



Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism?

An Assessment

Marc Sommers, Mai Ibrahim Nasrallah

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Executive Summary

Can the field known as Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism effectively prevent and/or counter the efforts of violent extremist organisations?

The answer to this question has risen in significance because the leading global response to violent extremist organisation (VEO) threats – hard power, enemy-centred, state-driven force known as counter-terrorism (CT) – has failed to reverse the ongoing expansion of VEOs worldwide.

A second set of international responses emerged alongside CT a few years after the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001 (9/11). Known either as Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) or Countering Violent Extremism (CVE; the combination is called P/CVE), it has served as CT's soft-side complement for two decades.

Due to the persistent ability of resilient VEOs to enter villages and neighbourhoods, coerce citizens, dominate illicit economies, manipulate female and male youth frustrations, and transform government weaknesses to their advantage, two pressing questions arise:

1. What is the appropriate P/CVE response to VEOs on the international stage?
2. Following funding reductions to P/CVE efforts (including by the US and the UK governments), what is the most effective way to invest limited resources?

This paper investigates whether and how P/CVE works against VEOs. It features an authoritative review of available and relevant published documentation about the P/CVE field in the international sphere, as well as key concerns related to P/CVE. The authors' comparative framework for organisation and analysis was straightforward: to contrast what VEOs do with how PVE and CVE actors respond. The nature, calibre, and reach of governance in nations where VEOs and P/CVE actors operate is a significant dimension of this paper's analysis. The appraisal of P/CVE programmes concentrated on four categories of initiatives – concerning youth, gender, large-scale holistic approaches, and counter-messaging and counter-narrative campaigns – which have produced especially notable levels of documentation.

In general, the VEOs that have propelled substantial global P/CVE investment operate in conflict-affected, fragile and ungoverned areas and threaten (or are seen to threaten) the strategic interests of Global North nations.¹ This paper's analysis identified a specific collection of radical Sunni Islamist groups – primarily, the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, together with their many affiliates globally – as the principal VEO focus of Global North powers (as well as major multinational institutions). Accordingly, this paper focuses on their actions and the P/CVE responses to them. Addressing the international VEO challenge has become substantially more complex in recent years, due to the reinvention of IS and al-Qaeda as transnational terrorist operations, each with expansive international reach.

Analysis for this paper integrated a recognition of potentially consequential constraints on P/CVE strategy and action, including: (1) The often-unstable security contexts that surround many P/CVE initiatives; (2) The influence of governments of nations where both VEO and P/CVE action takes place; and (3) Fundamental evaluation challenges, particularly the difficulty of confirming whether a P/CVE programme has successfully prevented VEO activities from taking place or countered those that VEOs have already undertaken.

¹ The Global North has been identified as comprising "the United States, Canada, England, nations of the European Union, as well as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and even some countries in the southern hemisphere: Australia, and New Zealand." Lara Braff and Katie Nelson, "Chapter 15: The Global North: Introducing the Region," in *Gendered Lives: Global Issues*, eds. Nadine T. Fernandez and Katie Nelson (Milne Open Textbooks, 2021; online version), <https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/genderedlives/chapter/chapter-15-the-global-north-introducing-the-region/>.

The research endeavour also drew on the guidance from two advisory groups. A total of eleven top experts were recruited to support this effort.² Members of the CT Advisory Group provided advice on CT and VEO issues, while their counterparts on the CVE Advisory Group advised on PVE and CVE programmes and their contexts.

Key Findings and Analysis

Lack of Consensus on Key Definitions

There is an absence of clarity about many basic concepts that impact the P/CVE field. Some contend that widely agreed definitions will never exist. One set concerns the lack of a clear-cut distinction between terrorism and violent extremism. At the same time, the notion of terrorism routinely excludes state-led terror. Terrorists (and, by extension, violent extremists) are thought to be non-state actors.

The launching point for what P/CVE is, what it should do, and how it connects to CT efforts also remains unclear. As a result, there is a lack of precision about how P/CVE efforts prevent and/or counter violent extremism. This has facilitated the regular and unstrategic merging of security-oriented P/CVE efforts with the non-P/CVE world of international development and humanitarian action.

An Array of VEO Capabilities

VEOs use terror to garner attention and generate the sort of emotional outrage and notoriety that fuels the impression of mighty power and influence. Such acts simultaneously cultivate the submission of subjects on the ground.

Other key features of resilient VEO operations include their capacity to: adapt to changing contexts; network with affiliated VEOs and expand areas of control; employ a range of methods to control civilians, including coercing the allegiance of local populations and applying human intelligence via informant networks; exploit immense governance vacuums that usually exist where they operate; develop profoundly profitable economic portfolios in a diverse range of sectors, including taxation, cybercrime, human, drug and arms trafficking, kidnapping and ransom, animal poaching, and illicit trade in livestock, gold, oil, and fuel; and apply a high degree of gender and youth expertise to entice and exploit their recruits.

Complex Relations with National Governments

The prime driver of VEO development and expansion is government mismanagement, violence, and abuse. Yet P/CVE actors usually operate with at least the tacit approval of governments that brandish precisely the sort of misrule that provides VEOs with opportunities to rise up or move in. Such a stance might be necessary: it is virtually impossible to operate in a country without its government's approval. However, this positioning invites the following irony to impact action on the ground: *In order to counter or prevent violent extremism, P/CVE actors often have to align themselves with the main contributors to the conditions that can lead to violent extremism.*

² The members of the CT Advisory Group are: Maj Gen J. Marcus Hicks, former Commander of Special Operations Command, Africa; Ms Georgia Holmer, Senior Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI); Dr Scott Atran, Emeritus Director of Research in Anthropology at France's National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and Professor at the University of Michigan; Dr Jessica White, Director of Terrorism and Conflict Studies, RUSI; Dr Alexander Thurston, University of Cincinnati; and Kateira Aryaeinejad. Members of the CVE Advisory Group are: Dr Lauren Van Metre, President and CEO, Women in International Security; Dr. Fatima Akilu, Executive Director, Neem Foundation; Dr. Dwaine Lee, Vice President, American Center for Combating Extremism and Terrorism; Former USAID FSO; Dr Matteo Vergani, Associate Professor, Deakin University; and Dr Kathleen Kuehnast, Senior Fellow, Alliance for Peacebuilding.

The P/CVE Programme Landscape

The international P/CVE programme field operating outside the Global North has grown to encompass government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and for-profit entities. There is a general lack of detailed information regarding who P/CVE programmes are targeting, what outcomes are projected, or what strategic frameworks will guide efforts (such as a Theory of Change, or ToC). While some programmes may claim success in delivering services, the evidence base is insufficient to substantiate claims about preventing or countering VEO impacts.

Analysis of a vast array of P/CVE programme materials surfaced the following key trends:

- *Regular dependence on unproven assumptions to inform and guide action.* Basing aims, rationales and objectives on assumptions that may not or cannot be true runs the risk of undermining P/CVE initiatives and possibly creating adverse and unintended outcomes.
- *A confusing and uncompetitive approach to gender and youth.* The P/CVE field does not clarify the difference or overlap between *gender* and *youth* concerns. Much more common are the implied conventional meanings of gender as *women* and *youth* as male youth. A perplexing P/CVE oversight is not prioritising the predominance of male youth in VEO fighting forces.

Contrast this to common VEO approaches to gender and youth. Exploiting female and male youth fragilities and vulnerabilities concerning threats of severe exclusion and emasculation, together with the search for a life with purpose, have proven to be VEO specialties. The result is a P/CVE field bound by tradition and more attuned to addressing mainstream development objectives than responding to rising security threats emanating from savvy, adaptable VEO adversaries with demonstrable, penetrating, and highly effective gender and youth expertise.

- *Ambitious holistic programmes are popular.* The whole-of-community (or whole-of-society) approach involves multiple stakeholders, including government, civil society, and local communities working together to address the underlying drivers of violent extremism. The emphasis is on collaboration across sectors, with the shared aim of strengthening governance, accountability, and community resilience. Although programme approaches often assume that states can and will reform themselves, there remains a need for more strategic and effective approaches for addressing state-driven practices that promote patronage, oppression, and marginalisation. The research did not uncover specific guidance for how to implement this approach within predatory states.
- *Counter-messaging and counter-narrative initiatives are prevalent.* These media-based approaches address the ideological, behavioural, and psychological drivers of radicalisation. They often focus on providing alternative narratives to challenge extremist ideologies and spark community discussions about the factors that drive violent extremism. However, efforts to counter the narratives and messages of VEOs (online or elsewhere) are based on shaky evidence. While some research indicates limited success in countering VEO narratives and messaging, comprehensive assessments of counter-messaging/counter-narrative efforts have raised questions about broader impact.
- *An approach to evaluation work that routinely sets aside basic assessment principles and frequently favours declarations of positive impact that are unproven.* The difficulty of proving that a P/CVE initiative either prevented a future VEO incursion or countered those that have already taken place are weighty evaluation constraints. At the same time, basic evaluation fundamentals regularly are not implemented. The paucity of quality impact evaluations remains a prominent sector-wide weakness.

Conclusions and Policy Questions

Analysis of available relevant publications for this study strongly suggests that the sprawling field known as Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism rests on uncertain ground. P/CVE actors institute programming that often lacks surgical precision or urgency. Most significantly, their efforts are largely disconnected from the specifics of what VEOs do and how governments behave. However valid their intent, P/CVE initiatives typically do not actively strive either to prevent or counter the explicit actions and designs of VEOs or the truly destructive impacts of governments.

Two decades into the P/CVE endeavour, the assets and advantages of VEOs are so significant, and the woes caused by national government misrule are so pronounced, that an upgraded approach to the vital endeavour of preventing and countering violent extremism is required.

To facilitate policy discussions, the following nine sets of elemental challenges (presented in question form; the complete set can be found in the final section of the main report) aim to inspire critical examination and reflection on how to upgrade and sharpen the exceptionally important work of P/CVE:

1. *VEOs*: Should P/CVE compete for relevance, credibility and legitimacy with VEOs? Should P/CVE create new subfields or expand existing ones to prevent or counter major and largely unchallenged VEO endeavours (such as in money laundering, human, arms and drug trafficking, and other illicit economic activities)?
2. *Governments and Governance*: Can governments known for misrule lead the way against VEOs? Should P/CVE address state violence, corruption, the profound marginalisation of particular groups, degraded public services, faulty justice, and other major governance issues that transform into VEO advantages? What areas of leverage can be identified and used to encourage impactful governance reforms?
3. *CT*: What does a strategic relationship between CT and P/CVE actors look like?
4. *Development and Humanitarian Efforts*: Does allowing P/CVE to merge with development and humanitarian work run the risk of cultivating counterproductive outcomes and undermining credibility?
5. *P/CVE*: Is it important to settle on whether a difference exists between PVE and CVE?
6. *Gender and Youth*: Should P/CVE actors compete with the often-exceptional gender and youth expertise and strategies that many VEOs employ?
7. *Access*: Who should get into P/CVE programmes? For example, are P/CVE programmes competing with VEOs for the same female and male youth?
8. *Assumptions*: Should P/CVE actors continue to derive rationales from assumptions?
9. *Evaluations*: How should P/CVE respond to evidence of little or no positive impact from P/CVE initiatives?

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Part One: Introduction

Purpose and Scope

Can the field known as Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism effectively prevent and/or counter the efforts of violent extremist organisations?

The answer to this question has risen in significance because the leading global response to violent extremist organisation (VEO) threats – hard power, enemy-centred, state-driven force known as counter-terrorism (CT) – has failed to reverse the ongoing expansion of VEOs worldwide.

A second set of international responses emerged alongside CT a few years after the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001 (9/11). Known either as Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) or Countering Violent Extremism (CVE; the combination is called P/CVE), it has served as CT's soft-side complement for two decades.³

This paper investigates whether and how P/CVE works against VEOs. Given the ability of successful VEOs to enter villages and neighbourhoods, coerce citizens, dominate illicit economies, manipulate female and male youth frustrations, and transform government weaknesses to their advantage, two pressing questions arise:

1. What is the appropriate P/CVE response to VEOs on the international stage?
2. Following funding reductions to P/CVE efforts (including by the US and the UK governments), what is the most effective way to invest limited resources?

Identifying viable answers to these questions is important because global VEO threats continue to advance. Despite costly Global North government⁴ responses to violent extremism and terrorism since 2001, many VEOs have expanded in size, diversity, capability, and deadliness. The numerous resilient and adaptable VEOs worldwide mix occasional and spectacular violence with sophisticated and adaptable operations. And their geographic reach keeps growing. In just one year (2024), the number of countries experiencing terrorist incidents rose by 12 percent.⁵

Featuring a critical assessment of relevant published literature, this paper aims to grasp the current state of P/CVE in the international sphere, spur reflection about P/CVE, and inspire a more nuanced and strategic approach to P/CVE practice and policy. The paper's analysis combines an examination of VEO operations, the contexts where VEOs operate, the influence of governance in VEO contexts, and the soft power initiatives that seek to prevent and/or counter their manoeuvres. The authors were greatly aided by a corps of top CT and P/CVE specialists who provided expert guidance and advice.

In general, the VEOs that have propelled substantial global P/CVE investment operate in conflict-affected, fragile, and ungoverned areas and threaten (or are seen to threaten) the strategic interests of Global North nations. Analysis for this paper identified a specific collection of radical Sunni Islamist groups – primarily, the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda, together with their many affiliates globally – as the principal VEO focus of Global North powers (as well as major multinational institutions). The

³ The P/CVE field is thought to have “evolved in the post 9/11 environment” and embody “the so-called ‘soft’ counterterrorism approach”. Sadi Shanaah and Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “What Drives Counter-Extremism? The Extent of P/CVE Policies in the West and Their Structural Correlates”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 8 (2023): 1724, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10629459/pdf/FTPV_35_2080063.pdf.

