This policy brief compares and contrasts four approaches to insurgency, terrorism and violent extremism. The table below contrasts each approaches’ underlying assumptions including their conflict assessments, theories of change and intervention designs. A “theory of change” (ToC) is a statement – a strategic narrative – describing how a driving or mitigating factor identified in a conflict assessment can be changed with some type of intervention to achieve a desired impact – in this case preventing or stopping violence. Most organizations work from an implicit theory of change. Agencies often design programs based on untested assumptions about what will foster change rather than using research to design evidence-based programs. This policy brief uses the concept of ToCs to make the underlying assumptions in each approach more explicit. *(See also our Theories of Change Policy Brief for more detail)*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Conflict Assessment</th>
<th>Theory of Change and Intervention Design</th>
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| **Local Peacebuilding** | Insurgent and terrorist groups exist and thrive when an elite-captured state actively excludes and discriminates against certain groups and lacks legitimacy due to kleptocracy and corruption. | Violence can be prevented and stopped through these efforts:  
  - *Engage insurgent and terrorist groups* in political dialogue to reduce their reliance on violent communication and address their legitimate grievances  
  - *Correct perceived state corruption, discrimination and exclusion* through provision of services (security, justice, healthcare, etc.) to all groups to improve state-society relations.  
  - *Support civil society’s capacity* to assert political grievances and participate in inclusive governance |
| **Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)** | Violent extremists thrive when they can recruit and mobilize support from local communities. | Violence can be prevented and stopped through these efforts:  
  - *Deter and disrupt* recruitment or mobilization  
  - *Build resilient communities*, immune to recruitment by violent extremists, by catalyzing community-based programs |
| **Counter-insurgency (COIN)** | Instability is a result of insurgents who threaten states. | Insurgents can be defeated and contained through these efforts:  
  - *Destroy, isolate, and undermine insurgents and their narratives*  
  - *Win over the hearts and minds of the population* to deny popular support for the insurgency. This includes efforts to:  
    - Limit civilian casualties resulting from COIN attacks while protecting civilians from insurgent attacks  
    - Increase government legitimacy via governance and development efforts |
| **Counter-terrorism (CT)** | Terrorism takes place where there is a lack of state capacity to maintain a monopoly of force. | Terrorism can be prevented and stopped through these efforts:  
  - *Deter, destroy, and isolate groups that use terror*  
  - *Train and equip* state security forces to fight terrorist groups  
  - *Increase the state’s capacity* to prepare, prevent, protect, and respond to terrorism  
  - *Pacify and prevent civil society* from supporting terrorist groups |

Contradictory Theories of Change

In practice all four approaches are often used within the same setting. Ideally, all efforts to stop violence would complement each other. However, in practice, these four approaches seem to be conflicting with and undermining each other. While peacebuilding and CVE empowers and supports civil society, CT often assumes pacification of civil society is necessary. While peacebuilding perceives the underlying problem as the state’s lack of monopoly of legitimacy and poor state-society relations, COIN and CT view the underlying problem as the state’s lack of a monopoly of force. While peacebuilding focuses on root causes, CVE, COIN, and CT focus on the factors driving violence. While peacebuilding focuses on finding sustainable political solutions, CVE, COIN, and CT focus on operational and tactical approaches to disable immediate threats.

Somalia: CT efforts seek to isolate Al Shabaab, viewing the armed group itself as the source of violence in Somalia. CVE and COIN attempt to undermine their local support by winning the hearts and minds of the local population. In contrast, peacebuilding attempts to foster moderation and responsible governance by engaging Al Shabaab in dialogue.

Kenya: CT efforts seek to isolate and undermine local Al Qaeda affiliates in Kenya. COIN attempts to undermine their local support. CVE seeks to build community resilience. In contrast, peacebuilding seeks larger Kenyan government reforms to address corruption, economic inequality, and land reform, which are drivers of extremist violence.

Nigeria: CT efforts seek to isolate and undermine Boko Haram in Nigeria and to aid the Nigerian government’s capacity to exert a monopoly of force. Peacebuilding addresses Nigerian government corruption, its perceived discrimination, human rights violations, and lack of legitimacy among the Nigerian population to address the root causes and drivers of violent extremism.

Research suggests violent extremism is on the rise, despite over a decade of investing primarily in CT and COIN. More than 90% of all terrorist attacks occur in countries that have gross human rights violations. In contrast to the lack of evidence of the CT and COIN ToCs, RAND Corporation research (see Figure 1) affirms that most terrorist groups terminate via political processes, not by military force. This seems to support a peacebuilding theory of change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Seek evidence-based policies by correlating research on terrorism and insurgency with theories of change, to align resources with effective strategies.

- Support political processes that engage all stakeholders, improve state-society relations, and address underlying grievances.

- Consider whether the unintended consequences of implementing CT policy could undermine CVE and peacebuilding approaches. Will short term tactical efforts undermine long-term policy goals?

- Make peacebuilding legal. Current counterterrorism laws and policies often obstruct peacebuilding, civilians are prohibited from teaching negotiation or nonviolent mechanisms for expressing political grievances to groups designated as terrorists on official lists.

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The Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) is a global membership association of nearly 100 peacebuilding organizations, and a network of more than 15,000 people developing processes for change in complex conflict environments. AfP amplifies the strengths of its members and works collaboratively on issues that are too large for any one organization to tackle by itself.

The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC) is a partnership of the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP), CDA Collaborative Learning, Mercy Corps, Search for Common Ground (SFCG). This brief was made possible by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Through whole-of-community efforts, the PEC aims to support greater methodological rigor, improve the culture of transparency and learning, and foster the use of evidence to inform peacebuilding policy.

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Figure 1: How Terrorists Groups End by Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, How Terrorist Groups End (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corp. 2008), 19.

Resources:

