

Peacebuilding and violent extremism

Key insights and lessons from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct



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Abbreviations

CRIE	Countering Radical Islamic Extremism
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CT	Counter Terrorism
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
ODA	Official Development Assistance
P/CVE	Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism
PVE	Preventing Violent Extremism
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TVE	Transforming Violent Extremism
VE	Violent Extremism

A note on terminology

The language that peacebuilders use matters a great deal. Language can be used to frame issues in a way that can emphasise commonalities and bring people together. Equally, language can offend and divide people, either by accident or design.

Like some others who participated in this dialogue, we continue to struggle with the language around “violent extremism” and prefer to avoid employing the frame of “countering violent extremism”. For the purposes of this report, we have used “CVE” as short-hand to refer to the dominant field that has emerged.

The different definitions that are used for “violent extremism” and “CVE” is in fact one of the central topics of the report. Different contributors used a range of terms and language in this report, and we kept all contributions in the original words used by participants.

Introduction and methodology

The concept of “Countering Violent Extremism” (CVE) has become central to the security policy of governments around the world. Yet despite the near-ubiquity of the term there is widespread disagreement over what the concept means.

The rise of the concepts of “violent extremism” (VE) and CVE has caused much discussion within peacebuilding communities around the world. Some see opportunities where the agenda of CVE and peacebuilding overlap. Others believe it is an agenda that distracts from the real root causes of conflict, and could actually undermine peacebuilding efforts.

To explore these issues further Peace Direct held a collaborative research project for experts and practitioners interested in this area. A range of experts in the topics of violent extremism and peacebuilding, from diverse contexts and expertise, came together to discuss these issues in an online forum run by the Convetit platform (www.convetit.com).

Over 5 days in April 2017, 118 expert participants from 36 countries took part in a series of discussions around issues relating to violent extremism and peacebuilding. The conversations covered areas such as defining extremism, the role of ex-combatants, and counter-narratives. The diversity of participants created great discussions and uncovered many important insights.

This report contains reflections from a number of the participants on some of the main themes and sessions from the week. A full list of participants is included on pages 68-71.

The first section of the report focuses on “Defining violent extremism”. Marisa O. Ensor summarises the definitional dilemmas around CVE. This is followed by an article by Nora Lester Murad, an activist and writer who argues that the peacebuilding community should reject the discourse of CVE. As the Trump administration intensifies militarised approaches to violent extremism, Bridget Moix of Peace Direct

looks at the impact this can have on peace and security in the US and around the world. Nicholas Dickson, a serving officer in the US Army, asks if the Department of Defense can be a useful and legitimate partner for CVE activities.

The second section of the report looks at “Pathways to violent extremism”. Anne Connell of the Council on Foreign Relations explores issues of gender and CVE. Luc Chounet-Cambas looks at push and pull factors leading people to become involved in violent extremist groups. Joel Gabri of Peace Direct discusses the possible roles that technology can play. Lebanese journalist Sawssan Abou-Zahr reflects on the impact sectarian violent extremism is having on her country. Ruairi Nolan of Peace Direct looks at the particular role of international recruits in violent extremist groups. This section also features case studies on the roles of diaspora groups in both fuelling and working to prevent violent extremism, by Dr Yusuf Sheikh Omar.

The final section of the report looks at “Peacebuilding approaches”. Taylor O’Connor and Kyaw Hsan, community peacebuilders in Myanmar, explore how narratives of peace can be used to counter narratives of hate. Esin Efe focuses on the role of civil society in the struggle against violent extremism in Syria. Patricia Andrews Fearon from the University of Cambridge asks if approaches to preventing violent extremism and de-radicalisation should use the same approaches as violent extremist groups themselves. Laura Vermeer of Peace Direct and Henri Bura Ladyi, director of Centre Résolution Conflits in DR Congo, draw on their experience of how former combatants can be reintegrated back into communities, while Dr Gordon Clubb adds further analysis on the role of ex-combatants. Finally, the role of livelihoods programmes in preventing recruitment to violent extremist groups is examined by Abdullahi Isse, director of the Somali development organisation Social-Life and Agricultural Development Organization, and Daniel Tamene of Peace Direct.

Key findings and recommendations

A peacebuilding approach to violent extremism?

This dialogue showcased the ambiguity that many in the peacebuilding sector feel towards the field of “CVE.” There is much potential overlap between those who view themselves as working in the field of “CVE” and those who view themselves as peacebuilders. This overlap includes both the goals they espouse, and their methods of working. And yet important points of difference remain. It is this tension that results in the fact that it is possible to view the emergence of “CVE” as a field as both an opportunity for the peacebuilding community and as a threat.

Be aware of the norms terminology can reinforce

Throughout this dialogue, participants used a broad range of terminology. Discomfort with the terminology of “CVE” has led to a proliferation of new terms, but little shared clarity around what they mean. Enough participants are uncomfortable with the term “CVE” to suggest it is too problematic for most peacebuilders. Yet no dominant alternative term has emerged, leading to some confusion in the debate, not least since the concept itself remains poorly defined. More dialogue in the peacebuilding community on this topic could create a shared understanding of what language is appropriate for peacebuilders to use. Furthermore, this might help the peacebuilding community push back against the aspects of “CVE” that are most damaging to peacebuilding.

The opportunities and threats that CVE brings to peacebuilders

This dialogue has highlighted many ways in which some peacebuilders believe they can engage with the “CVE” agenda. These include:

Learning from the approaches of those working on relevant programmes around the world. For example, this report includes cases of research on narratives and how individuals are attracted to

join violent extremist groups. Understanding of this research and related programming can help peacebuilders improve their own work.

Using the increased resources donors are identifying for “CVE” to achieve peacebuilding aims.

The increased prominence of “CVE” programmes has increased the funding and other resources available for activities that peacebuilders want to do. Many peacebuilders report ways to “frame” their programmes to fit with the interests of funders, without undermining the core aspects of their work. Indeed, some note how they reframe the work for the international (“CVE”) audiences, and then again for the local communities they work in.

Pushing for more support for peacebuilding goals through the “CVE” agenda. By engaging with policy debates and programmes related to violent extremism, peacebuilders may find opportunities to shift the debate towards a broader, earlier and more preventive, peacebuilding approach to address the drivers of conflict.

If participants identified potential ways in which the emergence of “CVE” can bring opportunities, there was also significant discussion of the threats that “CVE” can bring. Nora Lester Murad’s piece expresses concerns shared by many participants. These potential threats include:

The discourse of “CVE” originates and is primarily owned by Western governments. Few participants did not find the discourse to some degree problematic, in particular the fact that it tends to be used primarily against Muslim groups, fueling Islamophobia.

Many participants also fear that using the concepts of “violent extremism” means accepting a donor-driven agenda that prioritises the security of donor countries over the needs of local populations. Further, the “violent extremism” prism tends to lead groups to focus on the actions of non-state armed groups, ignoring the violence of state actors or deeper drivers of conflict that a peacebuilding approach entails.

For some participants, the flaws in the discourse and practice of “CVE” are so pronounced and serious that the peacebuilding community should forcefully

reject it. Others still see options for engagement and learning. This report does not offer any easy solution to this dilemma; it will remain the challenge for each peacebuilder to navigate these issues and determine what - if any - engagement might enrich their work for peace, whilst maintaining their independence and according to their ethical principles. Where peacebuilders decide to engage with the “CVE” agenda, they should first consider how they can do so while upholding the fundamental principles of peacebuilding, while pushing back against the biases in the field that can feed Islamophobia and ignore or downplay state-led violence.

Recommendations

- *Policy makers, practitioners, researchers, civil society groups, and other stakeholders should continue to share knowledge, practice, and lessons learned to better understand the meanings, drivers, and impacts of violent extremism. The peacebuilding community should continue to raise the definitional and language dilemmas that current “CVE” framing creates with donors and policymakers, and refrain from adopting politically-driven language and framing.*
- *The peacebuilding community should continue its emphasis on addressing the root causes of various forms of violence, including violent extremism, and on the long-term work of transforming the relationships and social dynamics that cause violence into constructive cooperation. It is vital that the peacebuilders that choose to engage in “CVE” activities directly confront the dilemmas and problems with current practices, and help reshape policies and practices towards more holistic and effective approaches to addressing root causes and transforming drivers of violence.*

Listen to and support local communities

A consistent theme throughout the dialogue was the need to understand the specific, local context of any conflict, and the drivers of violence. No one-size-fits all theory can help understand “violent extremists”, as if they share a common approach or ideology.

The efforts of local civil society are vital for both the analysis and the solution, which can include alternate narratives, education or livelihoods. Local actors know their constituencies well, have historical memory in the community and are grounded in their communities. Local actors understand intricate ethnic, religious, clan or family dynamics that need

to be factored into response development. Local leaders have more credibility than outsiders and will be respected. They have much more of a stake in the community; they have a commitment to finding long-term solutions because they will stay.

Local dynamics involving extremist groups must be understood well in order to have realistic expectations. For example, it is often not realistic to expect civil society organizations who operate in towns where extremist groups dominate to do the kind of public or black-and-white rejection Western donors are looking for. There are too many shades of gray that come with operating in the same space as these groups. Policy and strategy must be grounded in reality rather than aspiration, and international actors should follow the lead of local peacebuilders in considering how to engage in each situation.

Recommendations

- *The international peacebuilding community, donors, governments, and multilateral organizations should ensure a place at the table for local communities that are directly impacted by violence and actively working to prevent and respond to it. Local communities are at the forefront of practical actions to prevent and respond to extremist movements and can bring critical perspectives and learning into policy and programming development. This includes the still under-addressed needs of promoting reconciliation and ensuring effective reintegration of former combatants with communities.*
- *Governments, CSOs, and other donors should put the needs of local communities dealing with violent extremists at the forefront of their project and mission objectives, and should prioritize supporting and strengthening local capacities, locally-designed and locally-led solutions.*
- *Governments, multilateral organizations, and donors should shift funding and strategies toward greater investments in community-based peacebuilding approaches and less reliance on military force. Such a shift would mean placing peacebuilding, development and civilian leaders in the lead, with much greater resources and decision-making power.*

Do not neglect the “R” in DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration)

More resources and commitment needs to be focused on reintegration and rehabilitation efforts in order to assure the success of the entire disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) process for members of violent extremist groups.

DDR programmes offer an opportunity not only to disengage former extremists from their mobilisers, but also from the ideology and attitudes underpinning the violent mobilization.

Recommendations

- *Reintegration efforts should look at the needs of the community as a whole, rather than just the needs of former extremists. Focusing only on one specific group and neglecting the needs of the entire community is unlikely to restore the social fabric that is so badly needed in post-conflict settings.*
- *Policymakers, donors, and practitioners should invest more resources and support in comprehensive DDR for former combatants, with greater emphasis on community-based reintegration processes, and with community leadership on how best to meet the needs of both former combatants, and the broader community into which they settle.*
- *DDR and de-radicalization programs should not be run independently and should be part of more comprehensive post-conflict programmes, including a focus on transitional justice mechanisms like trauma healing, reconciliation, retributive and restorative justice to create long term reintegration success.*
- *Donors and practitioners should be realistic when it comes to planning DDR programmes. This means avoiding one size fits all approaches, planning for long term investment, involving the local community as much as possible, and encouraging governments and other community members to be just as invested in repairing the societal fabric as the former extremists who are going through the DDR process.*

Use caution when crafting alternative narratives

Extremist groups have become incredibly skilled at using a variety of methods to spread extremist narratives. Their techniques are marked by

increases in categorical, black and white thinking, oversimplifying and separating the world into “us vs. them.” These techniques often incite intense emotional responses that motivate action much more efficiently than cognitive appeals. This has put pressure on peacebuilders and security strategists to implement alternative narratives, which intend to counter the appeal of extremist messaging. The discussion led by social psychologist Patricia Fearon Andrews questioned the efficiency of “fighting fire with fire” and using simplified emotional appeals to counter extremist narratives.

Participants brought up multiple idealistic and pragmatic objections towards oversimplified counter narratives. Regardless of the efficiency of the strategies, participants agreed that oversimplifying complex issues is problematic. The underlying grievances that motivate extremism are often complex, and ignoring that complexity does a disservice to the vulnerable communities that peacebuilders are trying to help. Further, participants concluded that this technique diminishes impartiality and demonizes those who are already radicalized, which can damage exit routes for those considering leaving radical groups.

As technology advances, extremist recruitment strategies and messaging will advance with it. Peacebuilders should not ignore the way extremist groups structure and disseminate their narratives. However, this should not distract from the underlying goals of the peacebuilding community, which is to address the root causes that push people towards extremism in the first place. While peacebuilders should avoid using the same simplified psychological style used by extremist groups, there is no reason peacebuilders should not be uncompromising in terms of their dedication to promoting peace - building peace through every responsible and constructive means possible with tireless effort and unwavering commitment.

Recommendations

- *While the peacebuilding community should remain aware of extremist narratives and their messaging strategies, it must continue to maintain its focus on the root causes of extremism in all their complexity. For as long as the circumstances that give rise to violent extremism exist, no amount of peace messaging will prevent a minority being seduced by extremist propaganda.*
- *Alternative narratives should avoid black and white, “us vs. them” rhetoric, and instead focus on building*

critical thinking skills. Rather than push a particular perspective, focus on enabling people to recognise when they were being manipulated and to understand that the behaviour they participated in (or condoned) as a result of that manipulation was not in their best interests. From there, people can make their own decisions.

- *Those hoping to have an effect on extremist narratives should offer alternative narratives which provide “a way out” for radicalised individuals that allows them to maintain a level of dignity. Using strictly emotional appeals to turn people against extremist groups damages reintegration efforts for those who are trying to abandon extremist groups and rejoin the local community.*

Ensure women and youth are involved from the outset

The discussion led by Anne Connell showcased the ways that research has led to greater understanding of the different pull factors that draw women and men to violent extremist groups, and the distinctive contribution that women can make to efforts to prevent violent extremism. And yet despite the sharing of some inspiring examples of work from around the world, there remains a dangerous tendency to view women only as victims of violence, not as agents of change. Much more effort needs to be made by policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners to increase the participation by women in all levels of peacebuilding work and in security bodies.

Greater focus on supporting youth to engage positively with their societies and ensure opportunities for the future was also a recurring

theme. Offering youth employment and other opportunities to better their livelihoods is vital to curb youth from the socioeconomic and identity vulnerabilities that violent extremists manipulate. While jobs alone are not sufficient to prevent all recruitment, livelihoods and an economic future for young people are critical components of prevention efforts in many contexts. Economic and social empowerment go hand in hand. Providing youth with vocational training, civic education training, and creating environments more conducive towards peace, give youth a sense of meaning and independence, allowing them to become agents of peace in their community.

Recommendations

- *Policymakers, donors, and practitioners should ensure women and youth are fully engaged and supported in efforts to prevent and reduce violent extremism. Programmes and policies should aim to strengthen and support the role of women and youth as positive agents of change in their communities, while also addressing specific needs of women, girls, and young men and boys in the context of extremist movements.*
- *Create mechanisms to give women and youth a greater voice in decision-making at the local, national, regional and international levels. This also includes all levels in the security bodies and other authorities involved in crafting and implementing CVE policies, as well as developing frameworks that allow women and youth to contribute meaningfully to CVE activities.*
- *While jobs alone are not sufficient to prevent all recruitment, livelihoods and an economic future for young people are critical components of prevention efforts in many contexts. Economic and social empowerment go hand in hand.*



Defining violent extremism

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Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE): definitional dilemmas for the peacebuilding community

Marisa O. Ensor, PhD, LLM

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Introduction: a marked lack of consensus

The global urgency of countering what has been termed “extremist violence”, or “violent extremism” (VE), can be seen reflected in the recent proliferation of frameworks and stakeholders engaged in efforts to better understand and respond to it. The field nevertheless remains characterised by widespread disagreement over meanings, approaches and solutions. VE's transnational scope, and the wide range of perspectives espoused by those involved in preventing and countering it are contributing factors to this lack of consensus.

This article summarises the preliminary findings of Peace Direct's global consultation on “Peacebuilding and Violent Extremism”. I outline the diversity of conceptual understandings of the terms Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) and other related terminology guiding participants' involvement in this field. A focus on definitions facilitates a more comprehensive identification of the commonalities and discrepancies existing in prevalent constructions of these terms. These are not merely academic considerations – the way we define a phenomenon reflects how we perceive it and influences what is done in response to it. Participants in this consultation shared 53 different definitions of CVE (see page 14).

Unsurprisingly, participants' responses reflected a marked lack of definitional consensus, with multiple and sometimes contradictory constructions of violent extremism and associated responses being

proposed by different stakeholders. These disparities may present a challenge to the peacebuilding community as it determines how to best engage with the P/CVE field. They do, however, evidence the pronounced fluidity and dynamism that characterises this rapidly evolving agenda.

Is a definition of violent extremism even possible?

It is worth noting that a number of participants questioned whether a common definition of “violent extremism” was even possible. Sawssan Abou-Zahr, among others, asserted that:



Sawssan
Abou-Zahr

We are not talking science here. Thus no definition can take into consideration the full context of extremist acts and their background.

Similarly, Yusuf Omar posited that:



Dr Yusuf
Sheikh Omar

I don't think that a common definition of violent extremism is possible because of our cultural, and contextual differences plus our experiences and assumptions which influence our understandings, interpretations and defining of the concept will always remain different to some extents.

Acknowledging the difficulty inherent in achieving a universal consensus in defining a highly context-specific phenomenon, a number of participants nonetheless stressed the usefulness of developing common conceptual understandings. For example,

although Ramzi Merhej thought that a common definition of “violent extremism” is not possible, he qualified that by saying:



Ramzi Merhej

a common frame, which includes most of the perspectives, is possible to be made.

Other participants expressed a belief that a clear definition:



Luc Chounet-Cambas

frames a logic of intervention for peacebuilders, and allows us to share conceptual clarity with national partners in countries where we work.

This standpoint was elaborated upon by Jared Bell, who shared his belief that:



Jared Bell

a common definition is useful for us to understand counter violent extremism because we may be able to identify violent extremism so that academics, policy makers, and practitioners can develop indicators that identify how groups and individuals may become violent which may not fit current cultural or societal narratives of extremism.

This conviction was even more forcefully expressed by other participants, including Arsla Jawaid, who



Arsla Jawaid

strongly believes that a common and coherent definition of VE is desperately needed; however, one that doesn't seem likely due to the political and “relative” nature of the term that emanates from the placement of the state at the centre of the current VE/PVE discourse.

Other supporters of definitional consensus focused less on conceptual constructs and more on the practical and operational importance of formulating common working frameworks. This distinction was made, for instance, by Sawssan Abou-Zahr who proposed that:



Sawssan Abou-Zahr

We don't all need to agree on a rigid definition, we just have to find ways, even if on individual levels, to counter extremism in our daily lives and encounters with others.

At the same time, Kazi Nasrin Siddiq, cautioned us that a



Kazi Nasrin Siddiq

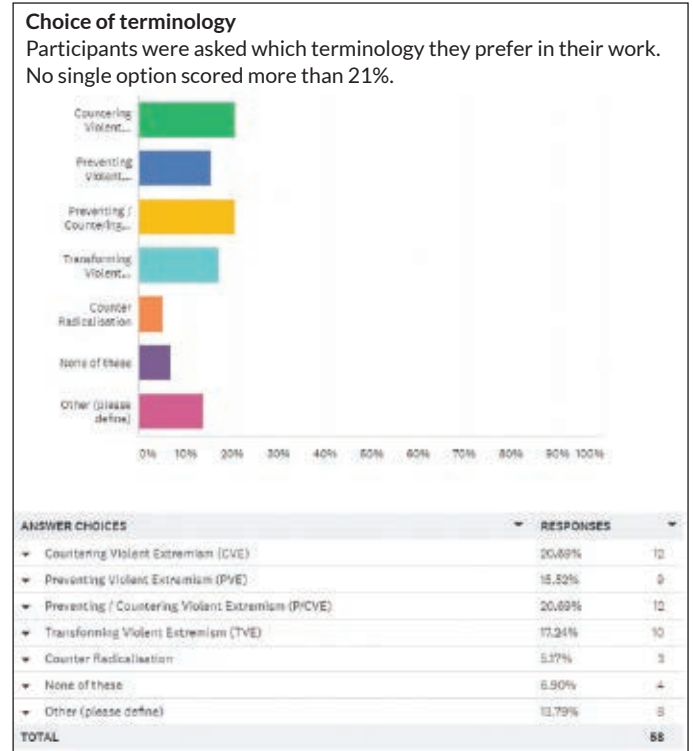
lack of clear definition may distract us to find a proper solution.

Nicholas Dickson added that



Nicholas Dickson

in the military, if you define the problem incorrectly, or define the wrong problem all together, you end up with many unintended consequences.



“Who defines what violent extremism is?”

Dickson’s comment draws attention to another fundamental issue – that of ownership and positionality – which was raised by a large number of participants. Understandings of P/CVE and related topics (e.g. “radicalisation”, “extremism”, and “terrorism”, discussed later in this report) have, in effect, been recognised as largely dependent on the priorities and objectives of those defining such terms. Several participants indicated that different names for responses to extremist violence (CVE, PVE, TVE, etc.) reflect different underlying values and goals.