⁴ The Global North has been identified as comprising “the United States, Canada, England, nations of the European Union, as well as Singapore, Japan, South Korea, and even some countries in the southern hemisphere: Australia, and New Zealand”. Lara Braff and Katie Nelson, “Chapter 15: The Global North: Introducing the Region”, in *Gendered Lives: Global Issues*, eds. Nadine T. Fernandez and Katie Nelson (Milne Open Textbooks, 2021; online version), <https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/genderedlives/chapter/chapter-15-the-global-north-introducing-the-region/>.

⁵ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring The Impact of Terrorism*, March 2025, 2. <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

international VEO challenge has become substantially more complex due to the reinvention of IS and al-Qaeda as transnational terrorist operations, each with expansive global reach.

The actions of and the P/CVE responses to this VEO subset are the main focus of this paper. P/CVE activities that address domestic VEO threats within Global North nations, or VEOs that largely consist of international networks within the Global North region (such as far-right, neo-Nazi VEOs), are not addressed in this study.

Methods and Constraints

This paper features an authoritative review of available and relevant published documentation about the P/CVE field in the international sphere, as well as concerns related to P/CVE. Most of the many hundreds of documents reviewed were in English. A much smaller number of programme-related documents were in Arabic.

Given the prodigious number of published documents on international P/CVE, the authors employed several strategies to focus their investigation. One was to identify and highlight quality reviews of literature about particular dimensions of P/CVE. This proved useful in the assessment of programme evaluations, for example. The appraisal of P/CVE programmes concentrated on four categories of initiatives – concerning youth, gender, large-scale holistic approaches, and counter-messaging and counter-narrative campaigns – that have produced especially notable levels of documentation.

The authors' comparative framework for organisation and analysis was straightforward: to contrast what VEOs do, with how PVE and CVE actors respond. The results of this analysis are found in the two core chapters of the paper ("What VEOs Do" and "How PVE and CVE Respond to VEOs"). Two additional subjects – on key definitions and a short history of the P/CVE field – provided necessary context and are incorporated as separate chapters.

The literature review process also surfaced an additional commanding factor: the nature, calibre and reach of governance in nations where VEOs and P/CVE actors operate. Governance is a significant dimension of this paper's analysis.

Our investigation further revealed a set of potentially consequential constraints on PVE and CVE strategy and action. They include:

1. *The security dynamics surrounding P/CVE initiatives.* Many take place in highly unstable environments. This may influence what P/CVE programmes address and where they operate, as well as what programme publications reveal about them.
2. *The influence of the governments of nations where VEO and P/CVE action takes place.* Governments may be leading CT operations and/or providing some degree of services and protection for citizens in locales where P/CVE initiatives are active. As host nations, governments also may directly and indirectly impact the location and nature of P/CVE provisions on the ground.
3. *Fundamental evaluation challenges.* It is difficult (if not improbable) for a programme assessment to confirm whether a PVE or CVE initiative has successfully prevented the actions of a VEO and its recruits from taking place. It is also difficult to determine whether P/CVE actions effectively countered those actions that VEOs and their members have already undertaken.

Analysis for this paper integrated a recognition of these constraints.

The research endeavour also included two sets of advisory groups, comprised of eleven top experts who were recruited to support this effort. Members of the CT Advisory Group provided guidance

and advice on CT and VEO issues, while their counterparts on the CVE Advisory Group advised on PVE and CVE programmes and their contexts.⁶ The suggestions and guidance they provided proved invaluable. For example, the CT Advisory Group suggested a process for identifying those VEOs that emerged as the central focus of the study, while the CVE Advisory Group urged the authors to include the identification and assessment of key assumptions that inform P/CVE policy and practice.

Part Two: Starting Points

Terrorism, Violent Extremism, and VEOs

From the start, the terms *counter-terrorism* and *countering violent extremism* invite confusion. Some contend that “CVE is a counterterrorism strategy” and that CT and CVE are inherently related.⁷ Yet the phrasing of the twin terms highlights a degree of separation: CT counters terrorism while CVE counters violent extremism (and, following the terminology, PVE prevents it). This appears to imply that *terrorism* and *violent extremism* do not have the same meaning. It turns out that the main characteristic the two terms share is a lack of precision and clarity over what they mean.

Quite often, the point of departure is terrorism, of which “there is no shortage of definitions on offer but none of them has attracted consensus”.⁸ The term itself has been around for centuries (perhaps since 1793).⁹ However, since the 9/11 attacks, its frame of reference is thought to have become more politicised than violent extremism. Also, terrorism “is frequently used in a pejorative manner to stigmatise and delegitimise opponents”. This suggests that the meanings of terrorism and terrorists are subjective and political, given the adage that “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”.¹⁰

At least two qualifiers appear to exist:

- First, one definition of terrorism focuses not on terrorists but acts of terrorism. In this way, meaning is extracted from “that which makes terrorism so terrifying: its randomness; and so outrageous: the intentional targeting of innocent civilians (as opposed to collaborators).” Terrorist violence thus is symbolic because “it aims not to influence the victims of the violence but to send a political message to a wider audience”.¹¹
- Second, the notion of terrorism routinely excludes state-led terror.¹² This is unsurprising, since states generally determine who the terrorists are. Nonetheless, the concept is foundational: terrorists are, exclusively, non-state actors.

6 The members of the CT Advisory Group are: Maj Gen J. Marcus Hicks, former Commander of Special Operations Command, Africa; Ms Georgia Holmer, Senior Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI); Dr Scott Atran, Emeritus Director of Research in Anthropology at France’s National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) & Professor at the University of Michigan; Dr Jessica White, Director of Terrorism and Conflict Studies, RUSI; Dr Alexander Thurston, University of Cincinnati; and Kateira Aryaeinejad. Members of the CVE Advisory Group are: Dr Lauren Van Metre, President & CEO, Women in International Security; Dr Fatima Akilu, Executive Director, Neem Foundation; Dr Dwaine Lee, Vice President, American Center for Combating Extremism and Terrorism; Former USAID FSO; Dr Matteo Vergani, Associate Professor, Deakin University; and Dr Kathleen Kuehnast, Senior Fellow, Alliance for Peacebuilding.

7 Brennan Center for Justice, *Why Countering Violent Extremism Programs Are Bad Policy*, 2019, September 9,

8 Peter Romaniuk, “Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned From the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism”, Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2015, 7, https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Does-CVE-Work_2015-1.pdf.

9 Alex P. Schmid, *Defining Terrorism*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, ICCT Report, 2023, March, 4, https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-03/Schmidt%20-%20Defining%20Terrorism_1.pdf

10 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilas Tarp, and Christina Schori Liang, *Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon of violent extremism*, Geneva Paper 24/19, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2019, August, 10, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10xuCSaBlvYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

11 Virginia Page Fortna, “Do Terrorists Win? Rebels’ Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes,” *International Organization* 69, no. 03 (June 2015): 522.

12 Legal frameworks effectively promote the notion that states cannot be considered terrorists and state abuse excludes state-led terror. While international humanitarian law “prohibits most acts committed in armed conflict that would commonly be considered ‘terrorist’”, the notion of terrorism is undefined. Outside of armed conflict contexts, states are in the driver’s seat, as they are empowered to enact “measures to prevent or suppress terrorist acts” on their territory. By implication, these measures are aimed only at non-state actors. See, for example, International Committee of the Red Cross, “What does IHL say about terrorism?”, January 22, 2015. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-does-ihl-say-about-terrorism>.

The dominance of governments in this discussion also sidesteps clandestine state support to major terrorist organisations. Efforts to obscure state-terrorist organisation connections (thought to be common) are facilitated by the absence of “internationally [agreed] legal instruments for designating states as sponsors of terrorism”.¹³

The overwhelming CT and P/CVE focus on non-state terrorist actors has opened the door for governments to customise definitions of *terrorism* and *terrorists* to their liking. A notable example of this surfaced in Egypt in 2013, when Abdel Fattah el-Sisi became president (following a military coup) and “called on the Egyptian people to back the army and the police to fight terrorism across the country”. One analyst considered this a tactic “to create a mandate for continued military rule”.¹⁴ Sisi’s ensuing counter-terrorism law in 2015 was thought to generate “a permanent state of emergency” by spotlighting “vaguely defined” terrorist crimes that enabled the state to address whatever threats they had identified.¹⁵ Years later, the Egyptian government continued to label “activists and political opponents” as terrorists.¹⁶

In the absence of universally agreed definitions of terrorism and violent extremism, “the terms can sometimes be employed interchangeably”. More frequently, however, “the phenomenon of ‘violent extremism’ is regarded as being broader than that of terrorism”.¹⁷ This take is widely shared.¹⁸

There also is disagreement on what constitutes a VEO. Davis observed that “[a] commonly accepted definition for VEOs does not yet exist within the United States and the international community”. To fill the void, she provided her own:

A VEO is a group of people that uses physical force to cause harm, damage, or kill/eradicate someone/ something to achieve one or more political, religious, social, or economic objectives that the majority subjectively considers to be outside the scope of what is reasonable and acceptable behavior and norms.

Based on her definition, Davis’ survey uncovered a plethora of VEOs worldwide: 1,393, to be precise. Over a 25-year period (1992-2016), an average of 56 brand new VEOs emerged every year. Extending Davis’ estimated average annual growth rate to the present, perhaps 1,897 VEOs are operational today.¹⁹

On the other end of the spectrum are definitions of violent extremism and VEOs that reflect the prominent tendency for Global North powers and major multinational institutions to focus, overwhelmingly, on a finite number of radical Sunni Islamist groups. Reflecting this far more common trend, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Commission on Countering Violent Extremism provided this definition:

We use the general term “violent extremism” to refer to the subset of violent extremist organizations that claim the religion of Islam as their motivating source and to justify their nefarious goals, and the term “extremist” to describe the ideologies and narratives deployed by these groups.

¹³ Alex P. Schmidt, 2023, *Defining Terrorism*, ICCT Report (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism), March 2023, 14, https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-03/Schmidt%20-%20Defining%20Terrorism_1.pdf

¹⁴ Saferworld, “We need to talk about Egypt: how brutal counter-terrorism is failing Egypt and its allies”, October 2017, 1, <https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/we-need-to-talk-about-egypt/>

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Egypt: Counterterrorism Law Erodes Basic Rights: Broad ‘Terrorist Acts’ List May Criminalize Civil Disobedience*, August 19, 2015, [https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/19/egypt-counterterrorism-law-erodes-basic-rights#:~:text=\(Beirut\)%20%E2%80%93%20Egypt's%20new%20counterterrorism,it%20could%20encompass%20civil%20disobedience.](https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/08/19/egypt-counterterrorism-law-erodes-basic-rights#:~:text=(Beirut)%20%E2%80%93%20Egypt's%20new%20counterterrorism,it%20could%20encompass%20civil%20disobedience.)

¹⁶ Abdelrahman Mansour, “Sisi’s Last Stand”, *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/egypt-sisi-human-rights-protests-detention-terrorism-biden-trump/>.

¹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), ‘*Radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’*, n.d, <https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/en/education/tertiary/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/radicalization-violent-extremism.html>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Norwegian Refugee Council, *Countering Violent Extremism and Humanitarian Action*, June 2017, 2, https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/position-papers/170622-nrc-position-paper_cve-and-humanitarian-action---fv.pdf, and Peter Romaniuk, *Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned From the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism* (Global Center on Cooperative Security), 2015,7, https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Does-CVE-Work_2015-1.pdf.

¹⁹ She further found that “[a]rmed assaults and bombings are the top two preferred attack methods” of VEOs while “[p]rivate citizens and government entities are the top two preferred [VEO] targets”. Brigit Davis, “Violent Extremist Organizations: Past Trends and Short-Term Forecast”, *Journal of Strategic Security* 12, no. 3 (2019), 38-41.

The Commission then listed examples of the VEOs they have in mind: “ISIS [IS], al Qaeda, Boko Haram, [and] the Taliban”.²⁰ All except the Taliban are radical Salafi-jihadist movements²¹ who maintain that “violent jihad is the only way to protect the Islamic world”.²² The Taliban, in contrast, are Deobandis.²³

The reasons that inform the explicit Global North concentration on a tiny handful of VEOs based outside the Global North goes deeper still. Via their terrifying, attention-grabbing, and proactive actions and aims, the radical Sunni jihadist VEOs ultimately spurred the founding and rise of the international CVE-PVE enterprise. An endeavour by President Donald Trump’s US Administration (in 2017) to replace the Countering Violent Extremism moniker either with *Countering Violent Jihad* or *Countering Radical Islamic Extremism* demonstrated the magnitude of the VEOs’ presence in the consciousness of many in the Global North.²⁴ It also communicated an explicit subtext for international CVE, PVE, and CT activity: that they are fixed on Islamic extremist groups. Accordingly, while the CVE label ultimately was retained,²⁵ the internal US government debate about CVE illustrates how this immense worldwide effort ended up concentrating on one particular subset of VEOs.

As we turn to examine VEO actions, this paper will adapt its VEO definition to the Global North focus on VEOs in the international sphere, which largely boils down to the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, together with their many affiliates worldwide. The Taliban no longer appears to be a VEO, since it no longer is a non-state actor, having retaken power over Afghanistan in 2021.²⁶ Boko Haram, in turn, has divided into two main groups, one of which is affiliated with the Islamic State.²⁷

What VEOs Do

VEOs that operate in fragile, conflict-affected, and/or ungoverned spaces, which in the contemporary VEO landscape tend to be radical Islamist outfits, “frequently undertake a mode of state-building that is based partly on a quest for legitimacy and partly on fear, coercion, and extreme brutality”. To do this, they regularly employ acts of violence to “create stronger boundaries between groups within society, as well as strengthened dichotomies between ‘us’ and ‘them’”.²⁸

A prominent al-Qaeda operative produced an unapologetic treatise detailing three phases that enable radical Islamist VEOs to secure legitimacy. The first phase features “[d]isrupting and exhausting the enemy through terrorist actions and insurgency”. Next comes the use of controlled barbarism “to establish order and security, provide public services, build efficient management structures and enforce Sharia law”. The final phase ramps up the performance of barbaric acts to unify “different small extremist entities”.²⁹

20 Shannon N. Green and Keith Proctor, *Turning Point: A New Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 2016), 2-3, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/turning-point>.

21 Emerging in the 1990s and eventually expanding their presence across much of the world, Salafi-jihadist VEOs combine Salafist designs to “purify” other Muslims (to align with Salafist ideas) with military action against Muslim leaders who “are Muslim in name only” and “far enemies” in the West/ Global North, particularly the U.S. and Israel. Salafi-jihadists “treat ordinary Muslims as needing violent correction”. Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 19-20.

22 A. M. Vasilieva and N. A. Zherlitsynaa, “The Evolution of Al-Qaeda: Between Regional Conflicts and a Globalist Perspective”, *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92, no. 13 (2022): S1242.

23 Deobandi Islam was “borne from [British] colonial struggles” and “founded in 1866 at Deoband, India”. The original followers aimed to “reestablish and elevate the role of the *ulama* [scholarly Islamic specialists] in British-occupied India”. The Taliban’s brand of Deobandism has been described as a “politically extremist” subset. Joshua Pease and James Hess, “The Convergence of Subjects: Defining Where Deobandi and Salafi Subjects Intersect”, *Global Security and Intelligence Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 61- 62, <https://gsis.scholasticahq.com/article/25508-the-convergence-of-subjects-defining-where-deobandi-and-salafi-subjects-intersect>.

24 Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik, *Countering Violent Extremism* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law, 2017), 1, https://www.brennancenter.org/media/254/download/Report_Brennan%20Center%20CVE%20Report_0.pdf?inline=1.

25 Eric Rosand and Stevan Weine, “On CVE, the Trump administration could have been worse”, *Brookings Institution*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/on-cve-the-trump-administration-could-have-been-worse/>.

26 Clayton Thomas, 2025, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 7, 2025), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45122>.

27 Boko Haram has divided into two splinter groups: Jama’u Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad (JAS) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The “[c]onflict between these Boko Haram splinters stems from differences in governance and treatment of civilians. JAS kills and steals from everyone; the more bureaucratic ISWAP generally spares Muslim non-combatants”. International Crisis Group, *JAS vs. ISWAP: The War of the Boko Haram Splinters: Crisis Group Africa Briefing No. 196* (March 28, 2024), 1, https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/b196-jas-vs-iswap_0.pdf.

28 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilas Tarp and Christina Schori Liang, *Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon of violent extremism: Geneva Paper 24/19* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, August 2019), 5 -14, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10xuCSaBlvYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

29 Abu Bakr Naji, *The management of savagery: The most critical stage through which the umma will pass* (2004), in Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilas Tarp and Christina Schori Liang, *Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon*

The use of acts that, to outsiders, are despicably brutal and vicious is precisely the point. VEOs use terror to garner attention and generate the sort of emotional outrage and notoriety that fuels the impression of mighty power and influence. Such acts simultaneously cultivate the submission of subjects on the ground. Unfortunately, and as will be detailed, in a great many cases (particularly in the short term), their efforts work.

This has been underscored globally via the spectacular success of two VEOs. They have created a demonstration effect that likely still inspires VEOs globally. First is the Taliban, who retook Afghanistan following the departure of US forces in August 2021. Second is the arrival of a rebel coalition led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; formerly Jabhat an-Nusra) as rulers of Syria in December 2024. Although international recognition of the Taliban and HTS has proven grudging and slow, the two victorious organisations have nonetheless assumed leadership over national governments.³⁰

This section will briefly review only some of the ways that major VEOs have operated and often thrived. It aims to set the stage for examining how P/CVE efforts respond to their methods.

Adapt, Network, Expand

In May 2011, US President Barack Obama declared that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden had been killed.³¹ In December 2018, US President Donald Trump announced that “[w]e have won against ISIS [IS]”.³² These assessments of the rival Middle Eastern VEOs, each with a robust global presence, were premature in both cases. Rather than ending their operations, the events hastened a major turning point in international efforts against VEOs. In response to these military operations, the two VEOs have reinvented themselves as transnational terrorist operations, each with expansive international reach.

Al-Qaeda has morphed from a single entity into a decentralised, networked outfit without a permanent headquarters but maintaining a presence in up to 76 countries simultaneously.³³ It strikes affiliation deals with VEOs in various parts of the world, such as one with al-Shabaab in East Africa. Al-Qaeda today “relies on its affiliates to project strength and rebuild”. In exchange, “[a]-Shabaab gains jihadist prestige” via al-Qaeda while retaining its autonomy.³⁴

Following its defeat to a US-led coalition of over seventy nations in eastern Syria in 2019, IS shifted gears.³⁵ While it remains an insurgent group in Syria and Iraq,³⁶ it has shed the aim of a centralised caliphate that broadcasts its presence and controls territory. Instead, it mainly operates via franchised operations that support and coordinate with affiliate VEOs.³⁷ IS affiliates operate across West Africa, as well as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Libya, Mozambique, the Philippines, and Somalia.³⁸

of violent extremism: Geneva Paper 24/19 (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, August 2019), 14, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10xuCsaBlvYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

30 Evidence of their shift from non-state terrorist actors to government leadership is substantial and growing. For example, the Global Terrorism Index 2025 stated that the Taliban was no longer included in their Index, “following the group’s ascendance to government in 2021”. Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring The Impact of Terrorism* (March 2025), 2, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

In addition, the UK and US governments have dropped HTS from their lists of foreign terrorist organizations. Reuters, “UK removes terrorism designation for Syria’s HTS”, October 21, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk-removes-terrorism-designation-syrias-hts-2025-10-21/>.

31 Aljazeera, “Osama bin Laden killed in Pakistan”, May 2, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/5/2/osama-bin-laden-killed-in-pakistan>.

32 Mark Landler, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “Trump to Withdraw U.S. Forces From Syria, Declaring ‘We Have Won Against ISIS’”, *New York Times*, December 19, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/us/politics/trump-syria-turkey-troop-withdrawal.html>.

33 A. M. Vasilieva and N. A. Zherlitsynaa, “The Evolution of Al-Qaeda: Between Regional Conflicts and a Globalist Perspective”, *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92, no. 13 (2022): S1244-S1243.

34 Tricia Bacon and Daisy Muibu, “Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab: A Resilient Alliance”, in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 392.

35 Frank Gardner, “IS: A persistent danger, 10 years since its peak”, *BBC*, June 28, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv2g3gz08ylo>.

36 Clayton Thomas, *The Islamic State: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2024), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10328>.

37 Alex Gatopoulos, “ISIL: 2.0: How the group became a franchise”, *Aljazeera*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/12/isil-20-how-the-group-became-a-franchise>.

38 Clayton Thomas, *The Islamic State: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2024),

VEOs also have adapted technologically. A vivid example of this has been the rapid expansion of military drone technology by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). From their perch in West Africa's Sahel, and in the space of only two years, JNIM "has built the capacity to deploy drones across three countries, integrating them into battlefield tactics, reconnaissance, and visual propaganda".³⁹ Over the coming decade, it is also anticipated that VEOs will use artificial intelligence (AI) to "produce believable deep fake content, provide immersive experiences, better intelligence on targets and produce believable tailored propaganda, faster".⁴⁰

Control Populations

One of the keys to VEO success is *not* to play by the military dictates of CT actors. West Africa's many jihadist VEOs, for example, appear to have learned from IS efforts to conquer large parts of Iraq and Syria. It didn't last: the effort attracted conventional forces from the US and its allies to attack and defeat IS in the field. Instead, some West African VEOs (such as JNIM) implement "competitive control" tactics that dominate populations, not territory.⁴¹ Beginning perhaps 70 years ago, the Viet Cong in Viet Nam⁴² and then the Taliban in Afghanistan employed similar methods for infiltrating and generating (or coercing) the allegiance of local populations in their successful battles against US, French, and other Global North forces.

Areas of influence have only expanded since then. IS established its "virtual caliphate" online in 2014.⁴³ A decade later, it still exists, albeit largely in "decentralised communities outside of Iraq and Syria that maintain the online presence of the Islamic State".⁴⁴

Another prominent example is al-Shabaab. Unlike IS, it continues to govern and provide services across a substantial portion of Africa's Horn. It also has maintained a highly sophisticated communications infrastructure – via radio, websites, films, social media, online news and more – that dazzles its audiences and promotes "a narrative that al-Shabaab offers a credible alternative to the current government".⁴⁵ Critically, the organisation also promotes "an exaggerated, glossy image of itself" that leads "some people to believe it is more powerful than it really is".⁴⁶ Such questing for credibility and legitimacy, as well as a striving to rival or outdo the public service provisions of governments, are common VEO pursuits.

The application of human intelligence,⁴⁷ often featuring expansive networks of informants, also may be widespread (for example, estimates suggest the Taliban at one point had perhaps 20,000 spies and 100,000 informants).⁴⁸ Significantly, the likely prospect of VEOs planting informants in P/CVE

1-2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10328>.

39 Nicola Milnes and Rida Lyammouri, *Countering JNIM's Drone Proliferation in the Sahel: Policy Paper 24/25* (Policy Center for the New South, July 2025), 7, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/countering-jnims-drone-proliferation-sahel>.

40 Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring The Impact of Terrorism* (March 2025), 3, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

41 Ed Stoddard, Laura Berlingozzi, Floriand Weigand, Ashley Jackson, Leigh Mayhew, and Ibraheem Bahiss, "Sahel insurgency: What policymakers need to do differently", *The New Humanitarian*, November 24, 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/11/24/Sahel-jihad-insurgency-France-Mali-Niger-Burkina-Faso-ISIS-JNIM-ISWAP>.

42 Fredrik Logevall, 2017, "Vietnam '67: Bernard Fall: The Man Who Knew the War", *New York Times*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/opinion/bernard-fall-the-man-who-knew-the-war.html>.

43 Michael Krona, 2020, "Revisiting the Ecosystem of Islamic State's 'Virtual Caliphate'", *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, October 21, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/21/revisiting-the-ecosystem-of-islamic-states-virtual-caliphate/>.

44 Matthew Bamber-Zryd, "The Islamic State's Virtual Caliphate", *Global Challenges*, no. 13 (May 2023), Article 8, <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/13/the-islamic-states-virtual-caliphate/>.

45 Georgia Gilroy, "The Online Frontline: Decoding al-Shabaab's Social Media Strategy", *CTC Sentinel* 17, no. 1 (2024), 25, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CTC-SENTINEL-012024.pdf>.

46 Mary Harper, "Is Anybody Listening? Al-Shabaab's Communications", in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 372.

47 Human intelligence (or HUMINT) in the surveillance field is intelligence that "is gathered from human sources". Jarrod Sadulski, "What Is HUMINT and How Is It Used in the Intelligence Field?", *Intelligence Blog*, American Public University, n.d., <https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/intelligence/resources/what-is-humint-and-how-is-it-used-in-the-intelligence-field/>.

48 This examination of the Taliban sheds light on the capabilities of VEOs to conduct sophisticated surveillance. Ben Brandt, "The Taliban's Conduct of Intelligence and Counterintelligence", *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 6 (2011), 19-23, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/CTCSentinel-Vol4Iss67.pdf>.

programmes, aid agencies, military units, women's groups, youth groups, focus groups, community meetings, ministries, hospitals, prisons, marketplaces, villages, urban neighbourhoods, and other locations remains understudied, even while anecdotal reports exist. One notable example of such activity is the expansive IS intelligence operation as part of their ground operation in northeast Syria.⁴⁹ Governments do it, too. One case is the reported surveillance of Muslim youth by governments in both Nigeria and Cameroon, out of concern over their connection to the Boko Haram VEO.⁵⁰

Govern

VEOs exploit immense governance vacuums that usually exist where they operate. In general, they “tap into the narrative [and lived experiences] of state neglect and marginalization.” Across the globe, “It is widely recognized that corruption, elite impunity and exclusion from political participation lead to marginalization and generate grievances that [VEOs] can exploit.”⁵¹ Pronounced governance deficiencies offer VEOs a multitude of opportunities to demonstrate their ability to control populations and govern more effectively than states.

Applying strict interpretations of *Sharia* law, imposing publicly witnessed *Hudoud* punishments (such as stonings, amputations, and lashings), removing both local leaders (sometimes brutally) and customary governance practices, and installing a version of protection that doubles as forced subservience, are all standard governance fare for Islamist VEOs. A common selling point is an immoderate justice system that nonetheless may appear fairer, swifter, and substantially less corrupt than state-run justice institutions.⁵²

Beyond these extreme starting points are variations in local approach. While “all jihadist groups involved in governance seek to control populations, apply their ideology, and extract resources (e.g., taxation, national resources, agriculture),” they also need “some sort of buy-in from the populations being governed.” Even VEOs “are in many ways accountable to the populations they govern.”⁵³ Here are examples of how some VEOs have approached governance challenges:

- Al-Shabaab's efforts to compete with the Somali government are prodigious. It provides aid to the destitute and religious education for children, addresses family, inheritance and property disputes, “encourages [usually forced] marriages between its fighters and local girls”, handpicks “relative unknowns” as committee members to manage markets (while undermining elite and clan dominance), investigates and prosecutes corruption allegations, and much more.⁵⁴
- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has sometimes provided a judicial system and access to water and electricity.
- Pulling back from indiscriminate attacks against civilians (which fuelled its unpopularity), the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP; also known as Pakistani Taliban) has shifted its approach in the tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan. The organisation increasingly targets those civilians serving as tribal elders and actively supporting local government institutions. A second apparent strategy is to goad the Pakistani military into attacking civilians, thus hoping to cultivate civilian support for TTP as the defender of local interests and a supporter of semi-autonomous governance in the tribal areas.⁵⁵

49 International Crisis Group, *Containing a Resilient ISIS in Central and North-eastern Syria*, Middle East Report No. 236 (July 18, 2022), ii, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/middle-east-north-africa/syria/236-containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north-eastern-syria>.

50 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 248.

51 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement* (New York: UNDP, February 7, 2023), 61, 77, <https://www.undp.org/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement>.

52 Information in this paragraph was drawn from a compendium of sources.

53 Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin, “Introduction”, in *Jihadist Governance and Statecraft: Counterterrorism Workshop 2024*, ed. Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2024), 3, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyFocus180MargolinZelin.pdf>.

54 Roland Marchal, “Rivals in Governance: Civil Activities of Al-Shabaab”, in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, ed. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 349, 353-354.

55 Pearl Pandya, “The battle for the borderlands: The Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan challenges the state's control”, ACLED, October 6, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/battle-borderlands-tehreek-i-taliban-pakistan-challenges-states-control>.

- JINIM holds territories across a broad swath of West Africa that are large and still expanding. At the same time, it only has the capacity to “securely govern a limited number of communities and individuals.” In locations where JINIM cannot “depend on community engagement and offers of service provision”, it either mounts forced displacement operations or uses “violence and economic warfare to restrict civilians’ ability to resist them”.⁵⁶
- Islamic State East Asia–Philippines (representing many smaller groups) has no specific governance ambitions. They merely seek to exploit “the politics of dashed expectations” by undermining the legitimacy of the existing government.⁵⁷
- Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) is a breakaway Boko Haram outfit that has adopted an emphatic competitive control governance model (detailed earlier), where “territorial control is transitory” while “control of the population remains the core goal”. The main focus is using coercion to dominate lucrative economic sectors (such as fishing in Lake Chad) and then extracting revenue via taxation. ISWAP also makes it “easy to join, or at least tacitly accept” their *dawla* (state) – but “difficult to leave and extremely dangerous to resist”. The VEO also provides “protection and security to local communities” that locks in their control over them.⁵⁸

Dominate Illicit Economies

VEOs, of course, cannot operate without generating resources to run their operations. In this, many VEOs have excelled. They regularly enter and even dominate economic sectors that states, businesses, private citizens, and criminal gangs normally exploit. In some cases, models of kleptocratic governance established by states, which feature “incentives for corruption, secrecy, state capture, illicit movement of money, and deadly violence”,⁵⁹ have become examples to emulate or capture. An added advantage that VEOs sometimes receive comes from government adversaries choosing not to respond. In some reported cases, governments interpret VEO excellence in economic exploitation as a demonstration that the VEO is nothing more than a criminal gang. When this occurs, governments may not consider them worthy of a concerted response.⁶⁰

Shorn of regulations (except those they impose), VEOs regularly develop diverse and profoundly profitable economic portfolios, often in areas where governments have little or no presence. In addition to heavy taxation of goods, market activity, roadside checkpoints, and people under their control, a review of literature on the economic activities of VEOs surfaced their engagement in or supremacy over the following sectors: cybercrime (including malware, ransomware, and fraud and hacking services); human, drug and arms trafficking; kidnapping and ransom; animal poaching; and illicit trade in livestock, gold, oil, fuel, motorbikes, and cultural objects.⁶¹

56 Héni Nsaibia, Eleanor Beevor and Flore Berger, *Issue 1: Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies in West Africa: Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)* (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), October 2023), 31, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/JNIM-Non-state-armed-groups-and-illicit-economiesin-wWest-Africa-GI-TOC-ACLED-October-2023.pdf>.

57 Haroro J. Ingram, “The Evolving Threat of Pro-Islamic State Groups in the Philippines: Context, Competition, and Cascading Risk,” in *Jihadist Governance and Statecraft: Counterterrorism Workshop 2024*, ed. Devorah Margolin and Aaron Y. Zelin (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2024), 48.

58 Edward Stoddard, “Competitive Control? ‘Hearts and Minds’ and the Population Control Strategy of the Islamic State West Africa Province”, *African Security* 16, no. 1 (2023), 44, 39, 47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2023.2192158>.

59 John Prendergast, “Violent Kleptocracies: How they’re destroying parts of Africa and how they can be dismantled”, Enough Project, October 2016, 1. https://enoughproject.org/files/2PolicyBrief_Violent%20Kleptocracies_EnoughProject_Oct2016.pdf.

60 Private interview, Advisory Group member.

61 See, for example, United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), *Beneath the Surface: Terrorist and Violent Extremist use of the Dark Web and Cybercrime-as-a-Service for Cyber-Attacks* (2024), https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/dw_beneath_the_surface_update.pdf; Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing in the Art and Antiquities Market* (Paris: FATF, 2023) <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/MethodsandTrends/Money-Laundering-Terrorist-Financing-Art-Antiquities-Market.html>. Jeannine Ella A Abatan and William Assanvo, *Links between violent extremism and illicit activities in Benin* (Institute for Security Studies, June 2023), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/Eng-WAR-42.pdf>; William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga, *Violent extremism, organized crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma*, West Africa Report no. 26 (Institute for Security Studies, December 2019), <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>; Frederick Appiah Afriyie, “Weaving through the maze of terrorist marriages in Africa’s Sahel region: Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) under review”, *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2347011>.

And there are still more avenues for enrichment. Al-Shabaab, for example, “generates over [USD] \$100 million per year by extorting local businesses and individuals, as well as through the financial support of affiliated businesspeople”. This amount does not include the multitude of other ways in which the VEO generates income. Al-Shabaab disburses some of its copious revenue to other al-Qaeda affiliates and supports al-Qaeda’s “global ambitions to sow discord and undermine good governance”.

The international dimensions of this activity are significant. In Africa, for example, firms based in the United Arab Emirates facilitate VEO money laundering operations in East Africa (alongside many local and regional actors), as well as gold smuggling in West Africa.⁶² In Mali, the lucrative artisanal gold mining industry has reportedly attracted buyers from Turkey and Russia, in addition to the Emirates. “Jihadi groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State” are thought to be part of “Mali’s gold boom” and are “taking their cut of the gold proceeds”.⁶³

Deploy Gender and Youth Expertise

While P/CVE efforts regularly rely on their own agendas and assumptions concerning females and males (detailed below), VEOs apply a high degree of gender and youth expertise to entice and exploit their recruits. Their approach often features savvy manipulation of gender inequality.

