lack the agility and capacity, or even the legitimacy, to operate effectively in this grey area.

The problem of contextualization: lost in translation. Mapping interventions to the specific and local contexts in which individuals radicalize requires an innate level of understanding, typically too great a reach for outside experts. Often it seems that although the tool kit used to counter violent extremism has expanded well beyond a single hammer, the international community still struggles with perceiving every potential community at risk of radicalization as a nail. What works as an intervention in Aceh may not in Islamabad. Counter narrative strategies, for example, may be less effective in environments in which the ideological sway is less of a driver than structural push factors such as access to resources.

The problem of relevance: also lost in translation. A pillar of CVE policy and practice is the promotion of cooperative and trust-based relationships between civil society and local police and the practice now known ubiquitously as community-led policing.[13] Although this approach may yield results—and has done so in places such as Copenhagen and Boston—significant risks are associated with it in fragile states with unreformed security services that lack oversight and may indeed persist in violating human rights. In certain environments, civil society actors are at risk of being instrumentalized by security services in the effort to prevent extremist violence, and the relationship is used more to collect intelligence than to work cooperatively. This reality demands thoughtful implementation of this particular CVE strategy.

The problem of safety: how to engage nongovernmental actors. Some CVE practices, especially those that come close to confronting the recruitment efforts of terrorist groups or focus on police interventions, are appropriately managed by security bodies, but civil society can play a vital role in building resistance to extremist violence. However, countering violent extremism is dangerous work whether it is directly challenging the recruitment narratives and messages of terrorists groups or working to teach tolerance in a highly polarized and fragile environment. The need to calculate the appropriateness of who should intervene, when, where, and on what level with an eye to security and safety—especially when engaging civil society—is critical.

The problem of measurement: evaluating impact. The security community has struggled with the problem of how to measure the impact of CVE initiatives and with the conundrum of how to measure a negative, or a decrease in numbers of potential new recruits to violent extremist movements. What complicates this exercise is the challenge of isolating the variables that might be correlated to a decline in extremist violence.

A Peacebuilding Perspective

For the peacebuilding community, most of these problems are familiar issues. Peacebuilders are accustomed to working in fragile "grey" environments in which roles, identities, and relationships can change rapidly and significantly. Peacebuilders are also often focused on local implementation, working from existing mechanisms and viewing conflict through an anthropological lens.

This approach, however, is sometimes criticized for being too local or narrow; for avoiding engagement with other sectors, such as security; and for not linking with international levels and trends. Despite these limitations, the approaches, methods, and experiences of peacebuilding organizations and practitioners can help enhance the security-centric practice of CVE in several ways.

Working with the grey. Peacebuilders operate with a broader and more neutral understanding of violence and its causes and, by virtue of this more objective optic and status, are able to engage with a larger range of stakeholders. By focusing strategically on the prevention of violence and conflict and unencumbered by certain policy and related definitional constraints, peacebuilders can work with the ambiguity that comes in situations in which lawmakers and enforcers may be part of the problem. This more expansive approach also affords more explanations and a more nuanced analysis of causes, which in turn helps map more contextually relevant interventions.

Do no harm. 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. This practice ensures that well-intentioned programs do not have unanticipated negative consequences. 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, the viability of which may be lost in translation.

Local ownership. Peacebuilding approaches include an emphasis on building capacity among local stakeholders, and to this end, the peacebuilding community houses a well-tested pedagogical library of teachable skills associated with empowering actors in fragile or conflict environments to build resilience and prevent violence. Expanding the concept of a CVE intervention to something that is taught and learned and has associated skills, rather than an operation carried out against a target, would significantly address the problem of contextualization. Peacebuilders know also that working within existing local mechanisms, networks, and practices ensures the sustainability, relevance, and impact of any conflict prevention program.