Hassan Mutubwa

Firstly, the counter terrorism discourse has long been prone to manipulation that wish to, ignore human rights obligations, limit the space for civil society and curb media freedoms – all in the name of national security. Such policies can themselves become drivers of violent extremism

Florence Kayemba contributed to this discussion as she questioned:



Florence Kayemba

who defines what countering violent extremism is and determines how these programmes are designed?

Michael Olufemi Sodipo similarly noted that:



Michael Olufemi Sodipo

definitions depend on the position of an individual or group within a larger socio-political context. For example, a position on the side of a government might determine if and by whom an individual or group's ideology is defined as "radical" or "extreme"

Kara Hooser's comments are illustrative of an additional dimension of the ownership/positionality issue – the sometimes uneasy relationship between top-down government-promoted initiatives in contrast to grassroots civil society efforts. She offered the following example:



Kara Hooser

The US Dept. of Homeland Security (in conjunction with the FBI, Dept. of Justice, and the National Counterterrorism Center) offered \$10 million in grants to grassroots, community-oriented CVE programs in 2016. Many CSOs have since declined the funding or encouraged others not to apply for funding because, first, it threatens the legitimacy and neutrality of these programs, and second, organisations felt the terms of the funding contributed to a loss of organisational independence and autonomy.

As an alternative solution, she proposed that "state funding for CVE should be housed under a more social service-oriented department, including the Department of Health and Human Services."

Recognising that PVE and CVE are problematic and exceedingly loaded terms, several participants questioned whether "a common definition is really necessary", as Sara Lind wondered.

As she elaborated, a common approach may be neither possible nor desirable.



Sara Lind

The situations in different countries, and even cities, will be so different that it might be more relevant for practitioners in each locale to determine what is the prevailing issue there and to then determine the best ways to tackle it,

Other participants proposed a compromise between adopting a universal definition and rejecting the term altogether.

Among this group, Sascha Werthes suggested that:



Sascha Werthes

"violent extremism" for now serves as a boundary concept. As a boundary concept it allows a broad range of actors and communities coordination without consensus as it enables communication about a social phenomenon troubling many societies around the world.

A further point of contention highlighted in the discussion revolved around the acknowledgement that the terms "radicalisation" and "extremism" are themselves contested, potentially blurring the distinction between VE and other forms of violence. It is also worth noting that "radicalisation" and "mobilisation" are two distinct processes that must be examined separately – some individuals may become radicalised but never act on their beliefs; others may act violently only years after having been radicalised. As Alistair Legge reminded us,



Alistair Legge

having extremist views is not a problem. Radical ideas can be good or bad. They can challenge the status quo and force us to better understand and appreciate our own values and ideas. The issue is violence, the use of force and the abuse of power to achieve our aims.

Colby Pacheco's assertion that:



Colby Pacheco

including "extremism" in a universal definition tilts the rules of the game in favor of state actors to exploit a broad interpretation of the term to crack down on dissent or to play off western government fears to continue their own "hegemonic violence"

suggested a similar concern. Unease over governments' willingness to invoke the CT and P/CVE agendas in order to silence dissent was echoed throughout numerous discussions. It is indeed widely acknowledged that the counterterrorism discourse has long been prone to manipulation by governments that seek to suppress domestic opposition in the name of national security. When such policies are undertaken in a context of human rights violations, a restriction of media freedoms, and a reduction of civil society space, counterterrorism initiatives can themselves become drivers of violent extremism.

In effect, the term "violent extremism" appeared to be as contested as the older concept "terrorism". Steven Leach argued that:



Steven Leach

countering Violent Extremism was directly birthed from the Global War on Terror.

While no internationally accepted legal definitions of either one exist, the two terms have been used interchangeably, a fact that several participants perceived as highly problematic.



Kloé Tricot O'Farrell

In theory, CVE was supposed to represent a shift away from the hard security tactics of the "war on terror" towards a "softer" approach. However, in practice, it is failing to challenge and shift wider military-security strategy, and is merely a tool in the "war on terror",

offered Kloé Tricot O'Farrell.

Further concerns were expressed by Ramzi Merhej and others, who worried that:



Ramzi Merhej

CVE, like "counter-terrorism" demonizes certain groups while it protects others

– a statement that once again underscores the important question of ownership and positionality.

Relatedly, some participants highlighted that CT and P/CVE, while generally understood to be different approaches, are neither linear nor mutually exclusive.



Halkano Boru

The emergence of the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) agenda reflects a recognition in policy circles that conventional security-based measures to counter terrorism have failed and, in some cases, has fuelled greater marginalisation and violence,

argued Halkano Boru.

He was among those who saw CVE's assumed emphasis on prevention as a reflection of the failure of militarised "hard-security models". In Halkano Boru's own words, "an emphasis on prevention, the CVE approach seeks to tackle the root causes of extremist violence by engaging with communities, with vulnerable groups and with households."

It has been argued that CVE's purported focus on prevention hints at a potential path forward for developing a shared CVE-peacebuilding analytical framework. The possibility is worth considering, albeit not universally agreed upon. Some in the peacebuilding community contend that the CVE agenda distracts from the broader root causes of conflict, potentially undermining peacebuilding initiatives. Others see opportunities where the CVE and peacebuilding agendas overlap and posit that, because VE shares risk factors with other social ills, it allows for the utilisation of pre-existing capabilities. The textbox below reflects these two positions, as expressed by consultation participants.

A threat or an opportunity?

59% of participants either "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that "The rise of "CVE" is an opportunity for the peacebuilding community".

However, 34% of participants either "somewhat agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that "The rise of "CVE" is a threat for the peacebuilding community".

The link between peacebuilding, CT, and P/CVE was further explored by Kara Hooser, for whom "the over-arching goals of CVE are already a core concern for peacebuilding".

Nevertheless, she added:



Kara Hooser

the field will continue to struggle to explicitly incorporate CVE programs so long as the narrative of CVE essentially being another form of counter-terrorism persists.

Religion emerged as a salient if frequently problematic aspect of the distinction between CT and P/CVE, as understood by a number of participants. Kara Hooser, for instance, contended that “CVE programs have been used to curtail free speech and religious freedom, have encouraged suspicion within communities, and stigmatized minority groups as being particularly prone to violent extremism.”

Elaborating on Hooser’s comment, Nora Lester Murad, cautioned us to:



Nora Lester Murad

not forget that CVE has risen in the context of a pandemic of Islamophobia and after the anti-terrorism discourse has eroded civil rights worldwide.

The tendency for CVE to stigmatise Muslim communities was indeed repeatedly noted. Arguably, VE has been narrowly applied almost exclusively to Islamist violence, ignoring the occurrence of various other forms of ideologically motivated or justified violence. A number of participants reflected on this reality, discussing the serious implications of a possible shift to “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism” (CRIE) both in the United States and internationally. This debate was taken further in a thread led by Nora Lester Murad, who proposed that the peacebuilding community should reject the discourse of CVE altogether – a suggestion she elaborates in more detail in her own article (see page 15).

What is the role of structural and cultural violence?

A final point raised by a large proportion of participants was the extent to which working definitions of P/CVE incorporate or disregard the role of structural and cultural violence. Context-specific understandings of masculinity, femininity, social adulthood, and citizenship can inform alternative messaging campaigns; they thus warrant more systematic attention than has typically been the case in most current P/CVE approaches. Taylor O’Connor’s illustrated this perspective, finding that:



Taylor O’Connor,

the way that the term CVE puts the focus solely on extremist groups is counterproductive in that it negates the influence of any form of direct violence perpetrated by dominant powers (be they global powers, national governments or otherwise) and renders invisible the influence of structural/cultural violence both so often contributing factors to the vitality of violent extremism.

Several other participants exhorted the P/CVE community of practice to be more mindful of the fundamental role of gender divides and generational social stratification.

As recent events have demonstrated, women’s rights and place in society are central to the narrative of violent extremist groups. Assessments of women’s active involvement in VE – hardly a rare or novel phenomenon despite the media’s sensationalistic portrayals – nevertheless remain bedeviled by misconceptions. A more sophisticated understanding of the gender-specific nuances of both VE and P/CVE is clearly required.

Similarly, the role of youth in VE, and in social life more broadly, is the subject of heated political and cultural contestation. It is generally assumed that young people, when marginalised by exclusionary regimes and disfavoured socio-economic circumstances, are likely to feel excluded, resentful and vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

The peacebuilding community, on the other hand, has often espoused an assumption that women – and also youth, although perhaps less categorically – are overwhelmingly a positive force for peace. Responding to these realities, a number of participants focused their discussion on the role that women and youth can or should play in P/CVE efforts.



Kloé Tricot O’Farrell

Rather than trying to co-opt women’s and youth’s organisations to serve top-down, state-driven counter-terror strategies, it would be more valuable to support them to set their own agenda for its own sake, with full freedom to challenge all problem behaviours, and have a say in shaping wider stabilisation strategies and peace processes,

concluded Kloé Tricot O’Farrell.

Without a more inclusive understanding of the nuanced roles and motivations of women and youth, P/CVE programming runs the risk of instrumentalising them – i.e. viewing women and youth only as tools through which to address adult male radicalisation. These issues are discussed in more detail in Anne Connell’s article on “Gender and violent extremism” (see pages 27-29).

As this discussion has illustrated, the rapidly evolving P/CVE field is still grappling with a number of important concerns – chief among them is the very definition of the term, which carries significant implications for the way P/CVE initiatives relate to peacebuilding efforts. The wide range of

constructions advanced by the participants highlight the high level of controversy and uncertainty that characterises the field itself. It is an encouraging sign that so many of the experts – policymakers, practitioners, researchers, civil society groups and

other relevant stakeholders – who took part in this global consultation have begun to pursue questions that inform our collective understanding of the meanings, drivers and impacts of violent extremism, however defined.

Definitions of CVE

Participants were asked to give a one-sentence definition of CVE. A representative sample of these is included below, indicating the range of different understandings of this concept.

- To encourage critical thinking within the general population and individualized initiatives for at-risk persons.
- CVE are attempts to prevent and react to the ideological justification and use of violence against civilians for political means.
- Countering Violent Extremism involves the co-opting of development practices for the state-security and democratization agendas of the US and Western Europe.
- CVE remains an emerging field, but put in a tense it is a collection of beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals.
- CVE serves as a boundary concept (interpreted differently across communities but with enough immutable content to maintain characteristic integrity), as such it describes a variety of sometimes rather abstract policies and actions, which shall prevent or hinder ideologically motivated violence to be perpetrated.
- The better term is Countering Insurgency Actors.
- All political, economic, social and cultural measures to prevent and transform violent extremism by state and non-state actors.
- A dynamic methodology for countering the causes and effects of the dissemination of ideologies that inspire violence.
- Any policy designed to handle the effects of violent acts of persons or groups that seek to impose their ideological or other views on others who might not hold such views.
- In its current form in the mindset of grassroots be Westerners or Muslims, the CVE is any action, word, attitude and behavior from extremist Muslims that is against Western values and ways of life and that is very negative and alienating definition. Therefore, an alternative definition is desperately needed, and that means to abandon CVE and coin a new alternative terminology.
- CVE is not a military mechanism, it is rather a socio-political process executed on a grassroots level by empowering education and fighting poverty.
- An intentional effort by the US to supplement their military activities against groups and interests they don't like with a programmatic response that gains credibility by affiliation with peacebuilders and others.
- CVE is a coordinated effort, on local, national, regional and global levels, to address a complex of issues, including root causes and consequences, of radicalisation the leads to violent extremism.
- It is the prevention of terrorism by addressing the underlying factors and actions behind sharp ideas, feelings and perspectives.
- Set of actions aimed at preventing radicalism, hopelessness and bigotry and creating conditions for educated, prosperous and generally happy and peaceful individuals and communities.
- An attempt to develop, promote, and embolden counter-narratives designed to compete in the marketplace of ideas with those encouraging social and politically-motivated violence.
- To address the conditions that lead individuals or groups to engage in or mobilize towards ideological violence.
- The initiative of finding a concrete way to discover the actual causes of violent extremism with a transparent mind and to resolve it in a constructive way.

Peacebuilders should expose CVE discourse not “engage” it

Nora Lester Murad

Nora Lester Murad, PhD, is an activist and writer in Jerusalem, Palestine. She co-founded Dalia Association, Palestine’s community foundation (www.dalia.ps), to promote self-determination in development. She co-founded Aid Watch Palestine (www.aidwatch.ps) to mobilise Palestinians to hold aid actors accountable, especially in the Gaza Strip. She writes about international aid, community philanthropy and life under military occupation at www.noralestermurad.com

Living in Palestine, I am alert to the power of discourse and the efforts made to manipulate it to promote the profit of some at the expense of the wellbeing of others. For example, resistance to the Israeli occupation is most commonly presented as violence, but the occupation itself is not. Those who control the discourse are able to frame certain questions in or out, to make certain ideas normal or extreme, and can use the legitimacy they gain from controlling discourse to marginalize certain voices.

Since discourse frames thinking that shapes action, I was disheartened when I first heard the “Countering Violent Extremism” discourse normalized in peacebuilding circles. I felt sure that CVE, like “anti-terrorism” and “homeland security” would be used to sanitize and legitimize structural racism, especially against Muslims and Arabs. From my point of view, the language of CVE “others” groups of people and justifies actions against them that have long-term consequences for global relationships. It further divides by framing violent extremism in such a way that nothing that “we” do qualifies as VE, implying that “we” are superior.

I feel confident that I was not alone in my initial decision not to take part in the CVE dialogue organised by Peace Direct despite my esteem for the organization. But when Peace Direct asked me to share my strong views in the forum, I accepted the opportunity. The discussion showed me how some perceive engagement with CVE as logical, but left me even more certain that the peacebuilding community should actively challenge the discourse of CVE, not grant it credibility by “engaging” with it.

A survey of dialogue participants indicated that 59% feel that the emergence of CVE presents opportunities for the peacebuilding field, and their examples of CVE-aligned peacebuilding work are included in this report. However – a significant proportion of participants (34%) felt that the

emergence of CVE poses threats. These concerns are ones I’ve heard frequently in the global south and from marginalized people all over the world who believe that our current political, economic, cultural and social systems are fundamentally and intentionally unjust. These concerns are not only about CVE per se, but about how self-interested power holders manipulate and distort discourse to promote a vision of the world that does not match the reality of many. It is precisely because these are non-dominant views that peacebuilders should take them seriously.

CVE is a discourse intentionally deployed by power-holders in the global north

CVE is an approach that is conceptualized by, funded by, and promulgated by the US government and their military allies. As Steven Leach points out:



Steven Leach

Countering Violent Extremism was directly birthed from the Global War on Terror ... The CVE variation coincides with the COIN (Counter-Insurgency) approach of the U.S. in Iraq.

These power-holders are shaping the discourse in their own interests, not in the interests of the people of the world, nor of peacebuilders. For example, note that in the CVE discourse, it isn’t the acts of violence that get categorized as extremist, it is the perpetrators themselves. This is key because it shifts the focus from a discussion about the causes of violence to a discussion about how to manage those groups of “fixed” people. Note that by saying “they” are bad, “we” are, by default, categorized as “good,” and therefore critical scrutiny is deflected from the often violent acts of the powerful. Because legitimacy of an action is a function of who did it, when “they” bomb a village, it is classified as violent

extremism (bad), but when “we” bomb the same village, it is to rid the world of violent extremism (good). In the analysis of Jared Bell,



Jared Bell

Most current CVE methods seem to either be imperialist at best and violent at worst. The current methods and mechanisms treat radicalism and violence as a full on disease, with no preventative methods beforehand to stop the disease from spreading. As we know from many examples violence begets violence. Drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan have done nothing to stop extremism from spreading; it has only been a tool for recruiting by extremist groups.

Since the CVE discourse is primarily driven by actors from the West, it prioritises their interests above all. As Kloé Tricot O’Farrell said:



Kloé Tricot O’Farrell

In many contexts the biggest challenges and conflict risks are posed by injustice, discrimination and poor governance. Focusing on ‘violent extremism’ above these other problems can seem to communities that we are prioritising first-world national security and citizen safety over the rights and priorities of people in conflict-affected countries.

Patricia Fearon suggested the self-serving focus of CVE risks exacerbating VE:



Patricia Andrews Fearon

Much of CVE discourse, as developed primarily by and for Western concern for preventing terror attacks (particularly attacks on Western soil committed by non-Westerners) often suffers from a myopia that not only often misses the point –failing to address root causes of VE – but may also exacerbate the problems and hinder the peace building approaches that do work.

Lidia Cano pointed out how alignment with international military responses can undermine the perceived legitimacy of CVE by local communities:



Lidia Cano

When fighting (or countering) so called violent extremism, violence (in the shape of military power) is used both as a preventive tool and as a response....at the local level, this is perceived as violence, no matter its origin, which might exacerbate the problem by even creating more local rejection, and hence more local “violent extremism” against foreign forces.

The discourse of CVE distorts the type of work we do

As Lisa Schirch notes, the CVE approach narrows the focus of violence only on certain groups:



Lisa Schirch

The main problem with CVE is that it focuses only on non-state actors. It aims to build community resilience or deter people from joining VE groups. But it overlooks the primary driver of VE: states themselves. Abusive security forces, human rights violations and corruption are prime factors correlating with VE according to the Global Terrorism Index.

The discourse means that civil society can end up supporting work that fits the agenda of donors (who nearly always share interests with the power-holders in the global north), and not local demands for fundamental change, as Kloé Tricot O’Farrell pointed out:



Kloé Tricot O’Farrell

It is crucial to challenge ‘donor-driven’ agendas that don’t really support local needs and local agency. And rather than trying to co-opt women’s and youth organisations to serve top-down, state-driven counter-terror strategies, it would be more valuable to support them to set their own agenda for its own sake, with full freedom to challenge all problem behaviours, and have a say in shaping wider stabilisation strategies and peace processes.

Peacebuilders who work within CVE parameters are agreeing to function inside militarized space. As I argued in depth in my recent report for Reality of Aid, “The Militarization of Palestinian Aid,” one way militarization works is by offering funding that shifts the focus from opposition to the system to support for the system. If peacebuilding becomes allied to capitalist and neo-colonial interests in the global north through funding dependency, it breaks the ties between peacebuilders and communities and distorts peacebuilding at a very basic level.

Pragmatism can be tyrannical

During the dialogue, many participants indicated discomfort with aspects of the CVE discourse or implementation of CVE programmes. However – they suggested that pragmatic accommodations could be made that would allow peacebuilders to engage. For example, some suggest that the arguments of CVE could be used to push the military

and national security agencies towards more preventative measures and away from hard security approaches. By this logic, engaging with CVE allows for more support to peacebuilding led work.

Yet this argument for pragmatism can be dangerous because by accommodating a certain framing, pragmatism leads to complicity in upholding the system that is supported by that framing. My experiences in Palestine explain why I and other colleagues founded Aid Watch Palestine, to push for aid to be more accountable to Palestinians, and not international actors. A key part of this accountability is a focus on long-term structural solutions and not small, short-term fixes, no matter how “practical” they may seem.

How many times have I heard international actors in Palestine say they are doing the best they can, given political constraints? Directly addressing the political constraints is not seen as “pragmatic” so they relegate themselves to a reactive, palliative role that enables Israeli impunity and ensures that Palestinian human rights violations continue. It has been nearly 70 years since Israel’s creation led to the largest unresolved refugee crisis and 50 years since Israel occupied the West Bank and illegally annexed Jerusalem. Since then, Palestinians have endured: military incursions, arbitrary arrest, home demolitions, theft of land, settler colonies, the illegal blockade on Gaza, and more – despite (or perhaps because of) being among the largest per capita recipients of international aid. Pragmatism is at least partially to blame. International actors say that if they confronted Israel politically (which they must do if they are to address root causes), they might be denied humanitarian access. Yet by censoring their own criticism of Israel’s actions, they become complicit with the ongoing humanitarian plight of Palestinians.

The tyranny of pragmatism may also explain why some peacebuilders surrender to engagement on the terms set by others rather than establishing their own terms of engagement. For example, some participants feel that CVE is an opportunity to collaborate with individuals within departments of government that are critical of militarized approaches. While I certainly support the cultivation of allies wherever they are, institutions with entrenched interests in maintaining the status quo are not going to flip their policies in response to enlightened staff members. More likely, those allies who “see the light” will recognize their complicity and leave those institutions. It is critical, then, that the

peacebuilding community has a vision to offer them that is radically different and more inspirational than a compromise to CVE.

The world needs peacebuilders to be bold not pragmatic! Bold peacebuilding starts at the level of framing, shaping our understanding of the problems we face and opportunities to address them. During the dialogue, it was at one point suggested that we need to counter perceptions of injustice of marginalised communities, in order to counter the appeal of violent extremist groups. My answer to that is that we should not allow ourselves to be manipulated into activities that counter *perceptions* of injustice. We should challenge injustice itself.

Peacebuilders should challenge injustice, not accommodate to it

I believe that many proponents of CVE, whether consciously or not, are operating in the belief that conflict and extremist violence can be addressed without changing the current economic-political system.

