

Human Rights and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

On 2 October 2015, the Human Rights Council adopted resolution 30/15 on "Human rights and preventing and countering violent extremism". Operative paragraph 16 of the resolution requests "the Office of the High Commissioner to prepare a compilation report on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism by the thirty-third session of the Council, and encourages the Office to consult with Member States, United Nations entities and other organizations, as appropriate, to benefit from ongoing relevant work on the human rights dimensions of preventing and countering violent extremism."

On 18 January 2016, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights requested input from Member States, United Nations entities and other organizations regarding best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism. The Office would be grateful if any information could be sent by 11 April 2016.

The Countering Violent Extremism Working Group established by the Alliance for Peacebuilding welcomes the opportunity to provide input on best practices and lessons learned on how protecting and promoting human rights contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism (CVE).

In spite of the tremendous resources that the U.S. and the international community have invested in counter-terrorism (CT) and counter-insurgency initiatives, violent extremist movements are growing. A whole-of-society approach that addresses fundamental social and political drivers of extremism including human rights abuses by both the international community and states must be an integral part of any CVE strategy.

Human rights are often subverted while fighting violent extremism when the approach is dictated by fear and short-term thinking. There is a significant emphasis on a counter-terrorism approach that focuses on deterring, disrupting and isolating groups that use terror. In this approach there is an emphasis on training and equipping state security forces to fight terrorist groups and increase the state's capacity to prepare, prevent, protect and respond to terrorism. Many times human rights abuses are integral to the CT approach.

In comparison, programs that focus on preventing and countering violent extremism encompass the preventative aspects of counter-terrorism as well as interventions to undermine the attraction of extremist movements and ideologies that seek to promote violence. These programs address the drivers of the conflict and implement conflict transformation and reconciliation programming. They also create resilient communities by limiting extremist appeal and by catalyzing community-based programs. Additionally, they focus on deterring and disrupting recruitment or mobilization and assist with reintegration of former violent extremists.

Our members and partners at the Alliance for Peacebuilding have conducted groundbreaking research in the field of countering violent extremism. This research concludes that the most consistent drivers of violence include perceptions of marginalization and injustice, both local and global exposure to violence, feelings of isolation, and the belief that joining a violent movement holds the best prospects of achieving justice or a purpose. Further, violent extremism occurs, in part, as a result of the perception of divisions between groups. Pioneering psychological research in two separate studies by Milgram and Zimbardo was recently highlighted by *Scientific American* to conclude that, “radicalization does not happen in a vacuum but is driven in part by rifts among groups that extremists seek to create, exploit and exacerbate.”¹

Denying human rights to specific communities through marginalization, discrimination and violence contributes directly to the rise of violent extremism. According to USAID, “cruel, degrading treatment by police or security forces, or being closely connected to someone who suffered at their hands, for example, can be significant risk factors [for radicalization].”² Therefore, effective CVE programming must avoid restricting human rights, specifically freedom of speech, and freedom from violence, torture, and arbitrary arrest, the denial of which has been shown to incite extremism.

Turkey’s current CVE strategy, which significantly erodes human rights, has led to an increase in violent extremism. In recent months, Turkey has seen an unprecedented rise in terrorist attacks prompting security forces to crack down on peaceful dissent under the pretense of combatting terrorism. Turkey’s response has included arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, torture and the restriction of freedom of speech. According to Zia Weise at *Foreign Policy*, “besides endangering lives and rights, the government’s anti-terrorism campaign appears to be woefully ineffective: Far from reining in terror, it may produce yet more.”³ The, PKK, the terrorist group responsible for the March attacks in Ankara, cited Turkish security forces’ human rights abuses at Cizre as the immediate motivation for the attack. The poorly designed CVE strategy’s disregard for human rights has exacerbated already wide divisions between the government and dissenting groups, leading to an increase in violent extremism.

Since 2010, the United Kingdom has also pursued a CVE strategy that serves to expand societal divisions while increasing the threat of violent extremism through an insufficient commitment to the protection of human rights. UK terror watchdogs have called for an independent review

¹ Haslam, Alexander and Reicher, Stephen D. *Fueling Terror: How Extremists Are Made*. March 25, 2016 <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fueling-terror-how-extremists-are-made/>

² USAID, *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency: Putting Principles into Practice*. September 2011. https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/VEI_Policy_Final.pdf

³Weise, Zia. *In Erdogan’s Turkey, Everyone is a Terrorist*. March 24, 2016. *Foreign Policy*. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/24/in-erdogans-turkey-everyone-is-a-terrorist-kurds-pkk-terrorism/>

of the government's flagship 'Prevent' program "over concerns that it is sowing mistrust and fear in the Muslim community."⁴ Critics allege that Prevent is being "applied in an insensitive or discriminatory manner"⁵ thereby isolating and marginalizing British Muslims. If systematic discrimination is proven, Prevent may be in violation of Article 12 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights that, "no one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence."⁶

The UK's Prevent program has created the perception of inequality and fueled grievances within the country's Muslim community. The failure of Prevent to effectively counter violent extremism without alienating Muslims suggests that CVE programming must incorporate explicit protections for human rights into its framework. Such protections will maintain productive relationships between communities and mitigate the potential for discrimination.

The United States has also failed at times to note the inextricable link between human rights and countering violent extremism. US support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen represents US leadership's unwillingness to recognize that human rights abuses such as, "unlawful strikes and large-scale civilian casualties are certain to foster further instability and extremism."⁷ Robert Grenier, the Former Director of the CIA's Counter-Terrorism Center, warns that the US support for the Saudi regime combined with US drone strikes may transform, "Yemeni militants with strictly local agendas [into] dedicated enemies of the West in response to US military actions against them."⁸ This case represents the devastating harm caused by abusive and short sighted counter-terrorism programs, especially when viewed through the CVE lens.

There are also positive examples of effective CVE and counter-terrorism programs that use constructive community engagement to minimize social cleavages. The hallmark of these programs is that they use productive and limited contact between law enforcement and the

⁴ Batty, David. Prevent strategy 'sowing mistrust and fear in Muslim communities' 3 February 2016. The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/03/prevent-strategy-sowing-mistrust-fear-muslim-communities>

⁵ Anderson, David Q.C. Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation. <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/countering-extremism/written/27920.pdf>

⁶ OHCHR, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁷Whitson, Sarah Leah. *The U.S. is quietly helping Saudi Arabia wage a devastating aerial campaign in Yemen*. Los Angeles Times. 30 March 2016. <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0330-whitson-yemen-strikes-20160330-story.html>

⁸Grenier, Robert. *Yemen and the US: Down a Familiar Path*. 10 May 2012 . http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/201251071458557719.html?utm_source=Press+mailing+list&utm_campaign=f6f7c603ab-2012_05_11_drones_Munter_CIA&utm_medium=email

community thereby empowering communities to police themselves. They create trust between law enforcement and the community because the law enforcement works to build relationships rather than spy on at risk populations. This tactic, which is used effectively by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and some Southeast Asian countries, minimizes gaps between communities by reinforcing the mutual desire for security from violent extremism. It is effective because it doesn't stigmatize entire communities as extremists but rather promotes them as allies in the campaign against violent extremism.⁹

Another effective community-based CVE program is located in Vilvoorde, Belgium. Nearly one quarter of Vilvoorde's population is unemployed, most of the youth come from broken families and many are at extreme risk for radicalization. From 2012 to 2014, 28 young men from this community traveled to Syria to fight for ISIS. In response, the local government decided to tackle extremism head on and enacted a community-based program to increase the resilience of both families and young people. The key to Vilvoorde's success is the program's ability to engage numerous support systems for at risk youth in the health, religious, social, parental and education circles. These groups work with the youth and decide collectively which type of intervention best supports a particular individual. Police contact is intentionally limited and authorities are only involved when absolutely necessary to prevent violence. Through a community-based approach to CVE that limits destructive engagement with law enforcement, no new ISIS recruits have left from Vilvoorde to Syria since May 2014.¹⁰ Vilvoorde serves as the model for effective CVE programming within a high-risk community. Given the tools and freedom to tackle violent extremism through a community engagement process that respects and adheres to human rights, communities can prevent violent extremism while minimizing societal cleavages.

For its part, the United States, by recognizing ISIS's genocide of the Yazidi ethnic group, is mitigating feelings of isolation, marginalization and injustice that engender violent extremism. By formally recognizing the systematic violence against the Yazidi's as genocide, Secretary Kerry took an important step towards effectively addressing violent extremism and how ISIS is viewed internationally. Jessica Stern and JM Berge argue it is important to document ISIS crimes against groups—not only the Yazidis, but also Shi'a Muslims and some Sunni Muslim tribes that

⁹Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Peter Romaniuk and Rafia Barakat. Evaluating Countering Violent Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation. June 2013. *Extremism Programming Practice and Progress*. http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Fink_Romaniuk_Barakat_EVALUATING-CVE-PROGRAMMING_2013.pdf

¹⁰The Economist. *Battle of Ideas*. April 2nd 2016
<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21695875-first-three-articles-about-western-countries-attempts-counter-islamist>

have resisted ISIS—saying it could “make a significant impact on how ISIS is perceived by those most susceptible to its ideology.”¹¹

The inclusion of human rights into countering violent extremism programming builds more resilient and safer communities. When human rights are subverted in favor of oppressive counter-terrorism policies, the results are catastrophic. Violations of human rights increases the grievances of individuals and communities at risk for radicalization, which may in turn push individuals towards violent action. Without respect for human rights, counter-terrorism policies are counterproductive. In order to effectively counter violent extremism, law enforcement should seek to constructively engage with at risk communities and develop community-based strategies for collective security. This strategy minimizes societal divisions, decreasing the propensity for violent extremism.

¹¹ Stern, Jessica and Berger, J.M. ISIS: The State of Terror. 2015.