



Under Pressure: Rethinking Comprehensive Approaches to CT and P/CVE in an Age of Austerity and Instability

Bibi van Ginkel

Under Pressure: Rethinking Comprehensive Approaches to CT and P/CVE in an Age of Austerity and Instability

Bibi van Ginkel

ICCT Policy Brief

September 2025

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Licensing and Distribution

ICCT publications are published in open access format and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

This article represents the views of the author(s) solely. ICCT is an independent foundation and takes no institutional positions on matters of policy, unless clearly stated otherwise.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| About ICCT | iii |
| Abstract | 1 |
| Introduction | 2 |
| Methodology | 3 |
| Stress test for the comprehensive approach | 4 |
| Refurbishing the toolkit for an effective, comprehensive approach to CT and P/CVE | 19 |
| Key Recommendations to Mitigate Decreasing Funding for P/CVE | 10 |
| Key Recommendations to Address the Shrinking Political Space in P/CVE | 13 |
| Conclusion | 15 |
| Bibliography | 15 |
| About the Author | 18 |

Abstract

Organisations engaged in counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) have long demonstrated resilience amid volatile funding environments. However, the recent, sector-wide decline in P/CVE funding, coupled with shrinking political space, is unprecedented and unsustainable. Surveyed stakeholders report severe consequences for their work, including diminished focus on root causes of radicalisation, erosion of human rights-compliant practices, and the weakening of civil society's role—particularly across the Middle East. Critical areas such as community resilience, root cause analysis, and gender-sensitive approaches have been disproportionately affected. In this policy brief seven major developments are identified that cause this contraction, largely influenced by shifting geopolitical priorities and reduced terror threats in Europe. It furthermore risks dismantling years of progress, expertise, and networks. As extremist groups regain influence and space for prevention shrinks, the threat of a more complex resurgence looms. The policy brief offers some strategies to navigate this changing landscape.

Introduction

The field of counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has undergone significant changes over the past 25 years. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the global response was largely driven by a security-centric agenda, with the UN Security Council playing a central role in shaping international policies.¹ Over the years, this security-centric agenda changed to a more comprehensive approach, where respect for human rights and addressing underlying drivers and push and pull factors of radicalisation to violent extremism took central stage. Beyond socio-economic factors or religious influences, more attention was paid to, for instance, psychosocial factors. Research, and the necessary funding were made available to develop a more sophisticated and accurate understanding of these processes, which would inform more effective prevention or countering policies. This shift from a merely security-centric approach to a comprehensive approach in CT and countering violent extremism went hand in hand with a diversification of government actors involved represented in a whole-of-government approach, for instance, by also involving education and social affairs. While at first there was reluctance to work with civil society organisations (CSOs) on prevention of violent extremism for a whole-of-society approach, as of 2015, the UN Secretary-General further advanced this shift toward a prevention-oriented agenda, aligning counter-terrorism more closely with the development aid agenda.² By doing so, P/CVE was made a policy priority, for the UN, who stimulated the implementation in states, also ensuring increased funding for localised and CSO-led initiatives. Building on these ambitions, various initiatives were launched to support states in formulating National Action Plans on preventing violent extremism, ensuring a whole-of-society approach that included engagement with non-state actors and local communities to build resilience.³

Despite these positive developments, global and national strategies have not been without criticism. The focus on countering terrorism, especially since it was considered to be an exceptional threat, also triggered exceptional security responses. The securitisation of the whole agenda, driven by this idea of exceptionalism resulted in the creation of suspect communities. Particularly Muslim communities fell victim to discrimination or worse.⁴ Policies also had a shrinking effect on the civic space of CSOs and on the rights of human rights defenders.⁵ These developments were clearly in contrast with the ambitions of a whole-of-society and comprehensive approach.

Four years ago, on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, many initiatives took the opportunity to reflect on the legacy and effectiveness of global CT and P/CVE efforts. The *Securing the Future Initiative*, in particular, assessed and recalibrated “the expansive counterterrorism regime developed by the UN Security Council in the years since the attacks.”⁶

Key criticisms centred on the absence of agreed definitions for terrorism and violent extremism,⁷

1 Peter Romaniuk, *Multilateral Counter-Terrorism: The Global Politics of Cooperation and Contestation* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009); Bibi van Ginkel, ‘Towards a comprehensive and effective counter-terrorism policy within the United Nations’, in: Gelijs Molier, Afshin Ellian & David Suurland (eds.), *Terrorism: Ideology, Law and Policy*, Dordrecht: Republic of Letters Publishing 2011, pp. 277-303

2 UN Secretary General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, UN Doc A/70/674, December 24, 2015; A/RES/70/291, July 1, 2016.

3 See for instance the support provided by Hedayah to the drafting of national action plans, <https://hedayah.com/expertise/national-strategies-and-action-plans/>

4 See for instance Tufyal Choudury and Helen Fenwick, “The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities”, Durham University, Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2011, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-72-the-impact-of-counter-terrorism-measures-on-muslim-communities.pdf>.

5 UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, “Impact of measures to address terrorism and violent extremism on civic space and the rights of civil society actors and human rights defenders”, UN Doc A/HRC/40/52, 1 March 2019, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/40/52>.

6 *Securing the Future Initiative* was an initiative of the Soufan Center, in partnership with the Four Freedom Forum. <https://thesoufancenter.org/projects/securing-the-future-initiative/>

7 Tanya Mehra and Julie Coleman, ‘The Role of the UN Security Council in Countering Terrorism & Violent Extremism: The limits of criminalization?’, in: *Securing the Future Initiative*, October 2022, *Securing the Future Initiative - The Soufan Center*

the disconnect between global strategies and local realities,⁸ and the continued focus on major terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Critics noted that contemporary threats have become more localised, diverse, and opaque, often rooted in local conflicts and driven by a broader range of ideologies. In addition, the prevention is further complicated by the increasing role of online radicalisation, and especially the exposure of youth to extremist content online.

Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic and developments since 2021 - particularly shifts in the global security landscape and changes in budgetary priorities - have posed a significant stress test for the international community's commitment to a comprehensive approach to CT and P/CVE. This policy paper examines whether the international community has successfully navigated this test or whether a so-called survival strategy is now needed to sustain this comprehensive approach.

To address this question, the paper explores perceived changes in the funding landscape and the shrinking political space available for implementing P/CVE initiatives - both of which are essential to maintaining a balanced, whole-of-government and whole-of-society comprehensive strategy.

The paper begins by outlining the key factors that have emerged as stressors to the comprehensive approach. Seven major developments will be discussed in detail that have implications for the political space to work on P/CVE and the overall funding landscape. Finally, the paper will present policy recommendations that may serve as a survival strategy to sail through the perfect storm of austerity and instability.

Methodology

This policy brief is based on a mixed-methods research approach. In addition to desk research, insights from the ICCT webinar *Spill-over Effects of the Israel-Hamas Conflict* held in April 2024 have been integrated into the analysis.⁹ A survey was also conducted among representatives from civil society organisations, international organisations, and subject-matter experts to assess the perceived impact of changes in the funding landscape.¹⁰ Furthermore, during the 2024 ICCT Annual Conference,¹¹ a structured brainwriting exercise was held, focusing on two key issues: the shrinking political space for P/CVE and the reduction in funding. The perspectives of 40 experts on the consequences of these developments - as well as strategies to mitigate them - formed the basis for a set of policy recommendations aimed at helping the field withstand this ongoing stress test.

⁸ Eric Rosand, Alistair Millar and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, 'Counterterrorism and the United Nations Security Council Since 9/11: Moving Beyond the 2001 Paradigm', *Security the Future Initiative*, September 2022, Full-Final-SFI-Report-Moving-Beyond-the-2001-Paradigm.pdf

⁹ Report of the ICCT Live Briefing on 'Spill-over effects of the Israel-Hamas conflict impacting narratives in Europe', April 2024, <https://icct.nl/event/icct-live-briefing-spill-over-effects-israel-hamas-conflict-impacting-narratives-europe>

¹⁰ Forty survey requests have been sent out, of which nineteen responded. Requests were sent out to international organisations working in the sector, academics and experts, and NGOs. The respondents indicated to work on research and evidence-based analysis, technical assistance and capacity-building, policy development and policy advise, training, community engagement, and monitoring & evaluation. The topics they worked on are: human rights compliant CT and PCVE work, prevention of radicalisation and resilience in communities, threat assessments and mapping of security trends, analysing underlying factor of radicalisation, online radicalisation, AI and its role in radicalisation, countering the financing of terrorism, strengthening CT responses, strengthening criminal justice responses, and strategic communication. The regions these organisations worked in include Europe, Central Asia, South-East Asia, Latin America, Western Balkans, MENA region, and Africa.

¹¹ ICCT Annual Conference 2024: "Houston, we have a problem", <https://icct.nl/event/icct-annual-conference-2024-houston-we-have-a-problem-counter-terrorism-age-uncertainty>

Stress test for the comprehensive approach

To conduct a stress test for a comprehensive CT and P/CVE approach, it is relevant to reflect on several of the key aspects considered essential by the United Nations to ensure effectiveness.

First, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is required in both the design and implementation of comprehensive CT and P/CVE strategies. This means engaging the security and social sectors of government, as well as civil society actors. Second, effective contextualisation is crucial. National strategies must be translated into local realities, requiring the meaningful inclusion of local partners to ensure relevance and impact on the ground. Third, a comprehensive strategy must strike a balance between hard and human security responses. This balance should be reflected in policies and legal frameworks that address the full lifecycle of radicalisation and terrorism - from early prevention to detention, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society. Such a strategy includes preventive programmes, strategic communication efforts, protection of critical infrastructure and key security risks, and a robust criminal justice framework that upholds the rule of law and human rights. Fourth, adequate funding is necessary to maintain this balance between hard and soft approaches and to conduct research into underlying drivers and the impact of policies. A general principle applies: prevention is always more cost-effective than responding to a terrorist attack or managing a high-risk security situation.¹²

Reflecting on impact effectiveness in addition to cost-efficiency should be a key priority in focusing policies and programmes, and in correcting programmes and policies that have unintended negative consequences and learning about mistakes to improve policies. However, investment in these kinds of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) exercises has been scarce.¹³ Although limited, the monitoring and evaluation that has been conducted on CT and P/CVE programmes has offered insights into the (in)effectiveness of approaches and provided recommendations for learning and improving policies and programmes.¹⁴

A fundamental precondition for designing and implementing an effective comprehensive CT and P/CVE strategy is the existence of sufficient political space for collaboration between government and civil society, backed by strong political support for a comprehensive approach matched with the necessary budget. However, developments in the past four years have placed this comprehensive model under significant strain - amounting to a full-scale stress test. The survey conducted among representatives of international organisations, research institutes and civil society organisations around the globe showed that close to 90 percent of the respondents stated that they were affected by a decrease in funding. This funding, on average, decreased by 50 percent, with some organisations stating to be hit by a 70-100 percent decrease in funding on projects related to CT and PCVE.¹⁵

Indeed, respondents to the survey stated that over the past year, funding for P/CVE in, for instance, Iraq has sharply declined, driven primarily by cuts in US support and shifting donor priorities across Western countries, which now focus more on defence, the war in Ukraine, and the perceived threat from Russia.¹⁶ For instance, the Dutch government, inter alia, cuts its 9 million