Liberal proponents of CVE argue that we should intervene with groups deemed vulnerable to radicalization through a kind of cognitive rehabilitation. More nationalistic or right-wing proponents believe that groups identified as vulnerable to extremism should be controlled, imprisoned, killed, or otherwise isolated from “good people” in order to minimize risk the present to their societies.

There is, however, a worldview that perceives capitalistic economic and political structures as inherently violent, and identifies those in power in the global north as the perpetrators of this violence against peoples in the global south. Is there any reason why such structural violence should not also be defined as “extremist”?

As Kieran Ford pointed out:



Kieran Ford

I would argue that even deploying the terms CVE, violent extremism, extremism, non-violent extremism etc. is itself a form of violence in that it takes away legitimacy from some, and affords it to others (states, militaries, capitalism etc.).

Having been targeted for strip searching, having had tear gas shot at my car full of children, and having people I love arrested without charge, locked behind a blockade with disastrous consequences on basic rights and dignity, I recognize that good people can

become truly desperate. And when they are denied safe places to raise their families, the ability to work to support themselves, access to healthcare and education, they can become truly disempowered. And when they are demonized, excluded from participation as global equals, and denied access to non-violent rights claiming mechanisms, they can become quite angry. What's amazing, in that context, is not how much violence there is but how little! Most people in the world are neither extremist nor violent, but when communities are weakened by structural violence, they are less able to moderate fringe groups, and less able to protect themselves against external incitement. In order to fundamentally challenge injustice, I suggest that peacebuilders act from a belief that when communities are strong and independent, there will be less of the kind of violence that CVE targets. This theory-of-change suggests that peacebuilders should be targeting the multifaceted economic, political, and cultural violence that is weakening communities around the world, not being distracted to leave these injustices intact.

In conclusion, it makes sense to me that peacebuilders should drive discourse in ways that are most advantageous to peacebuilding concepts and

practice, rather than submitting themselves to the limitations of someone else's discourse – especially when the discourse being offered is so profoundly problematic. I go further to suggest that the CVE discourse should not be rejected because it doesn't work (doesn't promote peace); instead it should be rejected because it works too well. Like other kinds of conceptual warfare, CVE accomplishes the aims it sets out to accomplish – to contribute to the perpetuation of profitable conflict while making sure it is managed at a level that benefits power-holders. Potential dissenters, including peacebuilders, are effectively neutralized – if not by military action, then by cooptation.

Further reading:

- Murad, Nora/Tartir, Alaa (2017): The Militarization of Palestinian Aid. In: IBON International/Reality of Aid - Asia Pacific (eds.): The Reality of Aid. Reality Check. Online: www.realityofaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/RealityCheck_2017_final_ebook.pdf
- Twomey, Hannah (2017): On “shrinking space”, a framing paper. Online: www.tni.org/en/publication/on-shrinking-space



US policy and rhetoric about violent extremism

Bridget Moix

US Senior Representative, Peace Direct

Since taking office, the Trump Administration has further escalated US military action against extremist groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, and the Taliban, and more openly targeted Muslim countries through its rhetoric and policies. Rumours persist that the White House may even formally change the wording of its CVE programmes to “Countering Islamic Extremism” or “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism.”

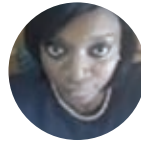
This escalation in militarised and Islamophobic responses is accompanied by devastating proposed budget cuts to diplomacy and development programs that have taken a more nuanced approach to addressing the root causes of violence and violent extremism. While US policy on CVE under the Obama Administration was already heavily militarised, Trump’s shift to even more hard power without deeper understanding of long-term solutions has caused concern amongst many community and peacebuilding groups in the United States.

In my work with Pe

ace Direct, I promote the work of local peacebuilding groups around the world to policy and government groups in the United States. I share the concern of many here in the US that the growing militarisation of US approaches to violent extremism, particularly targeting Muslim countries, could have far reaching consequences. The online consultation was an opportunity to explore a range of views from experts around the world on these issues.

Focusing only on Islamic violent extremist groups ignores the threat of other types of violent extremism, including domestic US groups.

With the Trump administration shifting their rhetoric and program focus toward a more narrow view of “Islamic extremism,” there is concern that this will also mean a lack of focus on other types of violent extremism, in particular the threat posed by right wing extremists, as Nneka Ikelionwu noted:



Nneka Ikelionwu

My greatest concern is that most terrorist attacks in the US were not carried out by Islamic terrorists. So, shifting the focus would imply that otherwise motivated violent extremist behaviour might be neglected.

In fact, a US Government Accountability Office report notes that 73% of violent incidents resulting in death since September 2001 were perpetrated by right wing extremist groups.

Leigh Hamilton made a similar point from a South African perspective:



Leigh Hamilton

In South Africa, we experience a broad spectrum of violent extremism that includes anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Islamic extremism, right-wing extremism and xenophobia. The US government’s changes to its P/CVE approach since Trump’s elections provide us with an opportunity to draw attention to Islamic extremism in South Africa, but at what cost? We may end up losing support for our efforts to prevent other types of extremism, most specifically xenophobia.

A narrative shift that further stigmatizes Muslims

Many of the participants highlighted the difference between actual project implementation and the public narrative surrounding CVE. Some argued that President Trump’s decision to focus explicitly on Islamic violent extremism risks encouraging Islamophobia and could create more negative sentiments towards groups working to combat extremism.

Anne Connell argued:



Anne Connell

It would have a detrimental effect on partnerships with organisations we work with on the ground all over the world. Local organisations combating Islamic extremism are often operating at the grassroots level and facing physical threats, closing civil society spaces, and a dearth of funding for activities - it's not strategic to alienate them. Not to mention the rhetoric change is certainly not helpful in convincing partner governments to cooperate with programming.

Kara Hooser added the dangers that such a shift would present to communities:



Kara Hooser

The new administration's plan to reframe CVE programs as CRIE is misguided and, frankly, dangerous, as it will not only undermine CVE's legitimacy, but will also send a message to our Muslim communities that we intend to police ideology and we consider their religious identity an inherent national security threat. While I believe CVE needs a re-branding of sorts, this one is in the wrong direction.

This stigmatisation could affect communities within the US as well, as Carolyn Williams argued:



Carolyn Williams

Based on my experiences working to shift the perception of Islam in America, I worry about the impact that a simple change in name could have on the public perception of Islam and how this could harm Muslim communities in the US.

The impacts on project funding

Participants acknowledged that one of the biggest challenges to this shift is its impact on potential United States funding. Proposed budget cuts and organisational changes within the US government is causing concern among many groups who already accept US support.

As Ramzi Merhej noted:



Ramzi Merhej

The US is one of the bigger donors, and shifting in its approach means shifting in the quality of the proposed project and academic work.

Benedetta Berti also argued that the shift could have long-term impacts:



Benedetta Berti

Changes in US budget on ODA will have a far-reaching impact (if the foreseen cut are indeed implemented). If CVE remains one of the main/few areas getting funded, I think we'll see (and we are already seeing to some extent) NGOs trying to re-market what they are doing as CVE to get funded. The trouble with this is increasing the creeping securitisation of development and international humanitarian aid, which I find troublesome.

Some participants disagreed with the importance of US government funding. Others even argued that in some situations, US funding caused more harm than good. Steven Leach argued that funding can have negative impacts for those that accept it:



Steven Leach

One of the great flaws of CVE, related to the other militarised democratisation project of promoting "religious freedom," is that international programs funded by the US end up compromising the legitimacy of those receiving funds in a community. That is to say, religious leaders who are identified and supported by the US become less influential in their communities, leaving a vacuum for others to fill.

Nora Lester Murad further suggested that communities should reject such funding and find ways to draw support for programmes from within communities themselves:



Nora Lester Murad

Politicized funding is often not beneficial for the independence of civil society and the credibility of actions that are progressive and critical... if we (communities around the world) believe in those actions, we should resource them ourselves. Our role should be to hold organisations accountable for fulfilling their duties rather to contract ourselves out to donors and governments, thus distorting potentially important civil society initiatives.

A shift in rhetoric, or something more substantial?

However – some participants did question how much impact such a shift would have at the level of programme implementation. While President Obama made sure to avoid a focus on Islamic extremism in his personal rhetoric, some participants argued Obama era initiatives already had an emphasis on Muslim communities and countries.

As Zahid Shahab Ahmed argued:



Zahid Shahab
Ahmed

In my opinion, the new US government's actions are not going to be much different from what happened during Obama's term. Although Obama did not directly say that CVE programs were aimed at countering radical Islam extremism, we know for a fact that many of the US-funded projects have been trying to do that.

On the same theme, Kara Hooser said:



Kara Hooser

There is distrust in CVE as an avenue for community surveillance, as well as a concern that CVE stigmatizes Muslim communities as somehow at more risk for violent extremism than other communities, and therefore in need of intervention. Even under the Obama administration, CVE programs almost exclusively worked in areas with large Muslim populations and aimed to reduce extremism among these groups.

Summary

Participants placed different emphasis on different risks attached to a shift towards a policy of "CRIE", and some questioned whether the Trump Administration's new language demonstrated a real shift in policy or simply a new label for what the US has already been doing. There was, however, quite strong agreement (88% of surveyed participants) that this new language should be opposed and broad support for investing more in community-based peacebuilding approaches, rather than simply relying on military force.

This matches many discussions I have had with practitioners, policymakers, and experts in Washington, DC, who are raising concerns over the White House's approach and working to educate the new Administration on the need for understanding and addressing root causes of extremism, not just launching more military action.

It remains to be seen whether the US government will heed the concerns and warnings of such experts.



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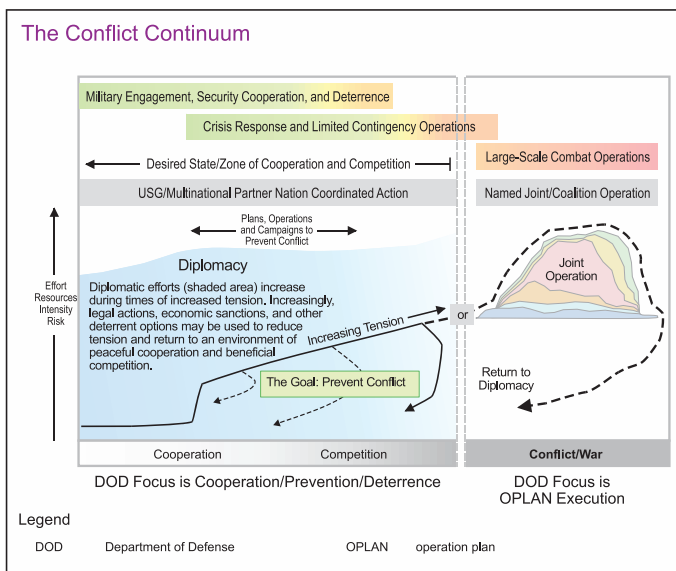
Is the US Department of Defense a viable partner for civil society in CVE?

Nicholas Dickson

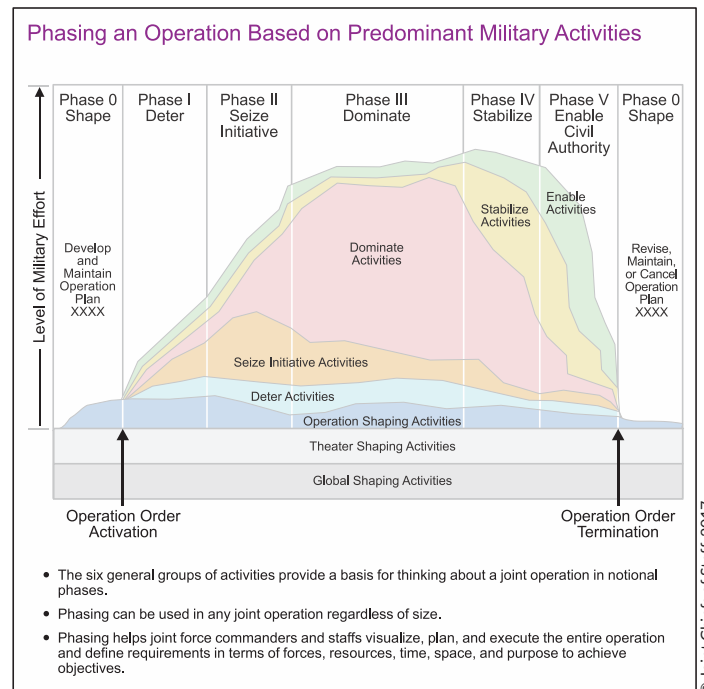
Lt Col Nicholas Dickson is an Active Duty Civil Affairs Officer in the United States Army currently assigned to the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade as the Deputy Commander. His work experiences include partnering with efforts throughout Central America, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia.

The views expressed here are the author's own and do not represent official views or policies of the Department of Defense.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) has become more and more involved in operations other than war around the world. The DoD increasingly views the scope of its work as covering much more than hard military power. Military operations may include peacekeeping missions, counter-terrorism, or security cooperation. The DoD view actions open to it as explained by the Conflict Continuum covering peace, war and states in between.



Highlighted in this is the fact that the DoD sees its role changing throughout the continuum. The next figure highlights how military activities change throughout the phases of military operations.



This is evident specifically in the Phase 0 portion of the military's version of the phases of operations. Known as the "shaping" phase. Examples of such activities are security cooperation activities, joint exercises, and Overseas Humanitarian Disaster and Civic Aid (OHDACA) projects.

In my role as a US Army Civil Affairs Officer and Planner, I am very aware of the fact that for many operations, specifically CVE type activities, there is a great reluctance amongst civil society groups to partner or cooperate with DoD efforts. I have seen efforts to do so succeed and I have seen efforts fail. There is a great deal at stake for the partners, and civil society as a whole.

With the knowledge that DoD activities are likely to increase in an already often confusing and complex environment, I asked the participants of the forum

several questions. First, is the DoD a viable partner for Civil Society with regards to CVE and other programs? Second, is there potential to leverage the DoD for information or cooperation to help individual organisations meet goals? Finally, is DoD expansion into these shaping activities a good thing, or does this show complications in how the US organizes and exercises the elements of national power?

The participants provided thoughtful responses that answered the above questions and centred around the following themes: implications of terminology, perceptions of collaborations between the DoD and CSOs to include fundamental ethical objections to collaborating with DoD, and potential solutions to the identified challenges.

Words have meanings

One theme that came to the forefront during the conversation is that it is important to define what being a “partner” actually entails.



Lisa Schirch

It is extremely important for civil society to understand what is meant by the term “partner.” “Coordination” is a far better term. Coordination requires communication. Where military and civil society are working in the same area, some form of communication and coordination is necessary.

Lisa highlights the important distinction between “partner” and “coordination” and the connotation that both words carry. As Lisa mentions, coordination requires communication. Often discussed as the three C’s, coordination, communication and cooperation, seem to be key, while partnership might be a bridge too far.



Luc Chounet-Cambas

Being a “partner” implies coordination and information sharing. I worked in partnership with the US coalition forces in western Afghanistan in 2004-2005, and information sharing was very much a one-way process for the first few weeks. It took a couple of robust discussions, as well as an understanding/open-minded US task force commander, to change this dynamic.

Luc shows that all too often, it is the result of personalities that help the system work properly, instead of the actual system working properly. Being a partner comes along with certain responsibilities.

Perception matters often more than other factors

A second theme also was highlighted by several participants. The fact that in CVE programming, often working with DoD is impossible due to the sensitive nature of such programming.



Steven Leach

The DoD is not a viable partner for CSOs engaged in CVE programming. Most VEs are labeled as such by security forces (and have different labels applied by their communities) and come from contexts where much of the population is between deeply skeptical and openly hostile of external security forces.

The concept that perception matters in regard to CVE programming is extremely important to consider, as linkages to the DoD often times bring unwanted attention with unnecessary and dangerous conclusions. This will be discussed further in our third theme below.

As members of the same overall team, those against VE, what should our actions be in regards to this? Colby highlights a prevalent attitude in the field, you cannot work with DoD and maintain your impartiality.



Colby Pacheco

Informal coordination may be possible, but any direct lines of command or acceptance of DoD money will cause problems for an organisation working on CVE.

While perception matters in some instances, it remains very important to understand that oftentimes individuals or groups will decide that there are ethical reasons to not partner with the DoD.



Dr Gordon Clubb

One of the problems with Prevent in the UK has been its association with spying and intelligence gathering, which subsequently leads to ‘suspect community’ narratives sticking and trust being eroded.

Gordon highlights this fundamental issue with partnering, and cooperating with the DoD as a whole. This is an ongoing problem highlighted by the discussions of several of the participants. While this remains a large roadblock to cooperation, there are potential ways to work together in the future, as the next section will show.

Rethinking the paradigm

A recent Peace Brief from the United States Institute of Peace discusses some of the same key issues highlighted by many of our discussants. “Civilian organisations and the military must become functional partners in this CVE effort, leveraging each other’s distinctive capabilities from the start of the operational design process and together creating space for civilian experts to do their work, enabled by the military” (Powers, 2017). However, as discussed above, it is a bit easier said than done. How do we arrive at this place where we can ‘leverage each other’s distinctive capabilities’?

The expert discussants of this panel highlighted that there is a need to communicate and collaborate between CVE practitioners and DoD. In addition, there is a call for a greater rethinking of the complete system in order to actually increase this communication and collaboration.



Steven Leach

My recommendation is for the U.S. to take concrete steps to desecuritize development and to elevate the State Department



Luc Chounet-Cambas

I would say that DoD expansion in more phase 0 activities will show complications and definitely weaknesses if it translates in DoD being seen as leading on these efforts at the expense of civilians. In the US itself, what would make a lot of sense from a peacebuilding perspective (and strategic) perspective, is for DoD [to] invest in Phase 0 [and] to convince the US Government to make strategic development funding

decisions which minimize the rationale for DoD to get involved in phases 3 and 4 down the line.



Chris Bosley

I think certainly initiatives like including the authority to transfer funds from DoD to the State Department/USAID are crucial.

All three participants discuss the need for the US as a whole to reexamine its strategy with regards to the elements of national power (Defense, Diplomacy, Development). Both Steven and Chris mention the need for the DoD to be able to transfer funds to the Department of State, an item which did not make it into the latest defense authorisation act.

The strategy advocated by Steven and Chris contains promise in reducing confusion in an already crowded field, as well as potentially saving money and lives from all parties involved. What remains to be seen, is if the “personalities” involved can figure out how to work together to achieve this highlighted way forward.

Further reading:

- Powers, Edward (2017): The Military’s Role in Countering Violent Extremism. In: US Institute of Peace, online: www.usip.org/publications/2017/06/militarys-role-countering-violent-extremism
- Joint Chiefs of Staff (2017): Joint Publication 3-0. Joint Operations, online: www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.pdf

Key terms/concepts

Department of Defense (DoD): In the elements of national power (Diplomacy, Development, Defense) it is all elements under the Defense heading. Per the Joint Publication Dictionary it contains “the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Military Departments, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the combatant commands, the Office of the Inspector General of the Department of Defense, the Department of Defense agencies, Department of Defense field activities, and all other organisational entities in the Department of Defense.” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017)

Department of State (DoS/State Department): Lead US Government agency for foreign affairs. “Diplomacy is the principal instrument for engaging with other states and foreign groups to advance US values, interests, and objectives, and to solicit foreign support for US military operations. Diplomacy is a principal means of organizing coalitions and alliances, which may include states and non-state entities, as partners, allies, surrogates, and/or proxies.” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013)

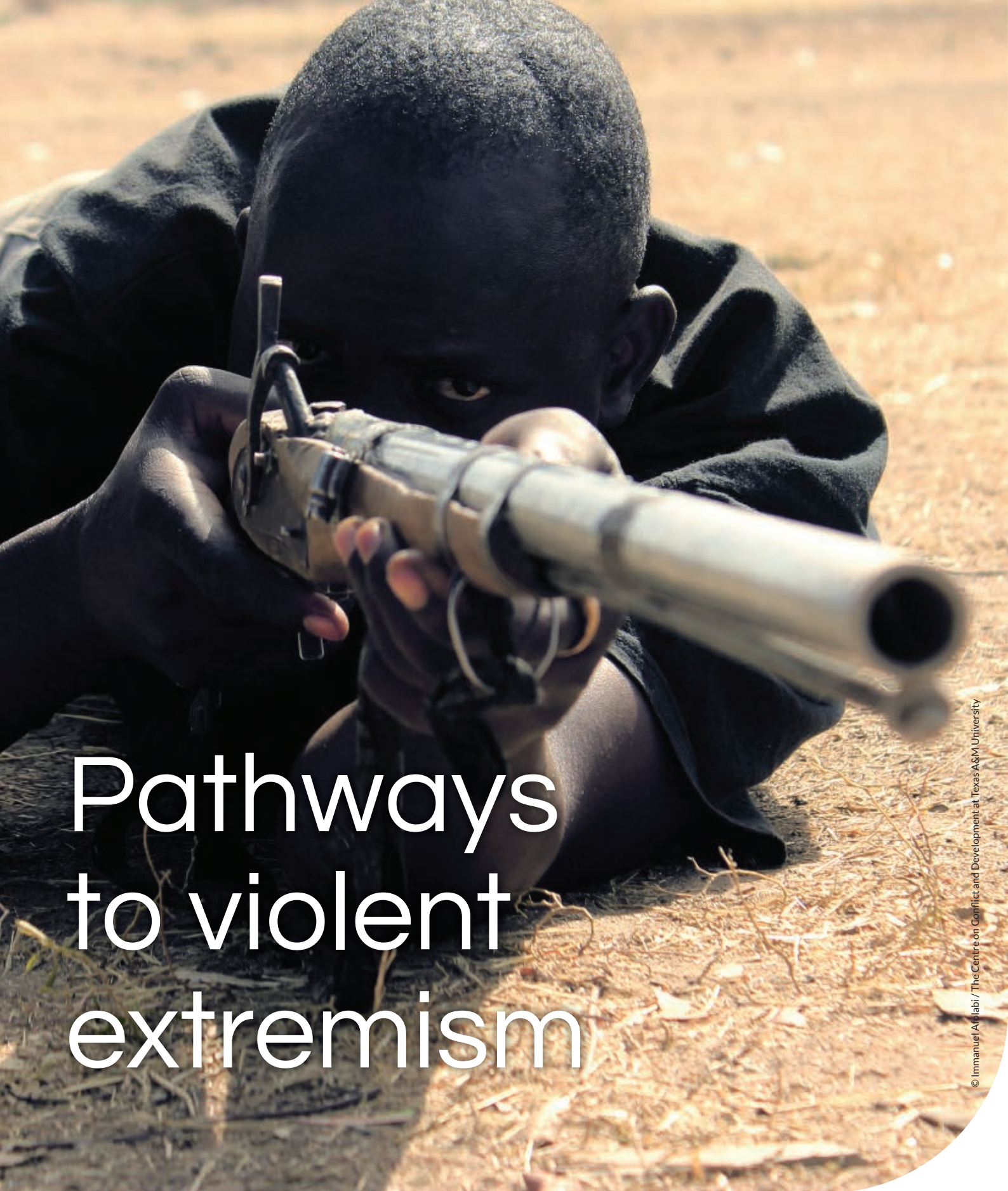
Phasing a Joint Operation: “The six general groups of activity provide a convenient basis for thinking about a joint operation in notional phases.