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A consideration of gender. A central tenet of peacebuilding is that sustainable peace is achievable only with the engagement and consideration of the rights and needs of both men and women. CVE policy and practice have been criticized for failing to consider the pivotal role women can play in preventing extremist violence.[14] Because of the significant influence of socialization and relationships in the process of radicalization, both men and women are inherently part of the dynamics that push and pull an individual toward and from violent extremism. In many societies, gender identities and norms are also deeply embedded in ideas about violence and peace. Peacebuilders appreciate the need to examine the role gender plays in both mitigating and fostering trajectories of violence.[15]

Supporting the role of civil society. Civil society actors are critical stakeholders in peacebuilding and play a pivotal role in building good governance in conflict or postconflict societies. They contribute to reform and transformation in powerful ways and often represent

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a society's true capacity to withstand violence. Civil society in weak and fragile states are often substitute service providers and, in this way, are significantly positioned to help prevent conflict and violence. CVE programs that focus on building capacity in civil society can be truly effective if undertaken in a way that ensures the safety and non-instrumentalization of these actors.

Because peacebuilding organizations focus on preventing conflict and work with both state and civil society actors, they are uniquely positioned to contribute to the objectives of CVE programs. Indeed, they already do on many levels but often not with the explicit objective to prevent extremist violence. USIP's justice and security dialogues, which are implemented on the community level in countries in transition, use facilitated dialogue to promote cooperation, enhanced relations, and joint problem solving among state and non-state justice and security actors, the government, religious leaders, tribal leaders, elders, business elites, and community members. The goal of the program is to prevent, mitigate, and resolve local conflict and promote human security and access to justice. Although not designed to prevent violent extremism per se, the aspects of the program do in effect mirror elements of the CVE practice of community-based policing.

In examining the drivers of extremist violence in many communities, it is clear that trauma healing is needed not just to prevent individuals from engaging in extremist violence but also as a prerequisite to empowering others, who have been scarred by violence, to work as preventers. Initiatives such as Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR)—a training program that brings together theory and practices from neurobiology, conflict transformation, human security, spirituality, and restorative justice—work to break cycles of violence and heal trauma.[16]

Curricula and training materials, such as USIP's Peacebuilding Toolkits, are valuable resources for teaching the skills, knowledge, and awareness needed to build resistance to and resilience against the pull of extremist violence on the individual, school, and community levels.[17] Conflict prevention and resolution skills, such as mediation, dialogues, and negotiation, coupled with increased awareness and appreciation for how and why violence and conflict occur can help make young people less vulnerable to recruitment.

The overlap between CVE and peacebuilding work is clear, but CVE is tied to security policy and practice, and peacebuilders and their local partners need to maintain a certain level of neutrality to be effective and safe. The concept of neutrality, however, can be a false construct in an increasingly polarized world, especially when dealing with subjective issues such as extremist ideologies. It is more important to be transparent in intentions and objectives, and peacebuilders must be afforded that space.

A Way Forward

Peacebuilders and peacebuilding practice can contribute to and enhance the CVE agenda in several ways:

- **Support a nonsecuritized space for civil society.** Civil society has a role in the prevention of extremist violence independent of engagement with the security sector or other state actors. In certain fragile environments, it may be dangerous or counterproductive or inappropriate to collaborate with police in identifying groups of individuals who are at risk of radicalization or pose a security threat. With the help of peacebuilding organizations, civil society can develop effective programs to increase community awareness of the dynamics of radicalization and teach the skills associated with building resilience and resistance to the drivers of violent extremism.

- **Empower and equip women to participate.** Women have been overlooked as a resource in CVE policy and planning but are poised to play significant and unique roles in their homes, schools, communities, and governments to help prevent violence and conflict. Indeed, some already do, although their participation is not recognized or documented as CVE per se. Peacebuilders, with their inclusive and gender-sensitive ethos, are well-positioned to help empower women in local communities engage safely and productively in preventing violence.
- **Focus on building resilience.** As civil society actors become increasingly involved in countering extremist violence, and because of its related danger, a natural division of focus emerges. State and security actors are best positioned to focus on direct engagement with the pull of recruitment messages and techniques. Civil society actors, more vulnerable to retaliation from violent extremists, are better placed to address the push factors that make individuals susceptible to recruitment or joining. Peacebuilders can help equip civil society with the skills and knowledge needed to build resilience through trauma healing and transformation and peace and tolerance education. This level of engagement also partially addresses the measurement conundrum as it shifts focus to evaluating a positive gain (in skills, awareness, capacity, and social cohesion/resilience) from measuring a negative (decrease in potential violent extremists).
- **Help reform the security entities charged with CT/CVE.** Peacebuilders can help lay the groundwork for effective police CVE work in fragile environments by working to reform and build the capacity of those security bodies charged with this mandate. Training programs that focus on enhancing the delivery of security services within the framework of democratic governance with full respect for human rights and the rule of law are a significant step toward building trust between civil society and the security sector.
- **Expand the definition.** By working directly in country with a full range of stakeholders and actors, peacebuilders have privileged access and insight into the dynamics and factors that contribute to radicalization and violence in a community. The peacebuilder's appreciation for the ambiguous and mutable nature of these issues and the evolving roles of state and civil society actors allow for a sophisticated and nuanced level of analysis. By viewing the problem of extremist violence using the broader and more neutral lens of conflict prevention, peacebuilders can help extract a deeper understanding of the drivers of violent extremism.