12 Mueller, John, and Mark G. Stewart. "Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security." *Homeland Security Affairs* 7, Article 16 (August 2011). <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/43>

13 Amy-Jane Gielen and Aileen van Leeuwen, 'Debunking Prevailing Assumptions about Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies', *ICCT Policy Brief*, 21 December 2023, <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-12/Debunking%20Prevailing%20Assumptions%20About%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation.pdf>

14 See for instance, Cynthia Lum, Leslie W. Kennedy, and Alisan J. Shirley, "The effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies – A Campbell Systematic Review", January 2006, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237262666_The_Effectiveness_of_Counter-Terrorism_Strategies_A_Campbell_Review

15 Survey conducted by ICCT between 30 June 2025 and 15 July 2025. Survey results on file.

16 Ibid.

euro budget for international support to CT and P/CVE projects abroad by 8 million euros.¹⁷

Apart from cuts in budgets for overseas project support, national budgets have also been cut for P/CVE programmes and research institutes. The He Whenua Taurikura National Centre of Research Excellence in New Zealand, established in 2022 after the Christchurch attacks, for instance, was hit by a two-thirds budget cut.¹⁸ The US programmes formally funded by the Department of Homeland Security Centre for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3) that focused on research and P/CVE have also been drastically cut,¹⁹ including the closure of the national database tracking domestic terrorism.²⁰

Overall, this shift has led to a dramatic contraction in available budgets, with fewer tenders, reduced Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds, and heightened competition. Critically, the nature of funding has also changed: it is increasingly short-term, overly ambitious in expected outcomes, and rarely covers core costs. As a result, many international and local organisations have closed their offices and discontinued programmes. Long-term initiatives, once common, have all but disappeared - illustrated by the disbanding of UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM)'s formerly active P/CVE team in Iraq. Most remaining CT and P/CVE projects are relying on dwindling core funding, with little sign of renewal. In some cases, funders have retracted support at the last minute, further underscoring the instability of the current funding environment.²¹

Overall, seven major developments have been identified as contributing factors to reduced funding and the marginalisation of P/CVE efforts.

Factor 1: CT and P/CVE Fatigue?

More than two decades after terrorism became a central concern on global security agendas, there appears to be a growing sense of fatigue—and perhaps even underestimation of current threats - among policymakers. This fatigue shows in a noticeable decline in political interest and momentum, a de-prioritisation of the topic, sometimes even a ban on certain topics that are politically sensitive, such as gender perspectives or right-wing extremism, and subsequently to a decrease in funding. While threat assessments by security agencies do not suggest a reduction in the actual threat level,²² in many cases, the lack of visible, tangible results - largely due to insufficient monitoring and evaluation of programmes²³ - may have contributed to this diminishing engagement.

17 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, Vaststelling van de Begrotingsstaat van het Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken voor het jaar 2025, Memorie van toelichting, Kamerstukken 36 600 V nr.,2; In addition to the budget cuts announced in this general budget, in the spring of 2025 the ministry received an instruction to cut another 20 % of several of the budgets.

18 Phil Pennington, "Terrorism and violent extremism research funding cut by two-third", *RNZ*, 5 June 2024, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/top/518667/terrorism-and-violent-extremism-research-funding-cut-by-two-thirds>

19 Hannah Allam, "Killing grants that have save lives: Trump's cuts signal end to government's work on prevention of terrorism", *ProPublica*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-doge-budget-cuts-terrorism-prevention>

20 The Washington Post, "Trump administration cuts national databases tracking domestic terrorism", 25 March 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2025/03/25/domestic-extremism-database-trump-cuts/>

21 Arguments cited in this paragraph were made by respondents in the Survey conducted by ICCT.

22 Europol, EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2025, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publication-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2025-eu-te-sat>; NCTV, Dreigingsbeeld Terrorism Nederland, Juni 2025, <https://www.aivd.nl/documenten/publicaties/2025/06/17/dreigingsbeeld-terrorisme-nederland-2025>

23 Amy-Jane Gielen and Aileen van Leeuwen, 'Debunking Prevailing Assumptions about Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies', *ICCT Policy Brief*, 21 December 2023, <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-12/Debunking%20Prevailing%20Assumptions%20About%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation.pdf>

Factor 2: 2024 – The Biggest Election Year in History

The year 2024 marked the largest global election year in history, with an unprecedented number of parliamentary and presidential elections taking place simultaneously.²⁴ This concentration of electoral events led to prolonged periods of political standstill, delaying strategic policy decisions and triggering budget freezes across multiple sectors - including CT and P/CVE. In several cases, election outcomes brought about shifts in political direction, often accompanied by austerity measures. Furthermore, the overall more polarised political landscape resulted in more instability in coalition forming in several countries, and a decrease in longevity of governments, adding to the less ambitious policies and budgets. These developments disproportionately affected funding for prevention-oriented policies, which are frequently financed through development aid budgets for the internationally-oriented programmes and through ministries of interior, home affairs, social affairs, education or family affairs for the national prevention programmes.²⁵

Factor 3: Competing security priorities

Unquestionably, the war in Ukraine - particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2021 - has prompted a significant shift in geopolitical focus and led to an unprecedented surge in defence spending.²⁶ This recalibration of threat priorities has had notable implications for the CT and P/CVE agenda. Survey respondents, for instance, noted that the prevention of terrorism and research into its underlying drivers are no longer prioritised by institutions such as the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Instead, attention and resources have shifted decisively toward hard security approaches, leaving little room for preventive or soft power strategies.