A phase is a definitive state or period during a joint operation in which a large portion of the forces and capabilities are involved in similar or mutually supporting activities for a common purpose that often is represented by intermediate objectives.”

Shaping (Phase 0): Shaping “activities usually precede the operation and may continue during and after the operation. The purpose of shaping activities is to help set the conditions for successful execution of the operation.” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017) It is important to remember that shaping activities occur throughout the spectrum of operations.

Civil Affairs: “Designated Active and Reserve Component forces and units organized, trained, and equipped specifically to conduct civil affairs operations to support civil military operations.” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017)

Civil-Military Operations: “Activities of a commander performed by designated civil affairs or other military forces that establish, maintain, influence, or exploit relations between military forces, indigenous population, and institutions, by directly supporting the attainment of objectives relating to the reestablishment or maintenance of stability within a region or host nation.” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017)



Pathways to violent extremism

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Gender and violent extremism

Anne Connell

Anne Connell is Assistant Director of the Women and Foreign Policy program at the Council on Foreign Relations, where she focuses on work related to women's roles in conflict prevention and resolution.

It is increasingly clear that women are deeply affected by the rise of extremist groups around the world, yet the gender-specific aspects of violent extremism are often overlooked in security policies and grassroots efforts to prevent and counter it.

Extremist groups pose significant threats to women, for example by disrupting social fabrics, causing mass displacement, and subjecting women and girls to forced marriages, exploitation, and sexual violence. Yet some women and girls voluntarily join extremist groups, many of which directly target them for recruitment with tailored messaging. These groups also use them as operational agents, including suicide bombers, because of their ability to fly under the radar of security forces.

It is thus critical to consider how women's inclusion in CVE policy is related to strengthening community resilience and improving security outcomes. Participants in the consultation hosted by Peace Direct were asked to evaluate how the drivers of radicalisation are different for men and women, why women have largely been excluded from CVE policy, and how policymakers could more strategically invest in women going forward.

Drawing on work from diverse contexts, three key themes emerged from participants' insights: a call for better research related to gender and extremism, an abundance of anecdotal evidence of women's contributions to CVE efforts, and suggestions about engaging women and women's groups without instrumentalizing them.

Better research and articulation of issues is needed

Among policymakers and practitioners—as well as among participants in this consultation—there is a wide range in level of familiarity with existing research on women and extremism. Indeed a growing body of research supports the idea that different pull factors draw women and men to extremist groups, and that, conversely, women offer valuable contributions to efforts to counter violent extremism.

This evidence has been incorporated into some national policies and written policy guidance (e.g. from the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the OSCE, UN agencies, the U.S. government or USIP). Yet the evidence has not permeated mainstream foreign policy debate. Many policymakers and practitioners continue to view gender as ancillary to core issues in the CVE agenda.

Even policymakers who recognize the strategic value of including women in peacebuilding may lack the tools and knowledge to make the case to others within the broader national security community. Some participants suggested, therefore, that there is a clear need for even more data:



Marisa O. Ensor

Robust empirical studies and rigorous qualitative and quantitative evidence are needed to support—or refute—common assumptions about CVE, including the role of women as victims, perpetrators, or agents of positive change.

Yet the nature of CVE efforts on the ground means that many of the lessons learned by grassroots organisations are anecdotal. Participants in the consultation offered examples about women's involvement in CVE efforts in the Rift Valley in Kenya, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Pakistani province of Peshawar, Somalia, and South Sudan:



Catherine Bartenge

There are a lot of peace-building initiatives done by women at the local level but little has been documented in this regard; for instance in the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya, women in the Rift Valley region named "Uasin Gishu Women of Peace" (an area which was mostly affected by the violence) started a door to door initiative on peace building while encouraging more people to join the initiative.

To bridge the knowledge gap between researchers and policymakers in order to inform policies, such anecdotal evidence and small-scale case studies should be better aggregated and disseminated.

Practitioners see how women's roles in society relate to extremism

While the broad socioeconomic and political drivers of radicalisation in a given country may be encountered by men and women alike, women's place in society affects how they relate to extremism—whether as victims, perpetrators, or agents of change in communities.

Extremism can compound or feed upon existing gender inequalities. Because women may be marginalised members of society with fewer educational opportunities and limited access to labour markets, they may perceive drivers of radicalisation differently than male counterparts:



Olalekan
Augustine
Babatunde

Of course, drivers of radicalisation are sometimes gender-specific. The case of Nigeria shows that poverty, unemployment, inequality, etc differ across gender.

On the other hand, women can be well-placed to challenge extremist narratives in homes, schools, and social environments, and have particular influence among youth populations. Many practitioners cited evidence of how women's central roles in families and communities afford them a unique vantage point to recognize signs of radicalisation and stage effective interventions. Some suggested that, across many cultures, women are gatekeepers within families and communities and are typically the first point of information—as mothers and teachers—for the young generation:



Sawssan
Abou-Zahr

In Peshawar a former teacher decided to reach out to women whose sons engaged in extremism. Through dialogue and training on how to use their maternal authorities, the women managed to convince some of their sons to drop arms.

Yet traditional efforts by governments and nongovernmental organisations to combat radicalisation typically focus on political or religious leaders. These are predominantly male.

Valuable opportunities to prevent and respond to extremism are missed when women are left out of peacebuilding efforts:



Halkano Boru

Efforts to find solutions usually involve experts, policy makers and community leaders. Many of these stakeholders are either disconnected from the communities involved or lack in-depth relationships with the community. Women play key roles in fostering community resilience and in influencing world-views and attitudes among young people. Women and other family members are advantageously placed to identify behaviours and attitudes that might indicate that individuals are becoming radicalised. In addition, mothers remain on the front-line even after radicalisation has occurred. They often maintain lines of communication as they are usually the first to be called when a son or daughter has been recruited or when something happens to them.

Policy solutions should meaningfully engage women

While research and anecdotes from the ground demonstrate the importance of women's participation at all levels of decision-making in the design and implementation of CVE policy, there are legitimate concerns about how to engage women, women's groups, and other community groups in sustainable and non-exploitative ways.

One thread of thought among participants in the consultation was that assumptions about women's roles in societies and in extremist groups can reinforce unhelpful stereotypes. A common narrative in discussions of women's rationale for joining extremist groups—often propagated by the media—assumes that women and girls are susceptible to coercion by men. In addition, few voices of the people most affected by conflict and extremism, including women leading efforts to stop radicalisation in their communities, are heard in the media or in mainstream foreign policy debate:



Daniel Ozoukou

Women indeed are considered in many civilisations as human beings of second zone who do not deserve a seat near men. These stereotypes and cultural beliefs have for ages undermined the inner power of women.

To resolve this question it become urgent to build the defense of change in the minds of supremacist men. The supremacist masculinity remains a cultural, traditional and historical fact. For ages women have been marginalized because men consider them as powerless and inferior and therefore they could not dare to compare themselves to them. With regards to that stereotype it becomes urgent and necessary to shape men's believes.

Policies and programs should thus be designed in ways that engage and empower women and women's groups:



Hassan Mutubwa

Include women and girls and gender mainstreaming in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all policies, laws, procedures, programs and practices related to CVE. Strengthen capacity of women in communities susceptible to terrorism/violent extremism on early warning, strategy development and dialogue; support skill building programs that create livelihoods opportunities for young people.

Policies should continue to recognize and support women as victims of terrorism in all contexts, taking into account the risks they face and their specific needs. But significantly more attention and resources

should be dedicated to increasing the participation of women at all levels in the security bodies and other authorities involved in crafting and implementing CVE policies, as well as developing frameworks that allow women and civil society groups to contribute meaningfully to CVE activities.

Further Reading:

- Bigio, Jamille/ Vogelstein, Rachel (2016): How Women's Participation in Conflict Prevention and Resolution Advances U.S. Interest. Online: www.cfr.org/report/how-womens-participation-conflict-prevention-and-resolution-advances-us-interests
- United States Institute for Peace (2015): Women Preventing Violent Extremism: Thought for Action Kit. Online: www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Women_Preventing-Violent-Extremism-Charting-New-Course%20%282%29.pdf
- Gaudry Haynie, Jeanette (2016): Women, Gender and Terrorism: Gendered Aspects of Radicalization and Recruitment. Online: wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2ND-WIIS-Policy-Brief-v3.pdf
- Gaudry Haynie, Jeanette/de Jonge, Chantal (2016): Women, Gender, and Terrorism Policies and Programming. Online: wiisglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Women-Gender-and-Terrorism-Policies-and-Programming.pdf
- United Nations (2015): Role of women in countering terrorism and violent extremism. Online: www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/womens-role/



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The lure of violent extremism

Luc Chounet-Cambas

Luc Chounet-Cambas' background is in disarmament, ceasefire and peace processes, in contexts as varied as Afghanistan, Indonesia, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sudan. Luc is an advisor to Promédiation, a France-based mediation network. Until recently, he lived in Lebanon where he headed the MENA portfolio for Integrity, a consulting firm that specialises in programme design and implementation in fragile environments. Luc is now in the process of relocating to South-East Asia.

Earlier this year, Jordan's Wana Institute released a report looking at radicalisation drivers for both Syrian and Jordanian youth. This piece of research built on focus group discussions conducted in what Wana Institute referred to as "radicalisation hotbeds" in the Hashemite kingdom, to then highlight a set of recommendations offered by the participants. This fascinating piece of research highlighted five key factors contributing to violent extremism, which I chose to summarize in a simple framework, called 'the 5 Is':

- Injustice,
- Idleness,
- Income (or rather lack thereof)
- Identity and
- Ideology.

I presented this framework to participants in the dialogue. These '5 Is', I argued, capture a range of contextual factors which limit the options citizens have to seek gainful political, social, or economic inclusion through non-violent means, present an increased risk of marginalisation, and make people more vulnerable to the appeal of extremist ideologies and narratives, and the sense of identity they promote.

I then proceeded to ask whether a '5 Is' framework would lend itself to easy design with local partners, and went on to:

1. prompt whether anti-corruption programming was an effective way to address widely perceived injustices in societies in transition, and;
2. advocate for the direct involvement of former extremists in CVE programmes.

This article focuses on the question of why individuals embrace violent extremism.

Contextual factors matter...

A number of participants very much echoed (if not embraced) Wana Institute's key findings. Jomart Ormonbekov walked us through the '5 Is' narrative in the Maldives where he conducted



Jomart
Ormonbekov

A study on the root causes of radicalisation, largely driven by existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

So did Hassan Mutubwa on the basis of his experience in Kenya where



Hassan
Mutubwa

frustration with employment and opportunities for political participation and governance has created ripe conditions for hate preachers (to use) monetary inducements and appeals to religious identity to net vulnerable youth into violent extremism.

Others agreed that weak governance and corruption are indeed drivers of violent extremism:



Florence
Kayemba

Weak governance systems, structural inequalities and the lack of rule of law,



Jared Bell

Corruption fuels anger over injustice by enabling powerful and predatory leaders to buy their way out of accountability for crimes they have committed

Several participants illustrate the need to adjust the '5 Is' tool to each environment, so as to prioritize each of the 'Is' and illustrate the prevalence of given 'Is' in each and every context. This was the case for Chinwe Oguchukwu Ikpeama who told us about the Niger Delta where



Chinwe Oguchukwu Ikpeama

injustice/alienation are two of the major factors to violent extremism, and are becoming increasingly important to understanding and exploring peacebuilding, especially in fragile states.

Mohammed Shikh Aiyob shared his views on Syria where



Mohammed Shikh Aiyob

Religious reasons were never the main driver for individuals to join (extremist) groups. The current pattern of activities of extremist groups shows with no doubt that movements with religious orientation have been capable of recruiting individuals heavily in communities that suffer from high levels of poverty or lack of integration, taking into account the backgrounds of the majority of extremists that have conducted terrorist attacks in Europe at least.

He instead argued that “both low levels of education and high levels of poverty” play a significant role in explaining the appeal of armed groups.

For a number of participants, the appeal of the ‘5 Is’ model was to re-situate extremist violence in the context of, as Azizur Rahman described it:



Azizur Rahman

Underlying root causes (that) violent extremism is the symptom or consequence of.

This comment was echoed by Amer Karkoutli’s point on the risks of “dealing with violent extremism as a stand-alone phenomenon”.

With this in mind, some went as far as suggesting, as GM Shoeb Ahmed did, that:



GM Shoeb Ahmed

The CVE community should put our efforts to lessen societal instability.

Kieran Ford felt that a useful aspect to the ‘5 Is’ framework is that it



Kieran Ford

Makes some effort to address grievances, much marginalised in radicalisation scholarship.

However, others had more substantive reservations on the framework itself.

The 5 ‘i’s framework

Injustice



Idleness



Income (or rather lack thereof)



Identity



Ideology



... But are not sufficient to understanding why some resort to violence

Substantive objection 1 – enabling factors (vectors) and triggers

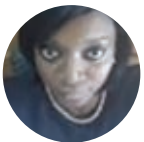
I had designed the '5 Is' Framework to be simple and useable. However, some participants felt that it is, in fact, simplistic. They argued that it failed to acknowledge why, in the words of Steven Leach,



Steven Leach

the drivers of violent extremism in one context may lead to gang violence in another.

Or on the same theme Nneka Ikelionwu noted that:



Nneka Ikelionwu

Where these factors exist, not everyone resorts to violent extremist behaviour

This was the meatier part of the discussion and the one I enjoyed the most.

Not only was each 'I' really abbreviated but, according to Matt Freear, the '5 Is' model is only partly useful when trying to understand why,



Matt Freear

Only a small number of individuals are incentivised to act despite the existence of structural factors that are acting on large numbers of people.

From this perspective, the '5 Is' model misses the mark on the key aspect of "enabling factors", vectors which make extremist information and discourse readily available to end-users, as well as places insufficient emphasis on "individual incentives". The framework developed by RUSI is helpful in expanding on this view (see box on the next page).

Substantive objection 2 – individual and group identity

On the latter aspect of "individual incentives", some suggested that psychology may be a relevant discipline for CVE practitioners to better understand what triggers a given individual to seek out a sense of belonging.

Christy Grace Provines and Sara Lind introduced the concept of "identity vulnerability" (see page 34)

to explain why, in the same environment, some individuals will give in to violent extremism while others will not. They highlighted the extent to which "vulnerable individuals exhibit a high need for cognitive closure or dislike of ambiguity, a quest for personal significance and the need to belong."

This discussion served as a useful reminder that identities are often fluid and multi-layered. Patricia Andrews Fearon added further depth to the debate when she introduced the notion of



Patricia Andrews Fearon

Self-complexity, that is, when identity is complex - spread across multiple differentiated domains (e.g. social identity complexity, contingencies of self-worth), individuals are more resilient to blows, losses, or deficiencies in any single domain.

Several of the participants expressed an interest in longitudinal surveys and field data on the topic. It is worth mentioning here Alistair Legge's input on



Alistair Legge

Research that suggests that it isn't the first generation of migrants who are radicalised but their children and grandchildren – young people who do not identify with the world of their parents and yet may not have integrated into the country their parents have adopted. The issue is one of belonging and acceptance.

This point tallies with the research of Olivier Roy, who places emphasis on individual behaviour and psychology in jihadism, and draws on his own database to highlight recurrent characteristics of second-generation immigrants and native converts with a violent past, whose radicalisation started or occurred while serving jail time.

This aspect of the discussion very much echoed another criticism made to the '5 Is' framework, whereby several thought it failed to capture the importance of group grievances and dynamics as a key driver of violent extremism.

Where does that leave us as peacebuilders?

Building on knowledge

The discussion ranged across a broad spectrum of ideas. As such it was a useful reminder that CVE is not a brand new field of work and ought to tap into existing bodies of knowledge, and the peacebuilding community has much to learn from other areas. In the words of Kieran Ford,



We lose out on knowledge by presenting extremist groups of today as an exceptional case that must be explored with little concern for the knowledge of the past.

Kieran Ford

Past relevant work that I believe can enrich the field of CVE includes:

- i) Donnatella Della Porta's work on European left-wing militancy in the 1960s (social movement theory),
- ii) existing work on child soldiers and DDR,
- iii) understanding how civil wars start (see Paul Collier's large N-study),
- iv) social psychology and anthropology research, as briefly discussed above and in Patricia Fearon's article in this volume.

Building on communities

Irrespective of how much one of the given Is can be relevant in a given context, and what assessment tool one may choose to work with, most participants shared a consistent view that peacebuilders and CVE practitioners must, in the words of Kloe Tricot O'Farrell:



Develop strategies on the basis of concerns raised by local communities with a view to identifying and supporting them to address the issues that could lead to conflict.

Kloe Tricot O'Farrell

Such bottom-up approaches were deemed a critical condition of success so as to ensure local buy-in, ownership and drive. Alistair Legge commented on IFES' Bangladesh People Against Violence in Elections (PAVE) programme being



developed for Bangladeshis and run by Bangladeshis. It has gained traction because of this.

Alistair Legge

This also means avoiding a "one size fits all" type of approach, as Arsla Jawaid noted:



Key drivers may vary from community to community even within the same country.

Arsla Jawaid

This is perhaps a nice way to conclude this article. The 5 Is can be a relevant tool for as long as practitioners take it for what it is. A useful mnemonic,

not a template. For each context, the weighing of each and every factor of radicalisation will change, as exemplified for example by the way ISIS adjusts its recruitment narrative for different audiences in different countries. And then further analytical tools will be needed to capture enablers and triggers of violent extremism.

Further reading:

- Roy, Olivier (2017): Who are the new Jihadis? In: the guardian, online: www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis

RUSI's categorisation of drivers of violent extremism

RUSI's recent CVE guide for programme design and evaluation suggested this useful categorisation of drivers of violent extremism:

- **Structural Factors:** Such as repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality, discrimination, a history of hostility between identity groups and external state interventions.
- **Enabling Factors:** Such as radical mentors, access to radical online communities, social networks with VE associations, access to weaponry or relevant items, comparative lack of state presence and an absence of familial support.
- **Individual Incentives:** Such as a sense of purpose, adventure, belonging, acceptance, status, marital enticements, fear of repercussions and the idea of rewards in the afterlife.

For more, see: www.rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/countering-violent-extremism-and-risk-reduction-guide-programme-design



“Identity vulnerability”

Is it possible that individuals are more prone to being drawn into extremist networks when they are in a certain state of mind? Research by Christy Grace Provines and Sara Lind lead them to believe so, and Co-Found The ‘MPOWER Project with goals of developing messaging campaigns that target such individuals using brand marketing and creative engagement strategies. They shared their research and approach with participants during the online dialogue.

The ‘MPOWER Project’s approach builds out a psychological framework called “Identity vulnerability”, a state of mind in which people are most at risk of being radicalised. Individuals in this state of mind are vulnerable to extremist ideology proffered by external and internal push/pull factors that threaten and indicate susceptibility to non-mainstream ideology.

