Preventing violent extremism is a complex issue that requires addressing fundamental social problems and political drivers through a whole-of-society comprehensive approach.

In spite of the tremendous resources the U.S. has invested in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency initiatives, violent extremist movements are growing. Hard security tools alone cannot defeat violent extremism. A whole-of-society approach that addresses fundamental social and political drivers of extremism must be an integral part of any countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy.

Violent extremism (VE) refers to actions advocating, engaging in, or supporting violence to further ideologically motivated social, economic or political objectives. Radicalization is the process by which individuals may become violent extremists. Counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism are different approaches that are not linear or mutually exclusive; as shown below, these approaches address violent extremism at different points of the radicalization process and engagement in terrorist acts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Assessment</th>
<th>Theory of Change and Intervention Design</th>
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<tr>
<td>Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)</td>
<td>CVE encompasses the preventative aspects of counterterrorism as well as interventions to undermine the attraction of extremist movements and ideologies that seek to promote violence.</td>
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<td>- Address the drivers of the conflict and implement conflict transformation and reconciliation programming.</td>
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<td>- Create resilient communities, by building immunity to recruitment by violent extremists, by catalyzing community-based programs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Deter and disrupt recruitment or mobilization and assist with reintegration of former violent extremists.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counter-Terrorism (CT)</td>
<td>Terrorism takes place in countries experiencing or involved in state-sponsored political violence, or violent conflicts.¹</td>
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<td>- Deter, disrupt and isolate groups that use terror.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Train and equip state security forces to fight terrorist groups</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Increase the state’s capacity to prepare, prevent, protect and respond to terrorism.</td>
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<td>- Interdict and prosecute through law enforcement.</td>
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RAND Corporation² and independent researchers³ have found that most terrorist groups are pacified via political processes and policing, not through military force or military victory over these groups. Furthermore, UNDP found⁴ that members of VE groups often attribute their support for extremist violence to feeling wronged by both a skewed global system and governments either unable or averse to advocating for their interests within this system. Hard security measures by local governments and foreign actors like the United States can legitimize this narrative and foment violence. In the US domestic realm as well as abroad, the CVE strategy risks conflating community strengthening and security objectives. Within Muslim communities, particularly in Minneapolis, Boston, and LA, the fear that CVE programs are mixing surveillance and policing creates distrust. Thus, a peacebuilding theory of change that values community perspectives, and employs complex, longer-term social issues and not just short-term, military objectives is foundational to effective prevention of VE.

Peacebuilding Approaches

Peacebuilding approaches offer a broader understanding of the root causes of violent extremism. Extremist groups exist and thrive when a state lacks legitimacy, and actively excludes and discriminates against particular groups. Recent research counters the conventional wisdom that terrorism is driven by poverty and lack of economic opportunity – far more nuanced issues of identity, alienation and grievance fuel violent extremism. There are significant correlations across the studies of political violence, terrorism and gang violence that should inform CVE policy.

Broadly, surveys\(^1\) and in-depth interviews\(^\text{ii}\) show that the most consistent drivers of these forms of violence include perceptions of marginalization and injustice, exposure to violence, feelings of isolation, and the belief that joining a violent movement holds the best prospects of achieving justice or purpose. Aggression toward or systemic exclusion of specific communities often fuels grievances and increases propensity towards violence. Peacebuilders can mitigate violence by engaging insurgent, terrorist and extremist groups in political dialogue to reduce their reliance on violent communication and address their professed grievances. It is also crucial to engage entire communities, and not just those members involved or “at-risk” of becoming involved in VE groups. These issues are addressed by peacebuilding approaches toward preventing or deterring violent extremism, including:

1. Responding to perceived state corruption, discrimination, and exclusion through provision of services (security, justice, healthcare, etc.) inclusive of all groups, to improve state-society relations;
2. Supporting civil society’s capacity to address political grievances and participate in inclusive governance;
3. Addressing the gap between local-level and national-level CVE activities, to ensure that community building is accompanied by sufficient coordination on national-level governance reforms, social inclusion and accountability by governments and institutions; and
4. Ensuring tolerance and conflict transformation are central aspects of prevention programs. \(^\text{iii}\)

Recommendations

- Develop evidence-based policies by correlating research on violent extremism to align resources with effective strategies and programming. These strategies should include programs which focus on addressing the needs of the entire community, rather than individuals thought to be “at-risk”.
- Ensure that security actors and government CVE programming work in tandem with the non-governmental peacebuilding community on CVE design and implementation across all priority areas, not just communication.
- Support political processes that engage all stakeholders, improve state-society relations, and address the actual underlyi
- ング grievances and drivers of conflict.
- Expand exemptions for peacebuilding in terrorist material support legislation.
- Develop USAID “off-ramp” programs to rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-recruits, incorporating principles of Do No Harm, gender analysis, age-appropriate programming, and context sensitivity. Set evaluation outcomes according to local priorities rather than US national security goals.
- Encourage the Department of Justice to issue guidelines like the Good Samaritan laws which protect those who engage with those considering VE to dissuade them, making clear that those who intervene to help others are not penalized for it through prosecution, watchlisting, or surveillance.

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\(^\text{iii}\) For example, Cure Violence works in cities in the US, Latin America and the Middle East to stop the spread of violence by detecting and interrupting conflicts, identifying and treating the highest risk individuals, and changing social norms.