Factor 4: 7 October 2023 – A Tipping Point

Two game-changing events have further sealed the decline in political and financial support for prevention programmes. The first was the Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023, which marked a turning point in the political discourse surrounding P/CVE. (For the second event, see *Factor 5* below.) The brutality of the attacks - resulting in 1,200 deaths and the taking of 251 hostages - provoked widespread outrage, particularly in the West, where the US and European states formed an almost unequivocal front in support of Israel. In this charged atmosphere, any discussion of the underlying drivers behind Hamas's actions became politically untenable. This resulted in a pronounced pivot back to hard security responses, at the expense of research into drivers of radicalisation and investment in prevention programmes.

Beyond Europe and the Middle East, the conflict has also divided communities and strained relations between governments and their populations. In some regions, Western-backed policies have met with public criticism, and the response to dissent has at times been repressive. This has led to restrictions on international donors and actors, making continued capacity-building efforts more difficult. The growing resentment toward the West - fuelled in part by mis/disinformation and perceived bias in the conflict - has further undermined the credibility of Western diplomatic and development actors, complicating their security cooperation goals.²⁷

These tensions are acutely felt by P/CVE practitioners. Political space for addressing the underlying drivers of radicalisation - such as the longstanding grievances of Palestinians in Gaza

²⁴ The Economist, '2024 is the biggest election year in history', <https://www.economist.com/interactive/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/2024-is-the-biggest-election-year-in-history>

²⁵ OECD, International aid falls in 2024 for first time in six years, says OECD, Press Release, 16 April 2025, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2025/04/official-development-assistance-2024-figures.html>

²⁶ The most prominent illustration follows from the increase to 5 % GDP pledge of defence budget during the NATO Summit in June 2025.

²⁷ Report of the ICCT Live Briefing on 'Spill-over effects of the Israel-Hamas conflict impacting narratives in Europe', April 2024, <https://icct.nl/event/icct-live-briefing-spill-over-effects-israel-hamas-conflict-impacting-narratives-europe>

- is shrinking. Framing such discussions as tantamount to justifying terrorism has rendered them politically off-limits. As a result, preventive interventions aimed at long-term, peaceful solutions are increasingly sidelined or rendered impossible.

Factor 5: US budget cuts

The second major turning point was the unprecedented wave of budget cuts to international support programmes following the return of the Trump administration. One of the most significant impacts was the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) – one of the biggest global donors of international programming - and other foreign aid initiatives. Between 20 January and 7 May 2025, USAID funding was drastically reduced - only 14 percent of the original programmes remained untouched, and just 57 percent of the original budget was preserved.²⁸

In addition, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), which for decades has functioned as a repository for studying international affairs and bringing together global experts on conflict resolution, including involvement in P/CVE programmes, has mostly been dismantled by the Trump Administration, forcing the institute now to resort to crowdfunding for the next fiscal year.²⁹

Beyond USAID, other foreign assistance programmes were hit with abrupt “stop-work orders,” halting ongoing activities. The US State Department’s Bureau of Counterterrorism - previously a key player in supporting and coordinating counter-terrorism efforts with foreign partners, with an annual budget of \$300 million - has also been left in limbo, awaiting new strategic direction from the Secretary of State.³⁰ The Global Engagement Centre was closed by Secretary of State Marco Rubio in April 2025. This Centre was another agency within the Bureau of Global Public Affairs at the United States Department of State focusing on recognising, understanding, exposing, and countering foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations around the world. Further budget cuts also hit domestic programmes, such as the earlier-mentioned budget cuts on the Department of Homeland Security’s CP3 funding.

Factor 6: In the name of efficiency

Major donors such as the EU, which manage large technical assistance and capacity-building budgets, increasingly rely on framework contracts. This means that the tender process is split into multiple stages. First, organisations must compete to be pre-selected for eligibility. Only then, in a second phase, are shortlisted organisations invited to submit a detailed proposal - usually within a very short timeframe. These projects typically must begin immediately and be concluded within a limited duration.

While this model may be attractive from the donor’s perspective by allowing them flexibility in defining project needs and selecting preferred partners or experts at a later stage, it also places a heavy burden on applicants. The amount of preparatory work essentially doubles, and the unpredictable, ad hoc nature of these calls undermines the financial stability required to maintain critical core staff.

Another emerging trend is the awarding of large contracts to major consultancy firms that often lack the relevant thematic expertise. These firms typically subcontract work

28 Amy Schoenfeld Walker, Malika Khurana and Christine Zhang, *What remains of U.S.A.I.D.?*, New York Times, 22 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/06/22/us/politics/usa-foreign-aid-trump.html>

29 United States Institute for Peace website, <https://www.usip.org/fy-2026-budget-brief>.

30 Daniel Byman, *The Strategic Role of the State Department’s Counterterrorism Bureau*, Lawfare, 2 June 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-strategic-role-of-the-state-department-s-counterterrorism-bureau>

to smaller expert organisations or individual specialists. This structure diverts a portion of the budget to administrative management rather than technical implementation, leaving smaller expert organisations with reduced fees. As with the framework contract model, this creates challenges for long-term planning, budgeting, and staff retention. Due to the increasingly volatile funding landscape, many expert organisations are being forced to downsize. Without sustainable funding, they are unable to retain qualified staff, resulting in the erosion of institutional memory, professional networks, and subject-matter expertise - ultimately diminishing the quality of services donors rely on.

Factor 7: Ghosting after proposal submission, or withdrawing pledged support

A final challenge cited by many organisations is the lack of transparency and communication from donors after proposal submission. Despite investing significant time and resources into developing proposals - often including conflict sensitivity analysis, needs assessments, and detailed programme designs - organisations frequently receive no response at all.

Proposal processes often consist of two stages: an initial concept note outlining objectives, problem analysis, and core activities, followed by an invitation to submit a full proposal. In theory, this two-step process should increase efficiency, allowing organisations to avoid investing in a full proposal unless they've passed the initial round. However, even when organisations are invited to submit a full proposal, many report that they never receive any follow-up decisions, no feedback, and no official closure of the process.

Survey respondents as part of this research also highlighted more troubling trends. In some cases, government donors have withdrawn previously pledged support without explanation. Others described situations in which donors solicited innovative project ideas from organisations, only to later implement the project themselves or hand it off to another implementer. This undermines trust, wastes resources, and discourages civil society actors from continued engagement.

Refurbishing the toolkit for an effective, comprehensive approach to CT and P/CVE

The seven challenges described earlier culminate in two major impacts on the preventing and countering violent extremism sector:

1. Decreased global funding for P/CVE work, and
2. Shrinking political space to carry it out effectively.

Together, these trends place the broader comprehensive approach to CT and P/CVE at risk. During the 2024 ICCT Annual Conference, around 40 international CT and P/CVE experts were invited to explore the implications of these two scenarios during a brainwriting exercise, in order to harvest from the wisdom of the crowd:³¹

Scenario 1: Declining P/CVE Funding

A global shift towards hard (mainly military and police) security responses is leading to reduced investment in P/CVE programming, setting the field back significantly. In addition, deteriorating security conditions in certain regions are causing US and European donors to withdraw both financially and operationally from precisely those areas where support is most critical.

Scenario 2: Diminishing Political Space for P/CVE

The return to securitised responses in several countries carries a serious risk: such measures can themselves become grievances and push factors for radicalisation. Yet, acknowledging and addressing these risks as part of a P/CVE strategy is becoming increasingly difficult. As space for dialogue narrows, trust between governments and communities erodes, further aggravated by the widespread circulation of misinformation.

The reflections that follow highlight the key insights and most compelling strategies identified through this process, as observed by the author.

³¹ To generate innovative strategies for responding to these challenges, the experts took part in a brainwriting exercise—a structured method to capture the “wisdom of the crowd” and reduce the bias of individual perspectives. A brainwriting exercise has several stages of idea generation and prioritisation: (1) individual idea generation, (2) individual selection of the ideas generated by the subgroup, (3) developing group consensus for a selection of ideas, and finally (4) group ranking of the best ideas.

Key Recommendations to Mitigate Decreasing Funding for P/CVE

Drawing on the collective insights of the expert group, the following five recommendations emerged as the most promising strategies to cope with the decline in available funding for P/CVE.

1. Mainstream P/CVE into Adjacent Fields

P/CVE and CT have long been treated as exceptional domains, singled out from broader security, development, and governance fields, and framed as addressing extraordinary threats requiring extraordinary measures.³² This exceptionalism has often come at the expense of fully upholding human rights norms and has hindered meaningful integration with other key sectors such as development aid, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, democracy support, and rule of law initiatives.³³ In domestic situations, integration with social work and mental health needs to be stepped up.

This separation has created both conceptual and operational barriers. For example, the failure to consistently apply the “do no harm” principle in CT and P/CVE has complicated their integration with development aid - where principles such as neutrality, impartiality, and independence are vital for legitimacy and operational access.³⁴ Heavy-handed or stigmatising interventions in the name of security often directly contradict the core values of development actors, eroding trust and jeopardising the safety of personnel and beneficiaries alike.

As highlighted by the Securing the Future Initiative,³⁵ this disconnection between P/CVE and adjacent fields needs to be recalibrated for a couple of reasons:

- The nature of the threat has changed. Since 9/11, the security landscape has evolved. Today’s violent extremist threats are often rooted in local conflict dynamics and manifest themselves largely in digital ecosystems, rather than being orchestrated solely by globally operating terrorist organisations. Yet, policies and funding structures remain, for a great deal, geared toward countering the latter.³⁶
- Policy responses are overly (central) state-centric. Most current interventions still focus on state-level (central government) responses, instead of adapting to local conditions or supporting community-based initiatives that address the specific drivers of radicalisation.³⁷

Mainstreaming P/CVE into adjacent fields - while crucial - will not be easy, especially as those sectors in many countries are likely to face budget constraints of their own.³⁸ For integration to succeed, P/CVE actors must make a compelling case for how their insights and methodologies can enhance the effectiveness of broader peace, development, and governance efforts.

This will require a paradigm shift in how P/CVE policy is designed and implemented. Rather than

32 Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Combating Terrorism while respecting Human Rights, A/74/335, 29 August 2019, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/74/335>

33 B. van Ginkel, “Violent extremism and development: Witnessing a fundamental pivot”, *Clingendael Alert*, November 2017, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/C_Alert_Violent_extremism_and_development.pdf; Bibi van Ginkel, “Unpacking the key features of a comprehensive counterterrorism approach by the UN Security Council, Policy Brief, *Securing the Future Initiative*, September 2022, Securing the Future Initiative - The Soufan Center

34 Bibi van Ginkel, “Unpacking the key features of a comprehensive counterterrorism approach by the UN Security Council, Policy Brief, *Securing the Future Initiative*, September 2022, Securing the Future Initiative - The Soufan Center

35 Eric Rosand, Alistair Millar and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, ‘Counterterrorism and the United Nations Security Council Since 9/11: Moving Beyond the 2001 Paradigm’, *Securing the Future Initiative*, September 2022, [Full-Final-SFI-Report-Moving-Beyond-the-2001-Paradigm.pdf](https://www.soufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Full-Final-SFI-Report-Moving-Beyond-the-2001-Paradigm.pdf)

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 There are exceptions. Germany and Canada, for instance, are still investing a lot in domestic prevention programmes.

expecting other sectors to adapt to P/CVE logic, the P/CVE community may need to align itself with the priorities and principles of these adjacent sectors - effectively “playing second fiddle” to their lead. Success will depend on clearly articulating:

- What unique value P/CVE approaches bring to conflict-sensitive development and peacebuilding;
- How lessons learned from P/CVE can enrich existing frameworks;
- And how a better understanding of the complex, often local, drivers of radicalisation can strengthen long-term resilience and stability efforts.

2. Invest in Monitoring & Evaluation of P/CVE

Calls to strengthen monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of P/CVE programmes may sound like a familiar refrain. Yet, despite repeated emphasis over the years, rigorous M&E still is not systematically embedded in P/CVE programming. Whether due to the persistent misconception that it’s impossible to measure a “non-event,” or the myth that effective evaluation would be prohibitively expensive, the result is the same: many organisations and states either lack the knowledge to implement meaningful M&E or the political will to act on its findings.

In reality, both of these arguments are flawed. It is not only possible to assess the effectiveness of P/CVE efforts,³⁹ but doing so is especially vital in times of fiscal austerity. With limited funding, it becomes all the more important to distinguish between interventions that work and those that don’t, ensuring that scarce resources are directed toward programmes with demonstrable impact.

Moreover, embedding M&E from the outset - by designing programmes around a clear theory of change, setting SMART objectives, and identifying relevant impact indicators - significantly increases the likelihood of achieving meaningful outcomes. Even if such programmes do not immediately succeed, this approach enables ongoing monitoring and course correction, providing timely data to inform adjustments during implementation. A good example is the project funded by the German’s main development agency GIZ, which offered training and mentoring on evidence-based project design to local Iraqi CSOs for the development of P/CVE projects.⁴⁰ While ultimately not all projects passed the quality threshold and received funding, the post-project survey showed that, in general, the CSOs participating in this programme improved their overall skills for evidence-based project design.⁴¹

In short, M&E should not be treated as an optional or secondary element of P/CVE. It is a strategic investment that improves programme quality, maximises impact, and ensures accountability - particularly when every euro or dollar counts.

3. Share Success Stories

Closely tied to the previous recommendation on M&E is the importance of sharing success stories from local P/CVE initiatives that have demonstrated tangible impact. Whether these projects directly reduced risks of radicalisation or triggered a chain of activities that strengthened community resilience, their positive outcomes deserve wider recognition. When M&E is embedded from the outset, it provides valuable insights into how a project has affected a community or target group over the medium and long term.

39 Amy-Jane Gielen and Aileen van Leeuwen, ‘Debunking Prevailing Assumptions about Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies’, *ICCT Policy Brief*, 21 December 2023, <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-12/Debunking%20Prevailing%20Assumptions%20About%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation.pdf>

40 See ICCT project page, <https://icct.nl/project/supporting-iraqi-civil-society-effective-pve>

41 A post-project evaluation survey is on file at ICCT.

Sharing these results does more than just showcase impact; it serves to motivate practitioners, reinforce the value of sustained engagement, and inspire others to replicate or adapt successful models. While many P/CVE projects include some form of dissemination within their activities, few adopt a strategic communications approach that extends beyond the life of the project. Public campaigns or targeted messaging initiatives designed to share success stories can enhance visibility, generate support, and contribute to a broader culture of prevention.

4. Engage Multilateral and Donor Funding to Support Local Actors

In line with a shift towards more localised and context-sensitive P/CVE efforts, multilateral organisations and donors should prioritise direct support to local actors. While concerns about the capacity of local NGOs to manage P/CVE programmes are valid, the solution should not default to outsourcing to international implementers. Instead, it would be more sustainable to invest in capacity-building for local NGOs, with a focus on evidence-based project design.

Such support could include training on developing a theory of change, setting SMART objectives, and identifying impact indicators, all of which contribute to more effective and measurable programming. This capacity-building could be paired with small grant schemes, allowing local organisations to submit proposals under the mentorship of more experienced entities. Not only does this model strengthen local ownership and sustainability, but it also fosters long-term investment in local expertise and trust.

5. Promote Public–Private Partnerships

As traditional donors reduce funding for ground-level initiatives in volatile regions, the risks of instability and insecurity impacting the private sector - through disrupted supply chains, compromised infrastructure, or reputational harm - become increasingly real. One way to address this is by promoting public–private partnerships (PPPs) that support social cohesion and community resilience.

Through investment in education, entrepreneurship, youth engagement, and community-building initiatives, the private sector can play a proactive role in conflict prevention and risk mitigation. P/CVE initiatives with a whole-of-society approach offer valuable models that can be adapted to corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks. Moreover, by aligning these efforts with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), companies can embed social impact and resilience-building into their broader governance agendas, turning potential risks into opportunities for shared value creation.

Key Recommendations to Address the Shrinking Political Space in P/CVE

Based on expert input, the below-outlined five key recommendations aim to help navigate the increasingly constrained political environment surrounding the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE).

1. Support P/CVE Practitioners Navigating Tensions in the Field

International NGOs and first-line practitioners are increasingly confronted with rising tensions in the P/CVE field. This includes challenges stemming from a polarised public discourse, particularly around issues such as the Israel– Hamas conflict, which has made it difficult to engage in balanced discussions or express nuanced opinions. In some regions, authorities and communities are reluctant to collaborate with NGOs receiving Western donor funding, due to perceptions of geopolitical bias or silence on violations of international law.

Additionally, the renewed emphasis on hard security approaches has widened the trust gap between the security sector and P/CVE practitioners. To counter these challenges, it is recommended to support the P/CVE sector in developing communication strategies and toolkits that facilitate respectful, inclusive, and constructive conversations on sensitive topics. These tools should foster safe spaces for engagement, especially in polarised environments.

Building on earlier efforts to move from security-centric responses to whole-of-government and ultimately whole-of-society approaches, structured dialogue forums should be reintroduced. These should aim to reduce hostility between security actors and P/CVE practitioners and work towards rebuilding mutual trust. A key objective of such dialogues should be raising awareness of the unintended consequences and legal risks associated with disproportionate or unchecked hard security measures.

2. Reallocate Funding to Local Communities to Build Trust

To address the growing trust deficit, especially between regional authorities, local communities, and Western-funded NGOs, it is recommended that donors reallocate funding toward locally driven initiatives (compare recommendation 1, mitigating the decrease of P/CVE funding). These efforts should focus on context-specific dynamics, prioritising issues that promote social cohesion and resilience without imposing Western P/CVE frameworks.

Rather than driving the agenda, external donors should adopt a supporting role, encouraging local ownership and resisting the “saviour complex” often associated with international assistance. One effective approach would be the provision of micro-funding schemes aimed at fostering trust and social cohesion, especially in communities that feel alienated or underrepresented. Special attention should be given to empowering women through these funding mechanisms, ensuring they are not overlooked in grassroots peacebuilding efforts.

3. Foster Cross-Community Dialogue and Youth Engagement

The third recommendation highlights the need to empower youth through cross-community dialogue and the development of critical thinking and communication skills. Initiatives that provide marginalised youth with the tools and platforms to share personal stories through media can help reshape public narratives and foster inclusion. These grassroots storytelling projects offer a more authentic and sustainable alternative to top-down, state-driven strategic communication campaigns.

This approach should be accompanied by awareness-raising on the impact of mis- and disinformation, as well as training in how to pre-bunk and debunk false narratives. Investing in the communication capacity of youth builds resilience against extremist messaging and gives space to underrepresented voices.

4. Rebrand P/CVE as Efforts to Strengthen Democracy or Counter Polarisation

In politically sensitive environments where the P/CVE label itself has become problematic, it is advisable to reframe or rebrand these initiatives under alternative, less politicised themes. This could include positioning projects as efforts to safeguard democracy, build social cohesion, counter polarisation, or empower youth, communities and women.

The aim is not to dilute the substance of the work but rather to depoliticise the terminology to allow for more effective implementation and community engagement. By avoiding contentious labels, practitioners can still work toward core P/CVE objectives under the banner of broader democratic resilience and community development.

5. Integrate P/CVE Principles into Broader Social Policies and Projects

Building on the previous recommendation, the final suggestion is to integrate lessons learned from P/CVE into broader social and development programming. Rather than emphasising P/CVE as a primary objective, implementers can incorporate its principles into conflict-sensitive development efforts.

For instance, conflict sensitivity assessments at the outset of a project can include considerations of how violent extremism might intersect with local dynamics. Likewise, initiatives aimed at addressing socio-economic inequalities in marginalised communities can contribute indirectly to the prevention of radicalisation, without stigmatising specific individuals or groups. This approach avoids securitising development while still promoting resilience and inclusion.

Conclusions

Organisations working in the fields of CT and P/CVE have long adapted to a funding landscape marked by fluctuations and limited predictability. Many have remained agile - minimising overhead costs, staying aligned with evolving threats and trends, and holding on to key lessons from the past. However, the recent, drastic, and sector-wide decline in funding for P/CVE - and the accompanying erosion of political space to work on these issues - has been unprecedented. It is not a shift that organisations could have anticipated or absorbed.

While each national government makes its own budgetary decisions, the broader implications of this collective contraction should give serious pause. Governments and international organisations that serve as funders of P/CVE initiatives must reflect on whether they are willing to stand by as years of investment in developing effective, evidence-based approaches to CT and P/CVE unravel - along with the loss of invaluable expertise built within the sector.

According to the survey, the themes most hit by budget cuts are prevention of radicalisation and resilience in communities, analysis of underlying factors, and human rights compliant CT and PCVE work. Respondents to the survey warn about the severe consequences of these decisions. Across the Middle East, including Iraq and Syria, respondents to the survey state they are witnessing a troubling normalisation of violent extremist groups - some of which now hold power - accompanied by a declining focus on the root causes of radicalisation. As funding and domestic and international attention wane, the space for civil society organisations (CSOs), researchers, and local actors to engage in P/CVE efforts is rapidly shrinking. This creates a dangerous vacuum: without containment mechanisms or sustained investment in prevention, extremist ideologies may evolve unchecked, leading to more complex and widespread threats. The consequences are already visible - loss of strategic networks, erosion of hard-earned expertise, declining innovation, and weakening of human rights and peacebuilding commitments, including gender equality and civil society oversight. A reorientation of donor priorities, largely driven by geopolitical shifts and a perceived drop in terrorist violence in Europe, risks dismantling the existing CT and P/CVE ecosystem. Should violent extremism surge again, many of the experts, institutions, and safeguards needed to respond effectively may no longer be in place. Respondents rate the seriousness of these consequences at over 7 out of 10, underscoring that without urgent reinvestment, the long-term security and stability of the region, and beyond, are at serious risk.

All of this merits serious reconsideration, and preferably a renewal of some of these budget streams. But at a minimum, in order to spare limited and costly capacities in the organisation, the impact of framework agreements and funding procedures on project planning deserves recalibrating. The time and effort that go into designing thoughtful, impactful projects should be met with a basic level of respect: honouring prior commitments, avoiding last-minute funding reversals, and communicating the outcomes of tender procedures in a transparent and timely manner.