These individuals actively seek narratives that validate their perceived grievances and allow them to regain a sense of empowerment and control over their own destiny. They seek to be the “hero” of their own story and to escape feelings of insignificance characterizing their current situation. Vulnerable individuals have

greater potential to be drawn into extremist networks, which give them a sense of belonging and validation, creating structure, order and significance in their lives. Christy and Sara’s research indicate that ‘identity vulnerability’ serves as a baseline instigator with more localised grievances (socioeconomic status, policy, quality of governance, etc.) layering on from there. Ultimately, attachment to a narrative, followed by a network, changes an individual’s perceptions, personal qualities, beliefs and social ties.

The ‘MPOWER Project’s aim is to use this concept to create bespoke messaging campaigns targeting an audience at risk of recruitment to violent extremist groups. They will seek to partner with organisations able to provide other social support to such individuals.

Further reading:

- The ‘MPOWER Project: www.mpowerproject.org
- Kruglanski, Arie (2014): Drivers of Deradicalization: Needs, Narratives, Networks. In: The Huffington Post, online: www.huffingtonpost.com/arie-kruglanski/drivers-of-deradicalizati_b_6117334.html

How does online communication change the way we (en-)counter radicalism?

Joel Gabri

Peace Technology Programme Officer, Peace Direct

New technologies, such as the internet, mobile phones, and artificial intelligence, are transforming all aspects of society. In my role as Peace Technology Officer at Peace Direct I'm exploring the ways new technologies can be used to enhance our efforts to build peace.

But I am acutely aware that these tools are as useful in building peace as they are in promoting violence. We have watched in recent years groups like ISIS seize upon social media in particular as a powerful propaganda and recruitment tool. It can seem like the most prominent voices in peace and conflict are those fuelling violence, while peacebuilders struggle to have the same level impact and profile.

I asked the participants to explore this further. Is it fair to say that peacebuilders are not as effective as those that promote violence in their use of new technology? And if so, why? Are there strategies peacebuilders should be using?

Here are three key learnings from the discussion that followed.

Don't lose perspective

However visible the negative aspects of new technologies are, it is important that we keep a sense perspective. Of the billions of active users of social media and the internet, only a tiny fraction are ever exposed to extremist propaganda, and even fewer are influenced by it.



Jeffrey Jonkers

We may not notice the daily struggle and successes of non-violent and anti-violent groups on social media, because what they say sounds 'normal' to us, but if you actively pay attention you will notice that peaceful social media activism is a strong presence that practically supports people on a daily basis.

Jeffrey Jonkers also reminded us to keep in mind the

many examples of positive action new technology has supported. As we focus on the negative applications, we pay less attention to the peaceful and positive mass movements digital technologies have supported. From the Arab Spring to the campaign for LGBT rights in the US, new technologies have opened up new ways of organising and campaigning, and enacted real social change.



Steven Leach

The use of social media receives disproportionate attention to its actual impact. The evidence of this as a problem is so scant that I am concerned it detracts from more important questions.

Steven Leach asked if we are placing a disproportionate level of attention on technology given the role it actually plays, compared to, say, prison radicalisation. To an extent I agree, new technologies may not be any more effective than "traditional" approaches. However, as new technologies expand deeper in the everyday experience of more and more people, the influence will only grow.

Simple messages are seductive and dangerous

It would be wrong to downplay the impact of extremist propaganda online entirely. Yes, it is just a small part of the online space, but ideologies that promote violence have a real influence. For many people the internet is their primary source of information, it is where they go to talk about themselves and the world. Extremist networks exist and draw people in.

ISIS has developed sophisticated online operations intended to attract foreign fighters to its so-called caliphate or inspire attacks at home. White supremacist groups have built online communities that spread narratives of hate and provoke violent acts against minority communities.



Kazi Nasrin Siddiq

They want to spread a single message of extremism and as it is a threat and aggressive so it spreads quickly.

Extremists do have a power here. As Kazi Nasrin Siddiq explained, they are able to focus on straightforward messaging that is more attractive compared to the fuzzier peace message. Such simple, black and white, worldviews make it easy to grab attention, give easy explanations and solutions to the world's problems. For people with genuine grievances such as disillusionment, isolation or poverty, these extremist networks offer an outlet. And the internet, through being free and open, makes it easy to seek them out.

It seems to me that peacebuilders have a natural disadvantage in countering this. We cannot offer the simple solutions, scapegoats, or the romance and adventure of building a new system in the ruins of the old. While there have been many attempts at counter-messaging, there is little evidence of what works.

Solution lies beyond technology



Matt Freear

Before we try to talk peace digitally we must first talk honestly about the conversations that are being removed from the internet and the ideas and people that are being excluded.

Is it realistic, or even desirable, to do this? Matt Freear raised the issue of censorship. I agree that this is something that needs to be at the front of our minds. Going down this route leads to some unsettling conclusions – states deciding what is acceptable, criminalising free expression, shutting down thought and debate. Many people have highlighted throughout the five days that deciding what is extreme is dangerous in itself. Democracy, women's rights, ending slavery, were all extreme positions at one time. And shutting down potential for one group, restricts the freedom of us as peacebuilders.



Florence Kayemba

The challenge with peace messaging is that it doesn't necessarily address the factors that may have led to violent extremism in the first place.

As peacebuilders, what should our response be? Florence Kayemba spoke for many when she stressed the importance of addressing root causes. We should recognise the legitimate concerns that often drive people toward violent groups in the first place. For as long as the circumstances that give rise to violent extremism exist, no amount of peace messaging will prevent a minority being seduced by extremist propaganda.



A Well Told Story in Kenya

One of the challenges to countering radicalisation is to find a compelling way to engage young people. Research has shown that governments, civil society and other organisations have so far found this very difficult to achieve. However, Well Told Story (WTS) provides credible alternative narratives for young people to believe in and follow.

WTS engages and empowers millions of young people in East Africa through its multi-media project Shujaaz. All of the Shujaaz media activities are grounded in the insights resulting from their unique research methodology 'GroundTruth' which relies on a creative use of traditional and innovative research tools and approaches to identify and address key factors that motivate and enable, or hinder and slow-down, positive social change.

When researching issues of extremism and radicalisation of youth in Kenya, WTS identified a variety of actions to give young people a sense of belonging and strengthen the overall resilience of society by creating stronger bonds for instance between families, businesses, religious groups or communities. This research provides important insights into how radicalisation can be countered and offers recommendations such as issuing identity cards, having relevant role models or providing counter narratives on social media.

These recommendations were then trialed in the Shujaaz media. Shujaaz tells the story of DJ B, who set up a radio station 'ShujaazFM' in his bedroom, and calls out to youth across the country to share ideas with each other to improve their lives. The Shujaaz audience (over 10m in East Africa) discuss with DJ B and each other the common problems they faced and help each other find practical solutions to these problems.

The Shujaaz story is told across multiple media platforms including print, radio, SMS, events and social media channels such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and uses the youth informal language 'sheng', a mix between Swahili and English, to engage youth in a big conversation which reaches millions of people each month. Through Facebook alone, the campaign reached 450,000 people.

One example of how Shujaaz incorporated a recommendation from their research into



their media, was in their pilot media campaign HaukoSolo (you are not alone) This campaign was designed to create a sense of belonging and community amongst marginalised youth to prevent them from becoming vulnerable to radicalisation (in all its forms) during moments of crisis. Shujaaz created a series of short online videos designed to trigger a conversation where youth shared their personal stories about moments of crisis in their lives, creating a sense of a shared experience and giving hope and encouragement to others.

Further reading:

- Well Told Story (2016): GROUNDTRUTH: Religious tolerance among young Kenyans in Nairobi and Mombasa – a serious comic. Online: www.welltoldstory.com/groundtruth-religious-intolerance-among-young-kenyans-in-nairobi-and-mombasa/
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- Ni Chonghaile, Clar (2013): Kenya's youth encouraged to aspire by DJ B and the Shujaaz. fm comic book. In: the guardian, online: www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/jan/03/kenya-youth-dj-b-shujaaz-fm

The rise of sectarian violent extremism in Lebanon

Sawssan Abou-Zahr is a Lebanese journalist, editor and consultant. The online dialogue provoked Sawssan to consider the rising threat of extremist violence in her home country of Lebanon, and what can be done to prevent it.

Does the name Ziad Jarrah ring a bell? He was one of the September 11 perpetrators. He was Lebanese. Unfortunately, he is not the only example I could give on growing extremism among my compatriots. A famous romantic singer, Fadl Shaker, became an armed fundamentalist. A 21 year old man who bears my family name became a suicide bomber targeting the Iranian embassy in Beirut in 2013. This list could go on for pages.

Jarrah descended from a relatively well-off family from the Bekaa in Eastern Lebanon. His uncle is currently a minister and deputy in Parliament. Ziad is believed to have been trained in Afghanistan, drawn to Al Qaeda's call for "jihad" against "crusaders and infidels". Fadl Shaker, the Iranian embassy attacker, and many others have a different story. Their enemy is not the West, but fellow citizens and fellow Muslims. They are motivated by hatred for Shiite in general.

Every Sunni-Shiite tension in the Middle East finds ground in Lebanon. An internal issue in Bahrain or Yemen might trigger clashes in neighbouring streets in Tripoli or Beirut. The Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict is felt powerfully here.

It is wrong to try and understand conflicts in the Middle East through the concept of "sectarian violence" alone, as if the conflicts are the result of some longstanding sectarian differences which make them inevitable. Instead, recent developments, above all the Syrian conflict, have contributed to an increased "sectarianisation" of politics in Lebanon.

Fundamentalist preachers have gained ground in Sunni strongholds in Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon in Southern Lebanon. Ahmad Al Assir, a local Salafi Sheikh in Sidon, acquired undeniable popularity among angry young Sunnis all over Lebanon, and even attracted support of many Christians for his anti-Hizbullah rhetoric.

Many Sunni sectarians in Lebanon have a particular hatred of Hizbullah as a result of both

their policies inside Lebanon and their large-scale military involvement in Syria defending the Assad regime. Assad is believed by many in Lebanon to be responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, a prominent Sunni leader, in 2005. Hizbullah claims they are active in Syria to prevent groups like ISIS from extending to Lebanon. Their opponents believe it is this involvement that triggers fundamentalism among Sunnis. Meanwhile ISIS abducted several Lebanese army personnel in 2014 and has since gained ground in the rocky mountainous surroundings of Ersal, a Sunni village close to the Syrian borders hosting the biggest community of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

In June 2013, I turned into a war correspondent while visiting my late father. Al Assir's loyalists clashed with Hizbullah's fighters before targeting Lebanese army personnel. From our balcony on the eighth floor, I saw a military tank hit by rocket fire. The explosion was huge and dark smoke filled the air. Large scale clashes took place, and civilians were trapped as human shields. Al Assir strongholds, which included a mosque, were bombed. Hizbullah's fighters backed Lebanese soldiers fuelling more anger among Sunni youth. The sheikh escaped and was caught in 2015 while trying to flee the country. Some of his loyalists died in the fight, and many were arrested. The frustration still grows among others.

Unfortunately, when young men have nothing but misery at hand, it is easy for some local sheikhs without sufficient theological knowledge to tell them, personally or online, that wealth awaits them in heaven; that all they ought to do is to detonate themselves in Hizbullah strongholds or attack Lebanese soldiers. Sadly it has happened several times, and more often innocent civilians lose their lives as well.

The typical profile of a suicide bomber in Lebanon is a young poor or unemployed loner, mostly recruited online. Hundreds of accounts on Twitter and Facebook incite hatred; audio and video of Al Assir is easily available on Youtube. Interestingly, many of those recruited come from mixed families (Shiite mother and Sunni father). One would expect them to be tolerant as a result; however they endure an identity struggle and inclination towards violence.

Putting the religious aspects aside, I think this



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recruitment might be a means to give oneself a sense of belonging to a group and later become a potential mujahed (the person who practices Jihad). But not everyone desires to turn into shaheed (martyr). Lebanese extremists arrested after failed attacks tend to cooperate with security and sometimes divulge information on potential terrorist plots. It is striking how easily they confess their recruitment by ISIS affiliates as well as the basic military and ideological training they received. Unfortunately confessions are not signs of remorse.

In Egypt and Libya some former combatants in Jihadi groups have turned into fierce opponents of violent extremism. So far in Lebanon, there are no similar examples of former Sunni fundamentalists or Hizbullah combatants doing the same.

Maybe it is still too early for these fighters to review their choices and admit they were once terrorists. It took former militants in Egypt and Libya years to find the inner courage to acknowledge one's mistakes. It is a risky choice that leads many to exile or death.

The nearest available example in Lebanon is that of former combatants during the civil war who became "Fighters for Peace". They are from different confessional and religious backgrounds. Muslims and Christians who once fought each other join hands in preaching civil peace. They accept responsibility for the atrocities they were involved in. Their target is angry youth and school students to make sure no Lebanese holds arms against another anymore. They are fully aware of how easily one could be manipulated to become a fighter; however the task of preventing a new war is bigger than their capabilities.

Meanwhile, events in Lebanon remain dominated by the conflict in Syria. One quarter of the population of Lebanon is now made up of refugees from Syria; Prime Minister Saad Hariri has said the country is at "breaking point". Is there an end in sight to the Syrian conflict, or will the country continue to fragment, with disastrous results for Lebanon? The refugees are increasingly facing racism and discrimination. Will they remain in the long-term, as many Palestinians have?

Unfortunately, while the war in Syria continues, I expect that those who wish to stoke sectarian extremism in Lebanon will find more fertile ground. Much of the political class in Lebanon seems ill-equipped to deal with the crisis.

It is therefore vital that those of us in civil society find ways to combat these new schisms in our country. In recent years, I have researched and written about many courageous civil society peacebuilding groups. Much of their work has focused on recovery and reconciliation from Lebanon's civil war.

The rise in threat from sectarian violent extremism is a new challenge that needs new approaches. Some are already finding ways to do so. Two years ago I wrote about the fantastic work of MARCH and their use of theatre to bridge sectarian divides. Lebanon needs more such initiatives. It is time for a new generation of "Fighters for Peace".

Further reading:

- Abou-Zahr, Sawssan (2015): When theatre turns enemies into brothers. In: Insight on Conflict, online: www.insightonconflict.org/blog/2015/08/theatre-turns-enemies-brothers/

International recruits to violent extremist groups

Ruairi Nolan

Head of Research and Engagement, Peace Direct

UN figures estimate that around 30,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Iraq and Syria since 2011, from at least 80 different countries. The phenomenon of international recruits has garnered much attention in the international press, and it would be easy to think that international recruits play a central role in the operations of violent extremist groups. But in fact, for the large majority of violent extremist groups, their core support and ability to operate comes from their capacity to gain support from some section of the local population where they operate.

For peacebuilders, having a clear understanding of the motivating factors behind the recruitment of international recruits is vital to developing strategies to respond. The online consultation was an opportunity to exchange views with a range of peacebuilding practitioners and analysts on how to best devise such strategies.

International recruits have different motivations from local recruits

Participants did highlight distinctions in the methods and appeals used to recruit international volunteers. International fighters are more likely to be recruited through ideological appeals or the opportunity for adventure:



Sara Lind

It seems that foreign fighters (especially Westerners) travelling to fight elsewhere are more likely to be drawn by a desire to be a “hero” or to do something that seems adventurous and significant. Many identify with the grievances of the local fighters, but they often have a different relationship to that grievance. Local fighters may be drawn by a legitimate grievance about local situations but they may also be drawn by the need for money or a job.

This contrasts with violent extremist groups that draw primarily from the local population. For example, Nigerian peacebuilder Michael Olufemi

Sodipo highlighted the following range of local factors have allowed the growth of Boko Haram:



Michael Olufemi Sodipo

Insurgent groups such as Boko Haram draw its members mainly from disaffected youth, unemployed high school and university graduates, and destitute children, mostly from but not limited to northern Nigeria. Its young followers have become highly radicalized individuals willing to carry out suicide bombings in pursuit of martyrdom – a new phenomenon in Nigeria. The ability of Boko Haram to target young Nigerians has continued to grow. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and weak family structures contribute to making young men in Nigeria vulnerable to radicalization and extremist recruitment. Itinerant preachers proffer an extreme version of religious teachings and convey the government as weak and corrupt. Widespread official corruption and excesses by security forces combating Boko Haram have created an environment conducive to youth radicalization and recruitment.

Another pertinent issue in northern Nigeria is the youth bulge. Young people in northern Nigeria face limited opportunities. The region regularly has some of the worst education statistics in the world, beginning with extremely low school attendance rates, while both inside and outside the schooling system, there is a distinct lack of opportunity for young people to engage positively in civic life.

However, even where recruitment and support for violent extremist groups can be understood in terms of local drivers, there remains the potential for significant international recruitment or support due to events in other countries, as noted in the Boko Haram case by Olalekan Augustine Babatunde:



Olalekan
Augustine
Babatunde

The aftermath of the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 witnessed a surge in the recruitment of Boko Haram and proliferation of light weapons in the entire region- Mali, Chad to Nigeria. There was an influx of Gaddafi's ex-soldiers, the majority of whom were Nigeriens and Chadians who came through the Sahara Desert.

Nora Lester Murad also warned of the danger of taking the ideological justifications too much at face value, and emphasised other factors that keep adherents part of groups:



Nora Lester
Murad

[We should remember that groups labelled extremists may offer actual help to people (food, protection) that lead people who have no ideological compatibility to join, and some people who join may be kept in the groups by force or lack of alternatives. Looking deeper may reveal that ideology is not the main pull. An ideology is created, packaged and sold to make people's participation seem logical. It is the framing that is deployed intentionally, when interested parties are trying to convince people to join something that doesn't fully make sense to them.

At the same time, there is a danger in too simplistic a division of fighters into 'local' and 'international':



Ahmed Al
YemenniMurad

Talking about Yemen and maybe Syria and Libya, it is not always the case as in your definition/ scale/ approach/ interpretations that the large majority of fighters are local to the countries or communities in which they fight.

It should be considered that they/the others have their own other definition/ scale/ approach/ interpretations of the notion of citizenship/belonging/Islamic world border/ unity/solidarity.

The 'supply side'

For many participants, understanding the ways that international volunteers are recruited requires focusing on the societies that they come from (or what Carolyn Williams called 'the supply side'). These different contexts may make recruitment strategies of violent extremist groups vary:



Kara Hooser

In a project I worked on that examined thematic recruitment priorities for ISIS, it was clear that foreign recruits were not only targeted with varying recruitment narratives, but that the region in which those foreign recruits resided also lent itself to different recruitment narratives. Western recruitment tactics, for instance, focused on feelings of isolation, a desire for agency, a responsibility to the greater Muslim community, and anti-secularism. In Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, recruitment tactics centered on state corruption and political oppression of religious expression, as well as this idea that life under the caliphate would offer a brighter future and more meaningful alternative to Post-Soviet life. Recruitment narratives in Tunisia offered even more variation, including a 'lost paradise' narrative, religion as a source of hope, duty, and economic incentive. On those terms, it seems as though ISIS already understands that different motivating factors exist across the spectrum of foreign recruits, and they have long been tailoring their recruitment efforts accordingly.

If we accept the argument that local drivers are critical to the support of local recruits to violent extremist groups, then international recruits can present a particular challenge to local peacebuilders:



Sascha
Werthes

Addressing the structures and causes of local grievances and engagement to foster resilience to strategies of mobilization and recruitment seem to have positive effects on the ground.

The challenge with international mobilized extremists willing to fight seems for me to be that they are not necessarily empathetic to a certain geographic area and therefore interested in the concrete living circumstances in that spot.

In a broader sense, Nicholas Dickson defined the recruitment as taking place due to "civil vulnerabilities":



Nicholas
Dickson

These critical civil vulnerabilities must be understood, whether it is a youth bulge, portions of the population not listened to/ engaged properly, jobs or lack thereof... these critical civil vulnerabilities exist, and should be understood and shared across the community of interest.

These civil vulnerabilities might include isolation of certain communities. This is discussed further in the 'diaspora' section (p. 43), where Dr Yusuf outlines his research on a group that is sometimes seen to be at higher risk of supporting violent extremist groups.

Former fighters can play a key role in preventing further recruitment

Several participants highlighted the key role that former fighters can play in preventing further recruitment to violent extremist groups. This may be because they end up disillusioned by the reality of ISIS or other groups do not match the propaganda that drew them to join in the first place, as Kazi Nasrin Siddiqia notes:



Kazi Nasrin Siddiqia

It seems that foreign fighters (especially Westerners) travelling to fight elsewhere are more likely to be drawn by a desire to be a "hero" or to do something that seems adventurous and significant. Many identify with the grievances of the local fighters, but they often have a different relationship to that grievance. Local fighters may be drawn by a legitimate grievance about local situations but they may also be drawn by the need for money or a job.

Participants cited examples such as the way that former fighters in Aarhus act as mentors to young people at risk of joining violent extremist groups. Other examples are the EXIT-Deutschland and HAYAT-Deutschland programmes, which both use former violent extremists to target potential recruits to violent extremist groups (see p 61).

