

POLICY BRIEF



Countering Violent Extremism

Preventing and ending violent extremism is a complex issue that requires addressing fundamental social problems and political drivers through a whole-of-society comprehensive approach not dictated by fear and short-term thinking.

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 CVE strategy.

Violent extremism 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.

	Conflict Assessment	Theory of Change and Intervention Design
Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)	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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Address the drivers</i> of the conflict and implement conflict transformation and reconciliation programming. • <i>Create resilient communities</i>, by building immunity to recruitment by violent extremists, by catalyzing community-based programs. • <i>Deter and disrupt</i> recruitment or mobilization and assist with reintegration of former violent extremists.
Counter-Terrorism (CT)	Terrorism takes place in countries experiencing or involved in state-sponsored political violence, or violent conflicts. ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Deter, disrupt and isolate</i> groups that use terror. • <i>Train and equip</i> state security forces to fight terrorist groups • <i>Increase the state's capacity</i> to prepare, prevent, protect and respond to terrorism. • <i>Interdict and prosecute</i> through law enforcement.

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. This evidence supports a peacebuilding theory of change that takes into account complex, longer-term social issues and not just short-term, military objectives.

The Obama administration's 2011 strategy for CVE represents a positive shift in that it calls for non-military engagement at the local community level to address some of the conditions fueling extremism. However, the broader US approach is also flawed in its emphasis on countering extremist narratives, the linking of development and security objectives, and the US government's focus on use of military force. A whole-of-

¹ Institute for Economics and Peace. *Global Terrorism Index*. Sydney: IEP, 2015.

² Jones, Seth and Martin Libicki. *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008

³ Cronin, Audrey. *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

society approach that encompasses both CT and CVE strategies and includes every stakeholder is necessary for a sustainable solution. However, 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.

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, surveys⁴ and in-depth interviews⁵ 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. These issues are addressed by peacebuilding approaches toward preventing or deterring violent extremism, these include:

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.⁶

Recommendations for better CVE strategies:

1. Develop evidence-based policies by correlating research on violent extremism to align resources with effective strategies and programming.
2. Support political processes that engage all stakeholders, improve state-society relations and address the actual underlying grievances and drivers of conflict.⁷
3. Resource peacebuilding programming the same way we resource the military and CT programs and grant transfer authority to the Department of Defense to enable the Secretary of Defense to transfer defense funds to civilian agencies.
4. Intensify diplomacy and advocacy efforts to support better CVE policy and adherence to international law.
5. Use a "Do No Harm" approach and consider consequences of implementing CT policy and arms sales even in the US context: Could security-oriented activities undermine CVE and peacebuilding approaches? Will short-term tactical efforts undermine long-term policy goals?
6. Expand exemptions for peacebuilding in terrorist material support legislation.
7. Formally acknowledge and address crimes against humanity as a priority in the CVE context and ensure US CT action is in full compliance with international law.

⁴ Mercy Corps. *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence*. Portland: Mercy Corps, 2015.

⁵ Atran, Scott. *Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*. HarperCollins, 2011.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Mercy Corps. *Youth & Consequences: Unemployment, Injustice and Violence*. Portland: Mercy Corps, 2015.