If the pendulum swings back - should a resurgence of major terrorist incidents dominate headlines - these experts may no longer be available to provide the informed, nuanced guidance that once shaped comprehensive policy responses. Donors would do well to heed these warning signs and reassess their funding priorities before it is too late.

Bibliography

Allam, Hannah, “Killing grants that have save lives: Trump’s cuts signal end to government’s work on prevention of terrorism”, *ProPublica*, 20 March 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/trump-doge-budget-cuts-terrorism-prevention>

Byman, Daniel, “The Strategic Role of the State Department’s Counterterrorism Bureau”, *Lawfare*, 2 June 2025, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/the-strategic-role-of-the-state-department-s-counterterrorism-bureau>

Choudury, Tufyal and Helen Fenwick, “The impact of counter-terrorism measures on Muslim communities”, *Durham University, Equality and Human Rights Commission*, 2011, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-72-the-impact-of-counter-terrorism-measures-on-muslim-communities.pdf>.

Gielen, Amy-Jane and Aileen van Leeuwen, “Debunking Prevailing Assumptions about Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies”, *ICCT Policy Brief*, 21 December 2023, <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-12/Debunking%20Prevailing%20Assumptions%20About%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation.pdf>

Ginkel, Bibi van, “Towards a comprehensive and effective counter-terrorism policy within the United Nations”, in: Gelijn Molier, Afshin Ellian & David Suurland (eds.), *Terrorism: Ideology, Law and Policy*, Dordrecht: Republic of Letters Publishing 2011, pp. 277-303

Ginkel, B. van “Violent extremism and development: Witnessing a fundamental pivot”, *Clingendael Alert*, November 2017, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/C_Alert_Violent_extremism_and_development.pdf

Ginkel, Bibi van, “Unpacking the key features of a comprehensive counterterrorism approach by the UN Security Council, Policy Brief, *Securing the Future Initiative*, September 2022, Securing the Future Initiative - The Soufan Center

Lum, Cynthia, Leslie W. Kennedy, and Alisan J. Shirley, “The effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies”, *A Campbell Systematic Review*, January 2006, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237262666_The_Effectiveness_of_Counter-Terrorism_Strategies_A_Campbell_Review

Mehra, Tanya and Julie Coleman, “The Role of the UN Security Council in Countering Terrorism & Violent Extremism: The limits of criminalization?”, in: *Securing the Future Initiative*, October 2022, Securing the Future Initiative - The Soufan Center

Mueller, John, and Mark G. Stewart. “Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security.” *Homeland Security Affairs* 7, Article 16 (August 2011). <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/43>

Pennington, Phil, “Terrorism and violent extremism research funding cut by two-third”, *RNZ*, 5 June 2024, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/top/518667/terrorism-and-violent-extremism-research-funding-cut-by-two-thirds>

Romaniuk, Peter, *Multilateral Counter-Terrorism: The Global Politics of Cooperation and Contestation*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009.

Rosand, Eric, Alistair Millar and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Counterterrorism and the United Nations Security Council Since 9/11; Moving Beyond the 2001 Paradigm”, *Security the Future*

Initiative, September 2022, Full-Final-SFI-Report-Moving-Beyond-the-2001-Paradigm.pdf

Schoenfeld Walker, Amy, Malika Khurana and Christine Zhang, “What remains of U.S.A.I.D.?”, *New York Times*, 22 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/06/22/us/politics/usaaid-foreign-aid-trump.html>

About the Author

Bibi van Ginkel

Dr Bibi van Ginkel, LL.M. is the Programme Lead of the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) pillar of ICCT and Senior Research fellow. Her expertise spans a wide variety of focus areas of ICCT, from rule of law issues to trends and threat developments, counterterrorism, countering violent extremism responses, and prevention strategies, and the nexus between development and P/CVE. She has published on these topics, as well as provided policy advice and training. In the PCVE pillar, she focuses on strengthening multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary approaches, ensuring global, national and local approaches are connected, using a human security lens to assess impact of policies and mitigate challenges, and advising on context-specific and effective policy solutions. She is a strong advocate of monitoring and evaluation of policies based on well-developed theory of changes, and has conducted evaluations of the CT policies of the EU, the co-chairmanship of The Netherlands of the GCTF, and the cooperation between the UN and the GCTF. Some examples of research and policy advice include themes such as returning foreign fighters, right-wing and anti-establishment extremism, evidence collection on the battlefield, use of administrative measures in a counter-terrorism context, the do no harm principle as a guiding principle in CT and P/CVE policy-making, assessment of local responses to radicalisation and extremism, development of multi-stakeholder P/CVE policies.

Prior to joining ICCT as the P/CVE Programme Lead, she worked as an independent consultant for her own company The Glocal Connection – Platform for Shared Security, and before that as senior research fellow at the Security Unit of the Clingendael Research Department of the Netherlands Institute for International Relations ‘Clingendael’, as well as research fellow for ICCT. She also worked as a senior consultant to United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UNCTED) on a project developing global guidelines to facilitate the collection of information and evidence by military and other relevant criminal law actors within a rule-of-law framework. She also worked as a consultant for UNODC, and worked as an implementer for the Criminal Justice and Rule of Law Working Group of the Global Counterterrorism Forum, developing several of the framework documents on battlefield evidence, administrative measures and the nexus between terrorism and transnational organised crime and international core crimes. She is an international lawyer by training and started her career at Utrecht University as an associate professor. She obtained her PhD at Utrecht University.

She is a regular commentator in national and international media. Finally, she has served as a member of the Peace and Security Committee of the Dutch Advisory Council on International Affairs for 12 years. She is a member of the Advisory Council to the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, and the Netherlands Advisory Council on Public International Law (CAVV).



International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050

E: info@icct.nl

www.icct.nl