However – Arsla Jawaid counsels that caution must be used in the role of former fighters, and their broader communities must be central to any such efforts:

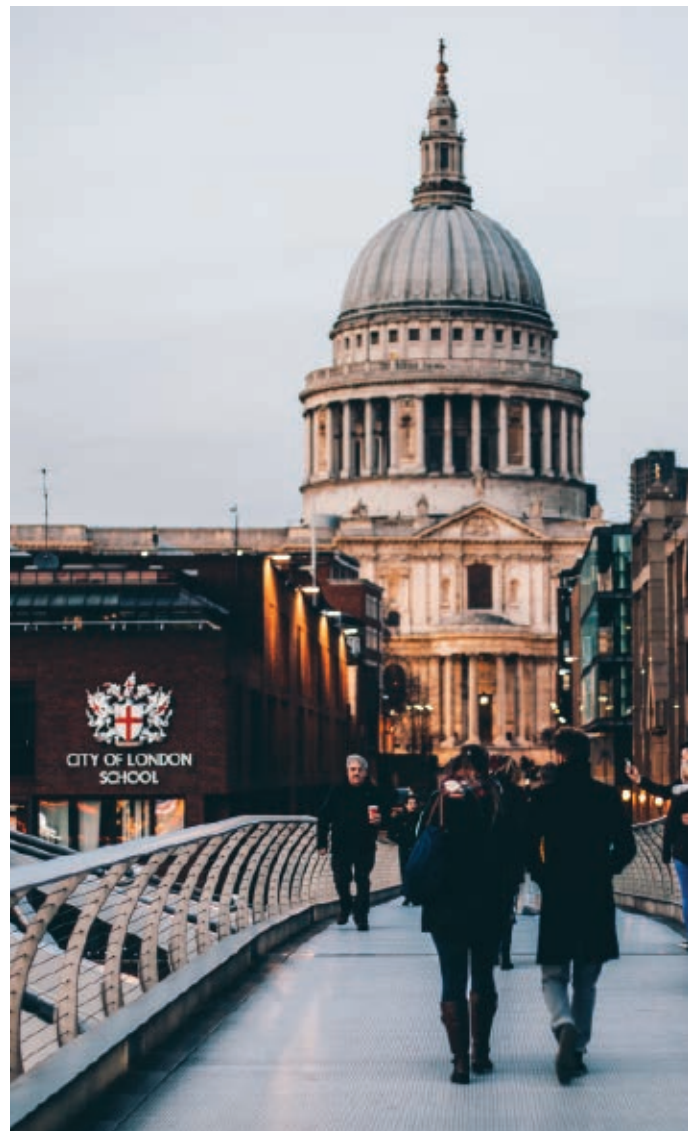


Arsla Jawaid

Communities MUST be at the center. I have been fairly critical of using formers voices in silos and overwhelmingly depending on them as credible avenues. Formers voices must be couched within community management and support which helps in creating a resilient and preventive environment for young minds. Radicalized minds will fight and resist. Voices of formers may be viewed with suspicion or may prove ineffective if the community itself provides an enabling environment for radicalization. Let's not FORGET: some formers (Belgium

and many more) come from the same communities that they go back to de-radicalize or help in prevention. Credible former combatants who participate in prevention are few. They themselves need a supportive community-led effort for sustainable leverage.

The discussion highlighted just why the problem of international recruits to violent extremist groups is such a difficult one to deal with. They often have different motivations to join violent extremist groups, and lack understanding or sympathy for the cultures where they fight, making it hard for peacebuilders or local civil society to engage with them. Their impact can be felt both by their original home countries, and the countries where they fight. Despite this, the dialogue did highlight some examples of strategies that have the capacity to better counter the impact of such international recruits. For more discussion of the role of former fighters, see the article by Dr Gordon Clubb (p 62-63).





Members of Somali community living in London attend a dialogue with Ambassador Francisco Madeira, the Special Representative of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (SRCC) for Somalia in May 2017.

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What role do diaspora communities play in fuelling and countering violent extremism?

Dr Yusuf Sheikh Omar

An often heard argument against immigration criticises members of immigrant communities for failing to “integrate” into their host societies. What is usually meant by such criticism is that they do not fully conform to the majority way of life. In my view, this is in opposition to the concept of “social integration”—which should mean a reciprocal process of adaptation. Nevertheless, this anxiety of a failure to integrate has in turn led to a concern about radicalisation of young people and the risk that some of them may join violent terrorist groups.

Some social scientist are uncomfortable of using the term “integration” and instead they use “inclusion” and “participation”, defining “integration” as a two way process and a bilateral relationship which affects both the migrants and the host society. These are brilliant and practical approaches and are helpful when developing policies related to CVE.

To some degree this anxiety over radicalisation is not misplaced. My own research into Somali diaspora youth in Australia and the USA has identified a number of factors that lead to support for extremist messages including discrimination, misconceptions about Islam, and identity crises. It is clear then that elements within diaspora communities are fuelling extremism within both the host country and abroad.

When dealing with the issue of integration, my

favorite terms include “collaboration, partnership, acceptance, accommodation, developing shared understanding, mutual respect”. Unfortunately, the issues of marginalisation, exclusion, superiority, ethnocentrism and binary perspectives of black and white lenses have been prevalent for a while. Here is where peace builders can make a bid difference by promoting equality, and social justice.

There have been other critiques of the role of diaspora in fuelling conflicts, with the suggestion that “long distance nationalists” have fuelled the conflict in places such as Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka.

But this is not the whole picture - diaspora communities are at the same time playing a central role in preventing and countering violent extremism. During my research into the Somali diaspora, I found many youth organisations on the frontline of preventing youth from radicalisation. For example:

- Ka Joog – which in English means “stay away” from negative influences – a Somali youth organisation based in Minneapolis. (www.kajoog.org/)
- Anti-Tribalism [Youth] Movement based in London. (www.theatm.org/)
- Heidelberg Stars Soccer Club based in Melbourne. (www.heidelbergstars.com.au/)

These organisations have all developed successful youth programs drawn from youth perspectives. These programs focused on youth empowerment through which young people are enabled to realise their potential, and at the same time prevent them from radicalisation, extremism, and drug and criminal involvement.

Peacebuilding approaches



© Peace Direct

Peacebuilding strategies to combat extremist narratives

Taylor O'Connor

Taylor O'Connor is a freelance consultant who has spent many years researching conflict and working closely with local peacebuilding organisations in Myanmar. His focus areas are peace education, youth empowerment and peacebuilding strategy. He has a personal interest in Buddhist philosophy and has integrated analysis of Buddhist narratives for peace and for conflict in much of his research.

Kyaw Hsan Hlaing

Kyaw Hsan Hlaing is the founder and director of Peace and Development Initiative (PDI), a youth-led peacebuilding organisation based in Rakhine State, Myanmar. In 2012, after the violence broke out in his native Rakhine State he dedicated himself fully to helping others heal from the trauma caused by the conflict, promoting social cohesion and building youth capacity for peacebuilding.

Narratives play a powerful role in the promotion of violent extremism and expansion of extremist ideology. Narratives are used to recruit people to commit acts of violence, to influence public perceptions, to mobilise political support, to influence public policy and for numerous other purposes supportive of the aims of extremist groups.

In Myanmar, hate groups have used extremist narratives to offer warped interpretations of Buddhist teaching in the service of ethno-nationalistic agendas and to incite violence and promote targeted political, economic and social marginalisation of Muslim communities.

We used the Myanmar case study (see page 48) to start off a discussion of how extremist narratives are constructed and used in other contexts around the globe and how peacebuilders combat these narratives. Participants shared case studies from Indonesia, the United States, Timor-Leste, Colombia, Ireland, Maldives, Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and other locations, and offered insights based on the work of peacebuilders in these locations.

Discussions noted narratives as a necessary component of violent extremism. In addition to the sharing of strategies that peacebuilders use to combat extremist narratives there was much discussion on the interplay between extremist groups and divisive political leaders and how both of these use narratives to justify the use of violence and advance political agendas.

Consider political campaign cycles and their contribution to extremist narratives

It was interesting to note that while it was implicit within the discussion prompt that extremist narratives would be produced by extremist groups, the discussion centred around the influence of xenophobic, divisive narratives produced by political leaders (often to mobilise political support) and the causal relationship between these narratives and various forms of violence including extremist violence, communal violence and politically motivated violence. Using an example from South Africa, Leigh Hamilton captured the idea echoed through numerous conversations in the thread.



Leigh Hamilton

Xenophobic attacks often occur when a local leader is vying for control in a power vacuum. Foreigners are a scapegoat in a resource scarce environment, and local leaders are easily able to deflect blame from the government to migrants.

Many cases were presented in how divisive narratives produced during political campaigns bolstered the growth of extremist groups and their vitality continued long after election season was complete and how political leaders labeling specific groups as terrorists, criminals, enemies, rapists, anti-Indian/anti-American/etc., or otherwise contributed to incidents of violence against targeted groups as well as to structural and social marginalisation of targeted minority groups. Anamika Gupta shared from the context of India:



Anamika Gupta

Over the last few years, there has been a perceptible shift in public perception against Muslims as being “the other”, “the enemy”, “possible terrorist”, “anti-national”, “anti-Indian”, thanks to the divisive politics of hate being played out at the Centre to divide the polity over vote banks. Iterations of such one-sided narratives can take deep roots in people’s minds and therefore become true in their mind.

Discussions noted political competition, both at national and local levels, as a driving force that produces and amplifies xenophobic messaging that bolsters extremist groups across a broad spectrum producing both parallel or oppositional messaging, in all cases contributing to the likelihood of violence. Election cycles and the potential of adjacent campaigns to produce and amplify divisive narratives should be considered by peacebuilders in an effort to plan more creative and effective strategies to counter divisive and extremist narratives.

Deconstruct and re-construct narratives

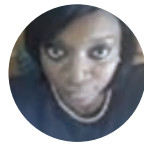
Participants discussed the power of hate speech as a force to dehumanise others that violence against them may seem justified or at least permissible. It was noted how extremist narratives and associated intolerant and divisive narratives play upon irrational fears relying on the ignorance of those susceptible to them. For peacebuilders, as a preventative measure it is critical to deconstruct these narratives as they emerge and to simultaneously produce narratives of peace, unity and coexistence.



Ashima Kaul

Intolerant narratives are mostly based on half-truths. A certain perception is built around half-truths backed by an ideology to produce a myth. The myth is then told over and over again to become the truth.

Numerous examples were used to illustrate this pattern and discuss concrete strategies peacebuilders can take to deconstruct extremist and intolerant narratives and produce narratives that promote peaceful coexistence. The following is an example shared from context of the United States:



Nneka Ikkelionwu

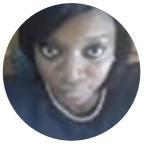
As has been pointed out above, narratives, including in the Nigerian context, centre around distortions of religious teachings as well as exploitation of people’s vulnerabilities. A disturbing trend which is not totally unrelated is the use of blatantly “fake news” to attempt to make groups feel marginalised or maltreated or to incite hatred. It might be true that counter-narratives have had limited success in the case of radicalised people.

Noted strategies that peacebuilders take to deconstruct extremist narratives include debunking myths, demystifying threats, speaking out against the distortion of religious teaching, exposing stereotypes, uncovering deceptive tactics of those producing extremist and intolerant narratives, breaking down propaganda and nationalist ideologies and discrediting narratives promoting a clash of civilisations ideology. Strategies to re-construct narratives to promote peaceful coexistence include humanizing marginalised groups, harmonizing diversity with strength and unity, promoting an understanding that violence and war are not innate or inevitable and promoting an inclusive group/national identity.

Consider the messenger

The final component for deconstructing and reconstructing narratives is to consider the messenger. For example, when a religious leader produces hate speech it is powerful when other religious leaders from the same group denounce it, or likewise when hate speech by political leaders is denounced by other leaders within the same political group. Participants noted the important role of government officials in combating hate speech as well as the influence of counter narratives by cultural icons, ex-combatants, community leaders, elders, teachers and others.

Nneka Ikkelionwu shared insight on messaging from former combatants from her research into the trajectories in and out of radicalisation in the Nigerian context:



Nneka
Ikkelionwu

Factor(s) that trigger de-radicalisation (of extremists) mostly have to do with them discovering some deception in the “ideology” of the group concerned. It was only after this discovery that they might become receptive to counter-narratives. It is necessary to use a combination of counter-narratives and narratives from former combatants to prevent violent extremism in youth. This could be achieved using social media.



Jared Bell

We need to breakdown the negative stereotypes by building links and contenting people across these group boundaries, discuss and highlight difference, but also legitimize how the groups have different aspirations and goals. In Ireland we try to increase the amount of good quality positive contact people have with the ‘other’ community to breakdown stereotypes and negative perceptions and build friendship and better intercommunity relations.

Create spaces for dialogue, learning and shared experiences

Participants noted that while combating extremist narratives with counter-narratives is useful and necessary, it does not get to the root of the problem. There was much discussion on how it is necessary that members of diverse or opposing groups have shared, positive experiences, in order to cultivate tolerance and understanding on a deeper level. Participants highlighted the role of shared experiences in humanizing the enemy and noted that conflict can be transformed when you bring people together around the table and get them talking.



Cathy Bollaert

Finding/creating opportunities to encounter the ‘other’ and experiencing their humanity is far more effective as it challenges our worldview and experience of reality in a deeply profound (way). Experience brings change that no amount of telling can.

Participants discussed a range of ways to create shared experiences, highlighting two main approaches:

1. Create facilitated experiences with small, targeted groups, and
2. Create opportunities for positive interaction amongst larger numbers of people in the general public.

Participants discussed the potential for dialogue spaces to transform the attitudes of parties in conflict and those producing divisive narratives, thus in many cases contributing to a shift in their narratives. Creating facilitated experiences with small, targeted groups can take numerous forms, as described by Jared Bell:

Participants also noted other facilitated experiences such as experiential education activities, community conferencing, workshops and community events, and added that listening and sharing stories are good approaches to begin encounters in dialogue spaces. Peacebuilders should always consider conflict sensitivities, work closely with trusted counterparts and place careful attention to who is brought into a dialogue space and how the dialogue is facilitated.

To influence positive transformations in community/public perceptions participants discussed numerous informal ways to increase the amount of good quality positive contact people have with diverse community members (or parties to conflict) in an effort to break down stereotypes and negative perceptions, build friendships and establish better intercommunity relations. Kara Hooser noted:



Kara Hooser

It is far easier to hate a homogenous ‘other’ group, and much harder to deny the humanity in a person that lives next door, sends their children to the same school as you, and lives a shared experience.

Participants discussed strategies for peacebuilders to analyse each unique context to note barriers to positive intergroup interaction and to find ways to promote interaction and more generally to reduce the separation between people. Some discussed integrating education systems and governmental institutions, while others noted the potential of cultural events to bridge divides and how when diverse communities join together they naturally establish positive relationships whilst producing and strengthening narratives of peaceful coexistence.

Peacebuilding strategies to combat extremist narratives in Myanmar

While Buddhist-majority Myanmar has a long and complex history of ethnic and religiously motivated violence, a fierce resurgence of religious and politically motivated hate crimes targeting Muslims has spread throughout the country in recent years.

One key factor fuelling the recent upsurge in anti-Muslim violence is the rapid spread of hate-speech media produced and widely circulated by an assortment of vocal Buddhist monks and associated hate groups. Core narratives of this media dehumanise Muslims and propagate conspiracy theories prompting fear of a Muslim takeover whilst offering warped interpretations of Buddhist teachings that justify violence and call on Buddhists to take action to protect Buddhism.

To get an understanding of their influence, a selection of evocative, divisive and unjustifiable assertions that highlight the general tone of said narratives is provided below:

- “Muslims are only well behaved when they are weak. When they are strong they are like a wolf or a jackal, in large packs they hunt down other animals.”
- “Every day in Rakhine State (ie. in Western Myanmar), Muslims enter houses and kill Buddhists. They don’t even do it to steal things – they just want to kill them.”
- “Muslims forcibly take young Buddhist girls as their wives. If the wives continue to practice Buddhism then they torture them every day.”
- “100 percent of rape cases in Burma are by Muslims; none are by Buddhists.”

The military in Myanmar benefits from increased levels of conflict because it justifies their control of governmental agencies and oversight of political processes. The government should play a role in combating hate speech in general, but in the Myanmar context government and military actors not only benefit from hate speech, but contribute to it vocally and with frequency in the media.

In the country, intolerant narratives in the mainstream both enable hate groups to mobilise young people to commit acts of (anti-Muslim)



violence and ensure that members of the general (Buddhist) public are either in support of violence targeting Muslims or at least are apathetic to it. One great challenge for local peacebuilders is combating such powerful, widespread and unchecked hate speech by providing alternative narratives to the general public that promote peaceful coexistence.

Local peacebuilders have taken numerous strategies to counter hate speech and promote narratives of peaceful coexistence. Organisations like Kalyana Mitta Foundation (KMF) and Peace and Development Initiative (PDI) use peace education approaches to transform the roots of intolerance while organisations like Panzagar and the My Friend Campaign work through social media to combat hate speech and provide alternative narratives.

KMF is a grassroots Buddhist youth organisation that works predominantly within the Buddhist Sangha and Buddhist community while PDI is a grassroots youth organisation working directly in Rakhine State where much of recent violent conflict has been centred.

Panzagar (translation: “Flower Speech”) operates through multiple social media channels to raise awareness of the dangers of hate speech and violent language online and offline while My Friend Campaign is a social media selfie campaign (ie. friends from different religious groups post selfies together) to promote tolerance and fight hatred and violence between Muslims and Buddhists.

The role of civil society in preventing violent extremism in the midst of war: lessons from Syria

Esin Efe

Esin Efe is a Turkish American who focused her master's degree studies on the Middle East, specifically on Syria. She has been working on programs supporting civil society in Syria for over three years. Any opinions expressed here are her own and do not reflect those of her employer's.

Independent civil society is a vital component of the struggle against violent extremism and a powerful presence to mobilise the community around moderate values, sometimes the only one. In my work for the Syria Regional Program, we work to support local civil society groups in Syria.

Civil society faces unique challenges in this environment. In such difficult circumstances progress is slow, donors are hesitant, and the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) is constantly under direct and indirect threat (see box on pages 52-53)

The challenges that CSOs face in Syria have brought up fundamental questions about working with CSOs in such environments: who can we work with? what kind of projects are suitable? what expectations are realistic?

In order to draw on lessons from other contexts, I asked participants in the online dialogue to discuss these issues. Some of the lessons might apply to CSOs looking to oppose regular armed groups, or specifically violent extremist groups. CSOs in Syria face threats from a wide range of such actors.

The conflict is highly complex and fragmented

The Syrian conflict defies a one-size-fits-all solution. Each area's experience differs based not only on who controls the area, but also on demographics and history. This means each area has its own windows of opportunity, requires different engagement methods, presents unique security risks, and will yield different results. As Benedetta Berti notes, based on work with a range of Syrian CSOs,



Benedetta Berti

the Syrian conflict is highly complex and fragmented and programs that can work in one area/community would fail elsewhere.

It is also critical to understand the regional and international dynamics. Broader efforts to curb violence, ensure civilian protection, and build peace are necessary. Furthermore, the situation cannot be understood by looking only at the present, without looking at the history. For example, in Syria, the current regime has been in power for over four decades, with very little room left for independent civil society to flourish. This has resulted in the current civil society actors to be mostly nascent and inexperienced.

Local dynamics with extremist groups must be understood well in order to have realistic expectations

Many CSOs are operating in areas where violent extremist groups operate, and may feel unable to operate entirely independently from such groups, or to challenge them openly. Therefore it is important for anyone who wants to support such CSOs to be aware that there are no bubbles in which organisations can operate. As Jeffrey Jonkers said:



Jeffrey Jonkers

We have to engage both with actors that limit and enable freedom and violence. If the goal is to 'influence communities away from such groups', cutting all ties with CSOs like these and thereby further isolating a community already under enormous pressure will only further expose a

community to the extremist groups we try to counter.

The CSO may only be coordinating with them in order to retain access, they may even publicly support some of their objectives in order to open venues for dialogue. Next to this, extremist groups themselves come in gradations: by coordinating with a somewhat less violent extremist group, a CSO can possibly undercut some of the attractiveness of a more violent one.

In other words, it is often not realistic to expect CSOs who operate in towns where extremist groups dominate to do the kind of public or black-and-white rejection Western donors are looking for. There are too many shades of gray that come with operating in the same space as these groups. This can lead to any number or kind of relationships based on the individual local dynamics, and it is often unrealistic to expect none.

Aside from being unrealistic, such efforts may even cause efforts to fall short of achieving their objective. Trying to erect a clear wall between the community and extremist groups may leave very critical grounds uncovered, particularly in areas where the groups are not alien implants but draw from local communities, and be exclusionary.

Based on her own experience working on Iraq and Syria, Mariam Tadros observed:



Mariam Tadros

Often in our attempt to be neutral and impartial, we avoid actually engaging the key institutions that affect people's sectarianism, theology, morality, and ethics.

It is also critical that people with a full range of views should be able to present them. As Alistair Legge noted:



Alistair Legge

Process is all-important. With a danger of being simplistic, an alternative for violently progressing your agenda is to be able to win the argument by presenting it rather than forcing it on people. Having CSOs with links can be seen as an opportunity for engagement.

To sum up, society cannot be neatly compartmentalised. While donors often have legal considerations to keep in mind regarding whether their support may potentially benefit designated terrorist organisations, as well as hefty procedural

requirements including at times the burden to prove otherwise, policy and strategy must be grounded in reality rather than aspiration.

Understand the security risks for activists

Having realistic expectations includes understanding the risks that civil society activists face. As Sawssan Abou Zahr notes:



Sawssan Abou-Zahr

We must keep in mind the physical dangers independent activists face in Syria. Civil society is vulnerable. For example the fate of Razan Zaitouneh and her colleagues remain unknown after almost four years of abduction. The danger extends beyond Syrian soils, there were incidents of intimidation and killings of Syrian activists in Lebanon and some Turkish border towns with Syria. So realistically speaking, for them to just survive the harassment of Assad regime and extremist groups is an act of heroism. For those trapped in Raqqa, the smuggling of videos and news from inside is a very risky task.

Drawing on her experience from Colombia, Eliana Jimeno shared the following lessons:



Eliana Jimeno

In the case of Colombia, during the most difficult years of the conflict (end of the 90's and early 2000's) communities that were under pressure by the FARC, the paramilitaries and the military (which was involved in multiple massacres) were at great risk when they mobilised or denounced the situation they were under or the multiple human rights violations.

Many local leaders have been and continue to be assassinated in the country because of their work due to the absence of protection. However, the testimonies these leaders collected and kept secure for years within their organizations are the basis for many cases today. This can tell us two things for the Syrian case:

- 1. Civilian protection is the key for CSO's and local leaders. Their work is necessary, but cannot be imposed. International programming should not put pressure on people to mobilize and denounce if they do not feel safe or don't want to do it. Their lives are at stake and it is a personal*

decision to risk it or not.

2. In the case of CSO's and members of the society who decide to mobilize it is key to find ways to secure their testimonies, the information they are gathering, for future prosecution and transitional justice processes. It is too early to know how the conflict will evolve in Syria, but it is key to prevent future denial of all the atrocities and local testimonies play a key role in this.

The faith component

More than one participant argued that if the violent extremism is based on faith, then any programming should have a significant faith-based component. While this assertion seems logical on its face, my experience in working with Syrian civil society indicates that is very complicated.

First, while the violent extremism may have a faith-based façade, it may not be the primary driver of recruitment for extremist armed groups. For example, one local resident who lives in the western Aleppo countryside recently estimated that half of Jabhat Fatah al Sham (previously known as the al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra) fighters would stop fighting if the Assad regime was to fall. This indicates that fighters are joining extremist armed groups, often the strongest and best funded, may be political or socioeconomic in some cases, rather than religious.

In other words, as Ramzi Merhej noted, extremism may also be a symptom of the problem rather than the problem itself:



Ramzi Merhej

The extremism is the result of different issues, we have to deal with these issues before reaching extremism (if by then still exists).

In this case, treating the symptom may not yield the long-term results that are desired and requires a combination of approaches.

Furthermore, religion can be a very sensitive subject. While there is certainly critical work to be done in this field, donors should be conscious of local perceptions of outside interference, particularly from Western donors, in such an intimate subject. Community ownership of any CSO effort is critical, particularly in this subject. Therefore, those intending to support such projects should keep these considerations in mind.

Despite the challenges, civil society remains vital

Continuing from the previous point about faith, and the motivation for people to join violent extremist groups, it is clear that an over-militarised approach to CVE is not the right solution to the problem.

An in-depth analysis of what motivates people to join such groups is essential, which will then require a unique approach. While a military response will certainly be necessary to a certain extent, it can only be a component of response.

For the rest, civil society's efforts are vital for both the analysis and the solution, which can include alternative narratives, education or livelihoods.

Investing in the diaspora/refugee community is also important

Whilst looking at the immediate needs of CSOs in Syria, we need to consider also the work of diaspora and refugee communities. These will be vital for longer-term peacebuilding. As Mohammad Shikh Aiyob points out:



Mohammed Shikh Aiyob

It is important at this stage to invest more in both the Syrian diaspora/refugees communities that have the potential of returning to the country at some point, and increase the knowledge of civilian initiatives on the possible role of CSOs in the future of the country.

Given the difficulties of working in a conflict environment and the refugee exodus, it is equally important and perhaps, in some cases, more productive to invest in the people who can be expected to return to their country after the conflict has ended. Where there are limitations on the ability of CSOs to have an immediate impact, this can provide a way to still invest in the country's future for the long run.

A glimmer of hope: how Syrian civil society works to build peace and resist violent extremism

The Syrian conflict has now lasted longer than World War II. The Syrian Centre for Policy Research estimated that as of February 2016, at least 470,000 people have died and 45% of the population has been displaced.

The brutality of the conflict has shocked the world. This has included the widespread use of sieges, indiscriminate aerial attacks, the use of banned and chemical weapons in civilian areas, and mass detention and torture of opponents by the Assad regime. The devastating brutality of ISIS, including its mass executions, has made headlines across the world. A UN-backed panel has said that both the regime and ISIS have committed crimes against humanity. The interventions of outside powers – including Iran, Turkey, the Gulf States, Russia and the United States – has only complicated the conflict and made a resolution seem more distant.

In the face of such onslaught, there has been one consistent glimmer of hope: the persistence and bravery of civil society activists and volunteers, working in the most dangerous circumstances imaginable.

Prior to 2011, Syrian civil society had been tightly controlled under the rule of Bashar Al Assad and his late father Hafez. The wave of protests across the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring included the flowering of a large number of Syrian civil society groups motivated by a desire for greater social and political rights. These ideals remain the driving motivation for many civil society groups, even if the descent into conflict has led to the marginalisation of nonviolent activists, as armed actors have taken centre stage.

While much of the regime-held areas are relatively secure today, it is nearly impossible for civil society to operate free from close scrutiny by the regime. In opposition-held areas, on the other hand, not only is there the threat of violence from regime airstrikes and ongoing military clashes, but a variety of armed groups, many of the most powerful ones falling on the spectrum from “very conservative/Salafist” to “extremist”.

These groups try (and often succeed) to interfere or dominate over civil society (via service

provision, or by dominating the justice or security sectors), making it difficult for non-violent governance bodies or civil society organisations to remain independent, or even continue to exist. For example, the Violations Documentation Center’s office in besieged Eastern Ghouta was recently attacked by supporters of extremist groups, and the offices many CSOs in Kurdish-held areas have been shut down by local authorities.

As can be seen, civil society continues to face severe challenges across the country, no matter who is in control of their area. Despite these challenges, civil society actors do continue to push back against armed groups, with varying degrees of success.

The best known Syrian civil society initiative is the Syria Civil Defence [or White Helmets]. In opposition-held areas these volunteer rescue workers form an impartial, humanitarian organisation that has saved more than 95,000 lives since 2014. They are made up of volunteers from all walks of life. As well as undertaking search and rescue missions, volunteers also provide educational trainings to communities on how to stay safe. 194 volunteers have been killed while working for the White Helmets.

Civil society groups have sprung up to support local communities. One such example is the Center for Civil Society and Democracy in Syria. The organisation’s aim is to strengthen civil society and democracy and promote values such as freedom and justice. The Center organises discussion forums as well as workshops to train local councils and NGOs on election procedures, organisational development or civic leadership.

One of the organisations that specifically works to empower women is Mazaya. The centre, founded in 2013, strengthens civil society by organising a variety of women’s workshops reaching from sewing and finance to teaching language or computer skills. One of the centres also has a children’s centre, where about 130 children come together to overcome traumatic experiences through play and gain basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The increasing strength of violent extremist groups – primarily ISIS, but also Jabhat Al Nusra and other small armed groups – has severely threatened civil society groups. In ISIS-held territory, civil society groups have not been

able to openly challenge the group due to their extremely brutal suppression of any independent group. However, some - such as Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently - continue to operate clandestinely.

In other areas, local organisations have been able to organise public protests against other violent extremist groups, who typically have a lesser percentage of foreign fighters and have been more susceptible to local pressure. One recent example comes from Idlib where local organisations constantly pressured the extremist group Jeish al-Fateh until they agreed to allow local council elections.

In the face of a conflict of such brutality, the resilience of Syrian civil society offers some measure of hope for future peace. Whilst unarmed civilian groups have been unable to prevent the spread of the war, they have limited its impacts on the population, supported their communities and remain a vital part of any plan for future peace, reconstruction and reconciliation. They also remain a vital component of the struggle against violent extremism.

Further reading:

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Fighting fire with fire?

Patricia Andrews Fearon

Patricia Andrews Fearon is a social psychologist who researches emotion and cognition in violent extremism and intergroup conflict. She is a member of The IC Thinking Research Team based in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge as well as the Emotion and Emotion Regulation Laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley.

It has often been argued that peacebuilders and security strategists must “fight fire with fire” – producing counter-narratives that offer all of the simplicity, assuredness, and promises of glory offered by violent extremist recruiters. Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that violent extremists tend towards simple, black and white, dualistic thinking (in psychology, this can be studied empirically in terms of *cognitive complexity* or “*integrative complexity*”). There is also ample evidence for the efficacy of emotional rather than cognitive appeals when it comes to motivating *action*.

However, using this evidence to support ‘counter-narrative’ campaigns has been called into question by experts such as Dr. Harald Weirnböck who argues that, “Field practitioners always had to realise quickly and painfully: countering doesn’t work [...] For, if you approach this particular sector of our young people by countering them you will fail in no time [...] It is implied that we should copy the violent extremists in their method but then turn around the objective and ‘counter-radicalise’ the audience, as it were radicalise them in the opposite direction [...] Not only will these approaches fail, they are also likely to backfire and propel radicalisation.”

Here are a few things psychologists who study violent extremism can generally agree upon:

- The path towards radicalisation and violent extremism is marked by increases in categorical, black and white thinking, oversimplifying and separating the world into “us vs. them.” This cognitive style can be measured empirically as decreases in *integrative complexity* (IC).
- “Emotion works” – That is, emotive ‘hot cognition’ is more likely to lead to action than more deliberated, reasoned, ‘cold cognition.’
- Emotion and cognition are inextricably intertwined and can exert mutual influence upon one another (cognition can regulate emotion and emotion can influence cognition).

As a social psychologist, my aim is to bring scientific

rigor to the questions facing practitioners and policymakers. Since what is true in theory does not always translate into efficacy on the ground. For me, this consultation was an opportunity to gain insights from those on the front-line to help ensure that my research is asking the right kinds of questions.

I asked participants whether practitioners and policymakers should seek to use the power of simple narratives and emotion to their own ends, or whether we should be equipping communities and individuals with the cognitive and emotional skills that might make all forms of sensational propaganda less compelling. Alternatively, might there be a way to leverage both emotion and cognitive complexity together for peacebuilding?

It is important to note that many existing critiques of “counter-narratives” refer to state-led mass-media initiatives that aim to compete with violent extremist recruitment messaging and productions. Those separate, but related, lines of criticism call into question this strategy in terms of its platform, its source, and its mass media approach; however, the particular line of questioning presented here seeks more specifically to address the *cognitive* and *emotional* style of communication.

Drawing on work in a wide range of contexts, participants offered insights that I will attempt to integrate under the themes that emerged: the potential dangers and shortcomings of the ‘counter-narrative’ approach, peacebuilding alternatives to this approach, and finally, how there may still be some ways in which emotional appeals can responsibly promote cognitive complexity and resilience to violent extremism.

Dangers of counter-narratives

Idealistic objections

Unlike pragmatic critiques of the counter-narrative approach, which are chiefly concerned with whether or not counter-narratives “work,” the idealistic objections presented by many participants are more

concerned with whether these approaches align with democratic and peacebuilding ideals regardless of their efficacy.

As Matt Freear notes:



Matt Freear

Countering is not just about what works, it is a choice about how societies and nations want to be. In that sense, it soon becomes a conversation about how to transform conflict towards peaceful co-existence.

This view is echoed by Kieran Ford:



Kieran Ford

When we think in terms of peacebuilding, what kind of 'peace' is this counter-narrative producing? It is the exact same ideological work, and here we can think in terms of 'epistemic violence' that an extremist group is using. While this might put a halt to certain kinds of direct violence, what kind of peace do we get?

In other words, if counter-narratives undermine the pluralistic values we purport to protect, then is there any way to use these strategies with meaningful "success?"

Pragmatic Objections

These idealistic objections will be enough for many of us whose primary concern is robust, positive, lasting peace. For other critical actors, whose primary concern is victory over violent radical groups, the pressing question is that of efficacy. Does it work? Does it help neutralise the threat?

In answer to this question, the theme echoed by most participants was: no, not really.

As Colby Pacheco writes,



Colby Pacheco

There is no empirical evidence that counter-messages work. From my experience working on citizen engagement, this makes sense - nobody wants to be told what's good and what's bad.

Beyond inefficacy, there's some evidence that 'countering' propaganda can also backfire by compromising credibility, deradicalisation efforts, and sustainability.

As Tom Gillhespy writes:



Tom Gillhespy

I think it is very risky to try to counter a narrative and maintain a perception of impartiality and if you lose impartiality do you not then also lose your audience? So any attempt to do this must be very sensitively managed

Propaganda-like counter-narratives can backfire by eroding hard-earned trust from communities or even causing retrenchment in those already somewhat radicalised, especially when the counter-narratives fail to adequately reflect people's lived experiences. An appeal to democratic values in a reality devoid of any of the opportunities and benefits of democracy cannot possibly carry the same weight as a message that exploits the tangible experience of discrimination or injustice. Alistair Legge submits that:



Alistair Legge

We react to democratic ideals emotionally because we know what they mean to us, to our families, and our communities.

Other pragmatic concerns include the risk that black-and-white counter narratives, by demonizing those already radicalised, may damage the 'exit routes' for those who are considering leaving the radical groups.



Miranda Holmstrom

There's a difference between countering a narrative and providing an alternative narrative. The alternative narrative needs to provide 'a way out' for radicalised individuals that allows them to maintain a level of dignity.



Ramzi Merhej

These radicals are, at the end of the day, human beings, and defining them by their terror actions alone will always make the problem bigger.

Finally, even if these approaches could achieve some short-term success, they are deficient in terms of sustainability. Steven Leach points out that maintaining the black-and-white, extreme discourse just from different angle leaves people more vulnerable to "flipping" once again, and may do nothing to curtail recidivism. Tom Gillhespy also notes that the efficacy of counter-narratives (unlike building cognitive complexity and critical thinking skills) will be constrained by time and context and on their own, may not promote future peace or protect against violence when the nature of the conflict takes a new shape.

Fortunately, our participants also offered lessons from their experience of what does work.

Peacebuilding alternatives to counter-narratives

“Promoting the gray lens”

Something that those who would argue for the use of simple, overconfident, fiery counter-narratives have correctly identified is that this style of thought, also known as low cognitive complexity or low integrative complexity (IC), is overrepresented among violent extremists. Those low in IC tend to be attracted to rhetoric that is also low in IC. However, in my opinion, one of the most encouraging findings from psychological research in IC is that it is not necessarily a fixed trait, but is open to change. Indeed, many of the strategies that we have found to be instrumental in raising integrative complexity in ‘IC Thinking interventions’ were also echoed in the comments from participants. For example, the importance of enabling participants to validate their own values and identities and drawing upon empathy and perspective taking to help promote what Colby Pacheco called skills in using the “gray lens” that leads away from black and white thinking. Also, recognizing that moving beyond “us vs. them” ways of thinking requires much more than mass messaging (not that there will not be some role for mass media to play). It requires something more akin to psychosocial support and training in metacognition, perspective-taking and emotion regulation that help people, as Matt Freear writes



Matt Freear

move beyond base emotions and seek to evoke reasoning, greater awareness and larger connections (eg. cognitive complexity, critical thinking, therapeutic engagement).

Furthermore, it is important that this process is experiential, and not just learned semantically, as Lisa Schirch notes:



Lisa Schirch

Humans act their way into new understanding.

“Addressing emotional needs”

Yet, many participants also pointed to ways in which the power of emotion can be utilised responsibly for peacebuilding. For example, emotions like empathy, compassion, and curiosity have a natural trajectory towards more complex thinking. Also, as Carolyn Williams reminds us, we should not ignore

how unmet “deeper emotional needs” (such as a need for purpose or belonging) may be exploited by violent extremist recruiters. Perhaps a key difference between responsible and exploitative uses of emotion is that one approach uses emotional propaganda to exploit emotional needs in order fulfill the goals of the radical group or state power, while another approach seeks to fulfill basic emotional needs in a way that supports the community and individual’s own goals.

This approach supports a lesson that was echoed by many participants such as Cathy Bollaert who writes that



Cathy Bollaert

people are getting fed up with being told what to think. People need their identities acknowledged and validated.

Tom Gillhespy describes effective approaches as those that (rather than pushing one particular perspective) focus on enabling people to



Tom Gillhespy

recognise when they were being manipulated and to understand that the behavior they participated in (or condoned) as a result of that manipulation was not in their best interests. From there, they can make their own decisions that – hopefully in most cases – would not result in violence.

Can appeals for tolerance be propaganda?

Throughout many of the discussions we heard echoes of caution that acknowledge the risk of our own ethnocentrism in promoting Western values. In trying to mount an ‘alternative’ rather than ‘counter’ narrative, many participants pointed to pluralism and tolerance as values that might be responsibly promoted. While I would certainly agree with the promotion of pluralism and its intrinsic complexity, I think even this agenda must be approached cautiously.

There is some evidence that even eloquent appeals to pluralism, while inspiring to those who of us who already cherish these ideals, might be interpreted as an “elitist” threat by others. For example, one study using live Google search data during an impassioned speech by U.S. President Barack Obama following the San Bernadino attack found that Islamophobic searches spiked during the parts of the speech that explicitly promoted diversity and tolerance. But, Islamophobic searches fell during the parts of the

speech that simply inspired curiosity about Muslim Americans by referring to Muslim athletes and Muslim U.S. soldiers.

In other words, even preaching tolerance can backfire if it is received as propaganda that fails to acknowledge the self-determination of individual thought and individuals' abilities to craft their own narratives according to their own values and goals.

A final important point to make is that while there may be idealistic and pragmatic reasons to avoid using the same simplified, us vs. them psychological style used by violent extremist groups, as Carolyn Williams reminds us, there is no reason peacebuilders should not be 'radical' in terms of their dedication to promoting peace—building peace through every responsible and constructive means possible with tireless effort and unwavering commitment.

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Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR) – Time to reverse the acronym?

Henri Bura Ladyi

Henri Bura Ladyi is the director of Centre Résolution Conflits in Beni (North Kivu) in the DRC. He is an experienced negotiator and has mediated peaceful solutions among the government, militia groups, church leaders, business people, international organisations, NGOs and ordinary people.

Laura Vermeer

International Programmes Officer, Peace Direct

The field of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) is well established as a key part of peacebuilding. Does DDR have lessons for those working on CVE programmes?

Peace Direct and its Congolese local partner organisation, *Centre Résolution Conflits* (CRC), shared their experiences working on DDR programmes with ex-combatants in North Kivu.

Contrary to the approach of many of the DDR programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), CRC has been implementing a community-led approach. CRC puts reintegration at the centre of DDR programmes and looks at the needs of the community as a whole, and not only those of the ex-combatants.

CRC has hosted a series of community activities where both the ex-combatants and other vulnerable groups of the communities worked together. In this way, CRC has been able to demonstrate how impactful and sustainable this type of DDR work is, especially when it comes to rebuilding social cohesion and trust among the members of a shattered community.

We wanted to share the CRC's approach with participants to see if this community-led approach to DDR would seem appropriate or contain lessons for practitioners in other countries. Equally, we were keen to learn from similar experiences in other contexts. We asked the participants to elaborate on what makes DDR work and, especially reintegration, successful. Below are three key learning's from the discussion that followed.

More efforts and thinking have to be put in the 'R' phase

Peace Direct and CRC's idea of community-led DDR exclude the linearity of traditional DDR process, where lots of energy and time are being spent for the two Ds, neglecting the importance of the R. Indeed, by the time traditional DDR processes arrive at the reintegration phase, funds and commitment have often ran out, consequently impacting the entire DDR process. Marisa O. Ensor agreed that:



Marisa O. Ensor

some (most) programs focus more on Disarmament and Demobilisation and fall short on Reintegration and Rehabilitation. This needs to be reversed, if we want to reduce the chances of recidivism.

As Benedatta Berti commented:



Benedatta Berti

Also working in DDR I agree on the strong emphasis on the non-linearity of the D-D-R process: without addressing economic reintegration from the outset, it is difficult to move towards meaningful disarmament.

Arsla Jawaid also agreed, drawing on experience from South Asia:



Arsla Jawaid

I find in my own experience, in South Asian countries, (e.g.: Sri Lanka) DDR has been focused much on the DD and less on R. Reintegration is a long term process, requiring not only tremendous after-care and exit programs but also sustainable funding.