Peacebuilders can help equip civil society with the skills and knowledge needed to build resilience through trauma healing and transformation and peace and tolerance education.

In this way, the local, contextualized, and inclusive approach of peacebuilding can add considerable value to CVE practice. The peacebuilding community can also help translate trends that emerge in an embryonic civil society and evolving state institutions in a conflict or postconflict environment for security policymakers. CVE policies and resources, in turn, may provide the impetus and enabling conditions needed for effective peacebuilding work. A stronger bridge between the two domains, with coordinated and clearer lines of engagement, would help advance the whole-of-government approach to countering violent extremism from theory to effective practice.

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An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

Notes

1. For a robust discussion of how definitions of the term terrorism are tied to legal frameworks and policy mandates, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). For an additional layer of complexity, and in furtherance of a functional understanding of terminology in this realm, see also DHS and FBI definitions for "Homegrown Violent Extremism."
2. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
3. For background on Boko Haram, see Andrew Walker, "What Is Boko Haram?" Special Report no. 308 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2012).
4. For background on Hizb ut-Tahrir, see International Crisis Group, "Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan," Asia Report no. 176, September 3, 2009.
5. For background on FARC, see U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2012*, chapter 6, www.state.gov/documents/organization/210204.pdf.
6. Scott Atran, "Pathways to and from Violent Extremism: The Case for Science-Based Field Research," testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, March 10, 2010.
7. Ibid.; Clark R. McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
8. Jerrold M. Post, *The Mind of the Terrorist: The Psychology of Terrorism from the IRA to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Macmillan, 2008); Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
9. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).
10. John Venhaus, "Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda," Special Report no. 236 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2010).
11. Randy Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism: A Review of Social Science Theories," *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 7–36.
12. See especially The White House, "Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," December 2011, www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf.
13. Community-led, -oriented, or -based policing encompasses a wide spectrum of practice but is rooted in the philosophy that security is best ensured, and violence and crime prevented, through collaborative relationships between community and local police.
14. Jayne Huckerby, "A Decade Lost: Locating Gender in U.S. Counter-Terrorism" (New York: NYU Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011).
15. USIP's Women Preventing Extremist Violence (WPEV) project works to build the capacity of women in local communities to prevent conflict and extremist violence and also identify and support ways in which women already play a role in conflict prevention in informal and undocumented ways.
16. See www.emu.edu/cjp/star.
17. See www.buildingpeace.org/train-resources/educators/peacebuilding-toolkit-educators.

Of Related Interest

- *A Crucial Link: Local Peace Committees and National Peacebuilding* by Andries Odendaal (USIP Press, 2013)
- *Engaging Extremists: Trade-Offs, Timing, and Diplomacy* edited by I. William Zartman and Guy Olivier Faure (USIP Press, 2011)
- *What Is Boko Haram?* by Andrew Walker (Special Report, May 2012)
- *Pakistan and the Narratives of Extremism* by Amil Khan (Special Report, March 2013)
- *Security Sector Transformation in the Arab Awakening* by Donald J. Planty (Special Report, September 2012)
- *Why Youth Join Al-Qaeda* by Colonel John M. Venhaus (Special Report, May 2012)
- *Gender and Statebuilding in South Sudan* by Nada Mustafa Ali (Special Report, December 2011)
- *Covering and Countering Extremism in Pakistan's Developing Media* by Hannah Byam and Christopher Neu (Peace Brief, March 2011)

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