Reintegration is especially important as it can be much more than economic reintegration. It offers an excellent opportunity to include some

de-radicalisation elements. Sharing his experience about DDR research in Nepal and elsewhere, DB Subedi says:



DB Subedi

DDR programmes must also explore how reintegration can eventually help ex-combatants disengage not only from their mobilisers but also from the ideology and attitudes underpinning the violent mobilisation.

Dr Gordon Clubb also agrees that economic or social reintegration is not enough in certain contexts. Indeed, for the entire DDR process to be effective, he argues that a component which facilitates (broad and narrower forms of) de-radicalisation in society should be included in the reintegration phase.



Dr Gordon Clubb

Social reintegration can be problematic because the former is being reintegrated back into the environment that caused radicalisation in the first place, and that the reintegrating community may itself be the 'radical milieu' which increases the risk of recidivism.

Ex-combatants are not the only vulnerable group that need help

Another aspect of CRC's community-led DDR model emphasises how important it is not to look at the ex-combatants as being the only vulnerable group that needs help. On the contrary, by neglecting the needs of the entire community and by focusing only on one specific group, the social fabric that is so badly needed in post-conflict settings is unlikely to be restored. It is therefore important to look at the community in its entirety and to explore ways of reconciliation. Sharing his experience about South Sudan, Jeffrey Jonkers states:



Jeffrey Jonkers

The focus CRC takes in its DDR work is a focus I am currently using in my work in South Sudan as well, where local organisations bring the community and ex-combatants together to jointly look at grievances and expectations instead of the too often one-sided ex-combatant focused approaches.

Pauline Zerla, talking about her DDR experience with former combatants of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the Central African Republic, says:



Pauline Zerla

I found that successful reintegration represents one of the most effective prevention mechanisms in conflict-affected communities, in particular when community reconciliation and social cohesion are put at the centre of the process.

In this regard, while this problem highlights the importance of taking into account the needs of the community as a whole, this issue also highlights the importance of transitional justice mechanisms and post-conflict psychosocial care. Talking about the findings of her research on the rehabilitation and reintegration of former Boko Haram insurgents in North East Nigeria, Florence Kayemba states:



Florence Kayemba

Some communities have made it clear that they will not accept the former insurgents into their domains and have threatened to launch reprisal attacks, which has made it clear that it is important the transitional justice mechanisms need to take precedence in promoting social reintegration. The importance of trauma healing, reconciliation, retributive and restorative justice cannot be under stated.

DDR programs should not be run independently and have to be part of a bigger post-conflict infrastructure

On the subject of reintegration being linked to de-radicalisation, several participants also pointed out the fact that DDR programmes cannot be effective if they are not coupled with other post-conflict programmes. Countering violent extremism and preventing re-radicalisation is too complex to only be the result of one specific set of activities. Lisa Schirch claims:



Lisa Schirch

DDR is important to addressing violent extremism. But SSR (security sector reform) is even more important to preventing violent extremism. While SSR and DDR often go hand in hand, most of the conversation in the CVE world is on DDR, and not SSR.

This argument also implies the fact that the government has a role to play in DDR process as there is a need to have both the government and other stakeholders sitting at the same table and working to solve their own issues. Emphasising the importance of government's buy-in, Luc Chounet-Cambas states:



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Luc Chounet-Cambas

One shouldn't try to "DDR" groups which are not part of a political settlement and/or whose agenda doesn't lend itself to negotiation. In that case, DDR is not an effective approach, it's not the right tool. DDR can be a practical tool to curb some of the violence which happens in a given country. But it should be seen for what it is, a methodology to disarm armed groups as part of a peace process, which can be effective provided that other programmes are put in place to tackle broader questions of insecurity.

This argument also echoed Florence Kayemba's comment on the fact that CRC community-led models would probably not be as successful in North East Nigeria where no peace agreement has been signed between the insurgents and the government:



Florence Kayemba

DDR normally begins when there has been a political settlement/ peace agreement with combatants who also agree on the terms of the DDR process.

The discussion has provided CRC with a useful affirmation of the importance of a strong focus on 'reintegration' as part of the DDR process. It has also given us some useful guidance on issues to consider as to how the DDR process can and must be linked to other activities as part of peace processes.

Further reading

- Peace Direct (2015): Locally Led Stabilisation And Peacebuilding In Congo, online: www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Locally-led-stabilisation-and-peacebuilding-in-Congo-learning-summary.pdf

EXIT-ing extremist groups: lessons from Germany

Is there something in common in the appeals and methods of both far-right and Islamic violent extremist groups? And if so can similar techniques be used to counter recruitment to such groups? The experiences of two linked programmes in Germany suggest as much.

There are more than 25,000 people actively engaged in right-wing extremism in Germany. At least 184 people have been killed due to right-wing violence since reunification in 1990. EXIT-Deutschland is a German initiative by ZDK Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur gGmbH that supports people to exit right-wing extremism and build a new life.

Their work is based upon the values of personal freedom and human dignity. EXIT-Deutschland promotes democracy and supports people who want to quit right-wing extremism in their new beginning and in the revision of history. This initiative is politically impartial and independent of state agencies, police, intelligence agencies and the judiciary. EXIT-Deutschland is dedicated to absolute discretion and confidentiality.

EXIT-Deutschland does not offer financial or social assistance or protect offenders from criminal prosecution. However, it does help people who want to leave extreme right-wing ideology behind them, to reorient, regain personal freedom and autonomy and also assists families of right-wing extremists who are still active in this scene. Wichmann, a counsellor at EXIT Deutschland says “It is necessary to discuss [with the person who is exiting] what was the meaning of the ideology, what was the goal and what is your goal now [...] We have to rebuild a new identity, a positive new identity looking forward.”

A famous project of EXIT-Deutschland, “Rechts gegen Rechts” (“Rightwing against rightwing”), turned a demonstration of extreme right-wing people into an involuntary charity run. For every meter the extremists walked during this demonstration, €10 were donated to EXIT-Deutschland. In that way donations of €20,000 were raised for EXIT-Deutschland. The sum was donated by individuals and local businesses for Rechts gegen Rechts projects on the basis of a ‘successful’ charity run.

This successful campaign was then also extended to the online world, where hate-postings can be flagged and trigger a donation of €1 for the organisations Aktion Deutschland Hilft and EXIT-Deutschland. The logic behind these campaigns is that either right-wing extremists stop their actions or their behaviour will actually contribute to a more peaceful, inclusive society.

EXIT-Deutschland is also a partner of another initiative of ZDK, called HAYAT-Deutschland. Based on the experiences and the success of EXIT-Deutschland, HAYAT-Deutschland was founded in 2011 as a counselling centre for people who became radicalised by or attached to Islamic violent extremist groups, including those who travel to fight in Syria or elsewhere. Additionally, this initiative offers consultancies for family members and any other people who are in contact with radicalised persons and supports persons who return from conflict regions. The organisation clearly distinguishes a strong, lived faith from an ideology which can result in violence and terrorism.

Besides German, the counselling services are also available in English, Turkish, Farsi and Arabic. Like EXIT-Deutschland, HAYAT-Deutschland is also dedicated to confidentiality and anonymity. The work is based on individual assessments and includes counselling, which aims at preventing, stopping or reversing the process of radicalisation. It also supports persons who return from conflict regions with reintegration into a safe social environment.

Berczyk, a HAYAT counsellor, points to the similarities between EXIT’s approach to countering right-wing extremism and approaches to counter Islamic violent extremism: “There is a commonality between extremist ideologies, but also, if we are talking about sects and cults, there are certain things that all these groups have in common.”

Further reading:

- EXIT-Deutschland: www.exit-deutschland.de/
- HAYAT-Deutschland: www.hayat-deutschland.de/
- Temple-Reston, Dina (2016): Methods for Reforming Neo-Nazis Help Fight the Radicalization of Muslims. In: National

Public Radio, online: www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/05/10/477043520/methods-for-reforming-neo-nazis-help-fight-the-radicalization-of-muslims

- Brenner, Yermi (2017): How to Leave the Neo-Nazis in Two Easy Lessons - and One Hard One. In: Aktionskreis EXIT-Deutschland, online: www.ak-exit.de/how-to-leave-the-neo-nazis-in-two-easy-lessons-and-one-hard-one/



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This image of EXIT's online campaign against hate-speech reads "Hating for the right reason". It subtly suggests that people are triggering donations by posting hateful comments on social media.

The role of former combatants in countering violent extremism

Dr Gordon Clubb

Do former combatants have a positive role in preventing and countering violent extremism?

The prospect of ISIS foreign fighters returning from Iraq and Syria has prompted policy discussions on their potential threat and prospects for their re-integration. However there has been less discussion on how the return and re-integration of former combatants will impact upon

violent extremism more generally, particularly among social groups who are attracted to violent extremism and becoming combatants. In this context, there has been a recent debate on whether former combatants can play a positive and active role in countering violent extremism.

The role of former combatants in countering violent extremism has typically been envisaged in limited terms, namely in the development of measures ensuring against their recidivism. Some CVE work is based on the involvement of "defectors". These are former combatants who disengage individually in the course of a campaign

and contribute to CVE through intelligence sharing and demoralisation of the active combatants, often producing counter-narratives whether in the form of books or pamphlets.

While defectors may be more complete in their renouncing of the goals or methods of the violent extremists, they may also face suspicion in their communities. Their narratives may find less resonance among hard-to-reach social groups attracted to violent extremism. For this reason, recent literature has pointed to a more active role of former combatants in CVE: research on DDR in Northern Ireland has highlighted the positive role former combatants can play in conflict transformation and prevention of violence.

When the leadership of violent extremist groups such as the Provisional IRA or ETA decided to change their strategies, some members became actively involved in work that they view as community work or peacebuilding. While such activities and accompanying narratives are claimed to be more effective in targeting hard-to-reach communities, these tend to come at the expense of victims and the accompanying narrative tends to be more conditional in its denunciation of violence.

Furthermore, the reintegration of former combatants has posed particular problems where there is little community support or has been perceived as marginalising victims or in shifting attention away from more high-risk groups, such as young people who may be on the cusp of engaging in violence. Others might argue that former combatants may not only be ineffective but actually counter-productive as, even if being disengaged or unsupportive of violence, their promotion of a radical ideology can encourage engagement in violent extremism. However, this debate has focused too much on ideology as a determinant of former combatants playing a positive or negative role in CVE

The context may shape the role that former combatants play in CVE work more significantly than ideology. In Northern Ireland, former combatants find an important role due to structural factors such as interface areas, traditions of marches which are opportunities for violence flaring up, the ethnic divide and the weakness of the state in penetrating these spaces in terms of a shared identity, legitimacy or policing.

The strength and pre-existing bonds of the former

combatant network provided them the capacity to engage in CVE-like activities and the presence of rival former combatant networks incentivised co-operation and moderation. The relationship between the 'radical milieu' and former combatants is more physical and geographically defined in Northern Ireland – this cannot be said for many other types of former combatants.

While this debate is continuing and needs deepening – particularly on testing the resonance of former combatant narratives- former combatants *can* play a positive role in countering violent extremism depending on the network structure, not solely whether they have de-radicalised.

Further reading

- Alonso, Rogelio/ Diaz Bada, Javier (2016): What Role Have Former ETA Terrorists Played in Counterterrorism and Counterradicalization Initiatives in Spain. In: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Vol. 39, no. 11, pp. 982-1006.
- Clubb, Gordon (2014): From Terrorists to Peacekeepers: The IRA's Disengagement and the Role of Community Networks. In: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. Vol. 37, no. 10, pp. 842-861.
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CVE and livelihoods

Abdullahi Isse

Abdullahi Isse is Deputy Executive Director of the Social-Life and Agricultural Development Organization (SADO), where he oversees the implementation of SADO programmes in Somalia and Kenya including peacebuilding and counter violence initiatives. He is a development economist by profession and worked for different international organisations including the ICRC, UNICEF, UNHCR and US institutions.

Daniel Tamene

Finance Manager (Programmes), Peace Direct

In Kismayo, Somalia, Peace Direct is working with a national organisation (SADO) to address the problems of youth unemployment and conflict in the town. High levels of unemployment among young people have left them vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremist groups.

The project is based on the idea that a lack of employment for youth in areas of persistent violence severely limits opportunities for improved livelihood. This means that young people are at a high risk of joining extremist groups leading to deeper poverty and social exclusion.

The approach in Kismayo is threefold. First, vulnerable young people are provided with vocational training and post training support. Second, young people receive civic education training to instill in them a sense of civic responsibility, which they are able to practice through peacebuilding activities. Finally, we aim to facilitate an enabling environment that is more conducive to peace, by delivering capacity building measures for existing peace structures such as local peace committees, as well as training in conflict transformation for local peacebuilders.

In this way we hope that economic and social empowerment go hand in hand, building up the resilience of vulnerable young people who can become agents of peace in their community.

As part of the online consultation we shared this project with the participants, and invited them to share their knowledge and experience of the role livelihoods play in CVE.

Providing livelihood opportunities for vulnerable youth

Many of the participants stressed the link between livelihoods and participation in violent extremist groups.



Abdullahi Isse

It is possible to stimulate peace and stability by enabling economic development and prosperity through livelihood support and provision of vocational training programs aimed at generating livelihood skills.

Yusuf Omar, a Somali based practitioner, argues that unemployed young Somali people, who constitute two-thirds of the Somali population, are faced with the options of either fleeing the country or the risk of joining extremist groups:



Dr Yusuf Sheikh Omar

The reality is that youth unemployment in Somalia is a ticking bomb and when youth feel frustrated because of a lack of basic life and employment opportunities they become vulnerable to join extremist Al-Shabab, ISIS, and other criminal syndicates such piracy or risk themselves by taking dangerous boat journey to the West where thousands of them drown in the high seas.

Steven Leach noted that studies show that:



Steven Leach

the "terrorists" of the 1990s and until the beginning of the Iraq War came from affluent families, while current trends suggest that most "VEs" engaged in larger conflagrations (Somalia, Iraq/Syria, Libya) are engaged for their livelihoods.

Some consider that the focus on livelihoods is over emphasised in solving the problem of violent extremism. When the income generation is not synchronised with other efforts peace and stability will not be achieved. Nicholas Dickson argues:



Nicholas Dickson

In a way, I would say that only generational change with constant inputs coordinated across sectors, in a way that supports good governance ... MIGHT have a chance at generating wide spread peace and stability.

Increasing a sense of inclusion and citizenship through civic education and peacebuilding

There is good literature that warns against using poverty as a sole driving explanation as to why people join or support armed groups, or become violent extremists. There has been an indication that livelihoods are a critical factor, combined with a host of factors motivating people to participate in extremism.

Marisa O. Ensor cited Mercy Corps reiterating that a combination of secondary education with civic engagement opportunities led to a decrease of youth's propensity to support violence, and also reduced their propensity to participate in violent acts.

While livelihoods play an important role in creating a stable and healthy lifestyle it cannot achieve peace and stability as a standalone programme. In this regards Chinwe Oguchukwu Ikpeama argues in favour of complementary development and CVE activities by stating:



Chinwe
Oguchukwu
Ikpeama

I think development programs and CVE activities should complement each other especially in impoverished and conflict torn states. Livelihood generation would go a long way in employing the citizens while the CVE programs educate and enlighten them on the dangers of violent extremism.

In a similar manner Catherine Bartenge contends that income generating activity is a useful step in the peace process, while a lack of its recognition feeds in to despair that leaves youth to manipulation:



Catherine
Bartenge

The tragedy is that while the young people's energy, creativity and resilience are not adequately recognized by government, civil society and international actors, their assets may be well recognized by those who seek to manipulate them.

Therefore we must recognise that a lack of livelihoods and opportunities can lead not only to poverty, but also to a sense of social exclusion. Peace Direct's partner in Somalia believes that providing young people with civic education training, thereby instilling a sense of civic responsibility in them, will enable youth to feel more included within their community. Perhaps this is why the lead should be taken by the local community in the development of programmes to tackle violent extremism. This is to mean that:



Steven Leach

the security actors driving CVE are not well positioned to assess, endorse, and implement development projects. The risk is, rather than attracting security dollars to development, which the security sector becomes the arbiter of development decisions.

Increasing the capacity and impact of local CSOs

Peace Direct's local partner in Somalia (SADO) aims to facilitate an enabling environment that is more conducive towards peace, by delivering capacity building training for existing peace structures (such as local peace committees), as well as training in conflict transformation for local organisations. This approach was echoed by many of the participants.



Florence
Kayemba

It is important to note that conflicts are rarely mono causal and therefore generating livelihoods needs to be accompanied by programmes and institutions that can help resuscitate the economy by creating an enabling environment and where there have been existing conflicts along ethnic, religious and resource control, it is important that these issues are addressed.

Conclusion

It is clear that the lack of alternatives for youth and excluded groups may provide an incentive to join violent extremist groups. This means that the provision of livelihoods programmes are an important component of CVE in such contexts. At the same time, it's vital that livelihoods are not viewed in isolation. What is more important is the combination of effort in providing income generating schemes that provide better livelihood and appropriate citizenship training in an enabling environment and a capable civil society.

Participants suggest that violent extremism can be countered by strengthening the resilience of communities and individuals. Strengthening resilience means taking a holistic and social approach to countering violent extremism by directly targeting those at risk of becoming violent extremists.

This approach includes offering alternative pathways to violent extremism that include creating resilience in vulnerable communities through livelihood training and through increasing incomes.

Biographies



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Sawssan Abou-Zahr

Sawssan Abou-Zahr is a Lebanese journalist, editor and consultant. She covers issues related to the Arab Spring, women, Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as radical Islamist movements. She has written features on human rights issues and peacebuilding based on field research in Afghanistan and Libya. She is local peacebuilding expert for Peace Direct in Lebanon.



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Henri Bura Ladyi

Henri Bura Ladyi is the director of Centre Résolution Conflits in Beni (North Kivu) in the DRC. He is an experienced negotiator and has mediated peaceful solutions among the government, militia groups, church leaders, business people, international organisations, NGOs and ordinary people.



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Gordon Clubb is a Lecturer in International Security at the University of Leeds. He has published a book on Social Movement De-Radicalization which looked at the transformation of the Irish Republican movement, and two articles on the role of former combatants in Northern Ireland in conflict transformation and countering violent extremism.



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Anne Connell

Anne Connell is Assistant Director of the Women and Foreign Policy program at the Council on Foreign Relations, where she focuses on work related to women's roles in conflict prevention and resolution.



Luc Chounet-Cambas

Luc Chounet-Cambas

Luc Chounet-Cambas' background is in disarmament, ceasefire and peace processes, in contexts as varied as Afghanistan, Indonesia, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sudan. Luc is an advisor to Promédiation, a France-based mediation network. Until recently, he lived in Lebanon where he

headed the MENA portfolio for Integrity, a consulting firm that specialises in programme design and implementation in fragile environments. Luc is now in the process of relocating to South-East Asia.



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Lt Col Nicholas Dickson is an Active Duty Civil Affairs Officer in the United States Army currently assigned to the 85th Civil Affairs Brigade as the Deputy Commander. His work experiences include partnering with efforts throughout Central America, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia.



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Esin Efe

Esin Efe is a Turkish American who focused her master's degree studies on the Middle East, specifically on Syria. She has been working on programs supporting civil society in Syria for over three years. Any opinions expressed here are her own and do not reflect those of her employer's.



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Dr Marisa O. Ensor is an applied socio-legal anthropologist and human rights scholar and practitioner currently based at Georgetown University's Justice and Peace Studies Program. Her areas of specialisation include forced displacement, human rights, political conflict, extremist violence, peace and security, and international development, with a focus on gender and youth.



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Patricia Andrews Fearon is a social psychologist who researches emotion and cognition in violent extremism and intergroup conflict. She is a member of The IC Thinking Research Team based in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cambridge as well as the Emotion and Emotion Regulation Laboratory at the University of California, Berkeley.



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Kyaw Hsan Hlaing is the founder and director of Peace and Development Initiative (PDI), a youth-led peacebuilding organisation based in Rakhine State, Myanmar. In 2012, after the violence broke out in his native Rakhine State he dedicated himself fully to helping others heal from the trauma caused by the conflict, promoting social cohesion and building youth capacity for peacebuilding.



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Nora Lester Murad, PhD, is an activist and writer in Jerusalem, Palestine. She co-founded Dalia Association, Palestine's community foundation (www.dalia.ps), to promote self-determination in development. She co-founded Aid Watch Palestine (www.aidwatch.ps) to mobilise Palestinians to hold aid actors accountable, especially in the Gaza Strip. She writes about international aid, community philanthropy and life under military occupation at www.noralestermurad.com



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Taylor O'Connor is a freelance consultant who has spent many years researching conflict and working closely with local peacebuilding organisations in Myanmar. His focus areas are peace education, youth empowerment and peacebuilding strategy. He has a personal interest in Buddhist philosophy and has integrated analysis of Buddhist narratives for peace and for conflict in much of his research.



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About Peace Direct

Peace Direct works with local people to stop violence and build sustainable peace. We believe that local people should lead all peacebuilding efforts, and this report is the fourth in a series that will canvas local views on violent conflicts around the world in an effort to highlight local capacities for peace and local expertise.

For more information on the reports, please contact us.

www.peacedirect.org

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