A key focus in VEO recruitment of male youth is exploiting threatened masculinity and emasculation. Male youth often confront “a challenge of fulfilling their own socially circumscribed or ‘gendered’ roles such as being good providers and husbands”.⁶⁴ VEOs regularly respond by offering them a sense of belonging to a group and the opportunity to rid themselves of social marginalisation, get married (and gain recognition as men) and then defend their manhood and secure respect as men.⁶⁵ VEOs also regularly “shame men who do not engage in violent behaviour” by “suggesting that appropriate [male] expressions of anger or frustration must include violence”. They propagate “an alternate worldview” for emasculated men “that allows them to seek empowerment through acts of violence”. Simultaneously, VEOs “promote narratives related to masculine entitlement” by “offering women and girls as sexual trophies or providing avenues for men to easily access sex”.⁶⁶

VEOs’ manipulation of female youth and women can be equally shrewd and effective. While there is considerable variation in the treatment of women by VEOs, one VEO option is to “capitalise on and profit from the subjugation of women” and “weaponise [women’s] desire to seek empowerment through increased access to the public sphere”. Some VEOs also may present themselves as the “champions of women and women’s voices”. Their members may further deploy “messaging to pursue women who not only desire adventure and a sense of community, but who sympathise with narratives of [women’s] victimisation”.⁶⁷

62 U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Designates Transnational al-Shabaab Money Laundering Network”, March 11, 2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2168>;

For the West Africa context, see: Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps – A New Iteration of Russia’s Old Military Presence in Africa* (Polish Institute of International Affairs, May 2024), 28, https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_.pdf.

63 Bruce Whitehouse, “Illicit Flows to the UAE Take the Shine off African Gold”, *Middle East Research and Information Project*, January 18, 2023, <https://merip.org/2023/01/illicit-flows-to-the-uae-take-the-shine-off-african-gold/>.

64 Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, 2018, *Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices: A Gendered Lens on PVE*, Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series No. 13 (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2018), 30, <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/challenging-conventional-wisdom-transforming-current-practices-a-gendered-lens-on-pve>.

65 Jossif Ezekilov, “Gender ‘Men-Streaming’ CVE: Countering Violence Extremism by Addressing Masculinities Issues”, *Reconsidering Development* 5, no. 1 (2017), 3-5, <https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/reconsidering/article/view/908/978>.

66 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilaus Tarp and Christina Schori Liang, *Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon of violent extremism*, Geneva Paper 24/19 (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, August 2019), 19-20, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10xuCSaBlVYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

67 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilaus Tarp and Christina Schori Liang, *Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon of violent extremism*, Geneva Paper 24/19 (Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Policy, August 2019), 19, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10xuCSaBlVYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

Some VEO recruiters promise women “a dream life, free from daily household tasks”.⁶⁸ But once in the fold, VEOs may exploit existing stereotypes of women, as they are “less likely to raise suspicion or to be searched by authorities”. The impact of women as recruiters may have a “profound” positive impact for VEOs because they can “penetrate grassroots networks” to recruit female and male youth.⁶⁹

There also are signs of increasing VEO interest in educated female youth. For example, al-Shabaab seeks them as wives for jihadi fighters, spies, and informants (as they “raise less alarm and suspicion than the men”), and because university-educated female youth can provide medical, pharmaceutical, midwifery, and teaching support to VEOs.⁷⁰

Al-Shabaab’s mastery of youth recruitment is broadcast by their name (which means “the youth” in Arabic). In addition to the forced recruitment of some male youth, al-Shabaab also recruits those male youth who feel dispossessed and powerless, view government actors as “ultra-predatory” and may see violence as the only way to upend the status quo. In return, recruiters promise “an adventurous life”.⁷¹ Among their many promises to recruits are “leadership opportunities for youth”.⁷² Research with former al-Shabaab female members found that those married to fighters “lead a privileged existence”, are awarded many freedoms, and demonstrate devotion to the VEO.⁷³

Part Three: The Response

PVE and CVE: A Short History

The rise of P/CVE on the international stage was a direct result of the terrorist attacks in three locations of the eastern United States by the radical Sunni Islamist group al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001 (9/11). However, the antecedents to P/CVE in the post-9/11 world are reported to have surfaced both internationally and within the US domestic context. One precursor to modern P/CVE policies, for example, was thought to have surfaced in Yugoslavia in the 1970s.⁷⁴ CVE’s initial orientation in the US was reported to focus on individual-level interventions. PVE, in contrast, first arose in the US as a set of development and conflict prevention tools focused on groups. Both of these processes took place prior to 9/11.⁷⁵

The al-Qaeda commandos who directed airplanes into New York City’s World Trade Centre towers, the Pentagon outside Washington, DC, and a field in Pennsylvania on 9/11 created stunning, searing images (particularly those in New York) that shook the global status quo. Terrorists and terrorism rose to the top of national and international agendas, and al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, became simultaneously famous and infamous around the world. Top US leaders cultivated his notoriety, with Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush labelling bin Laden as America’s public enemy number

68 Parfait N’Goran, Aziz Mossi and Bernard Bleou, “They call us Jihadists”: Research on the Early Signs of Violent Extremism in Côte d’Ivoire’s Northern Border Areas (Equal Access International and USAID, January 2023), 20, <https://www.equalaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Early-Signs-Report-ENG-09-SPREAD.pdf>.

69 Fathima A. Badurdeen, “Women and Recruitment in the Al-Shabaab Network: Stories of Women being recruited by Women Recruiters in the Coastal Region of Kenya”, *The African Review* 45, no. 1 (2018), 35.

70 Fatuma A. Ali, “Understanding the Role of Gender Relations in Radicalising and Recruiting Young Muslim Women in Higher Learning Institutions in Kenya”, *The African Review* 45, no. 1 (2018), 86.

71 Mohamed Haji Abdullahi “Ingiriis”, “Al-Shabaab’s Youth Recruitment Project”, in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, eds. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 343, 344.

72 Hussein Yusuf Ali, “Youth Radicalization: Causes, Consequences and Potential Solutions”, in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, eds. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 334.

73 “Khadija” and Stephen Harley, “Women in Al-Shabaab”, in *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab*, eds. Michael Keating and Matt Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 252.

74 Sadi Shanaah, “Explaining the variation and contestation of P/CVE policies around the world: a public policy approach,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2023), 479, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2023.2234708>.

75 Private interview, Advisory Group member.

one. On the global stage, Bin Laden emerged as a popular icon in many parts of the world; “a solitary, romantic rebel, singlehandedly taking on the West.”⁷⁶ The audacious acts of his outfit also illuminated how terrorism had the power to inspire expansive alarm within super-powerful states.

US President George W. Bush responded to the 9/11 attacks by leading the Global War on Terror. The strategy was an enlarged brand of CT. While CT normally focuses on the direct targeting of terrorists, the US strategy mixed a *decapitation strategy* aimed at eliminating al-Qaeda leadership with much more: regime change in Afghanistan, followed by Iraq.⁷⁷ The cost of US efforts has been colossal: an estimated eight trillion US dollars (and the deaths of more than 900,000 people) over the initial 20 years.⁷⁸

The expensive yet faltering approach led many governments to realise that “their security machinery and capabilities were not designed to cope with the lethality, unpredictability, and reach of the [al-Qaeda] brand of terrorism.”⁷⁹ It is a theme that has never exited the stage: conventional military forces have proven mostly unable to halt the advance or global diffusion of VEOs. Indeed, “the overall success rate of military approaches to counterterrorism” has been assessed as “poor”, given that very few “terrorist campaigns that ended were brought to a conclusion by military force”.⁸⁰

Winds of change arose in 2005. That year, President Bush “introduced the term ‘violent extremism’ as an alternative to the much-criticized concept of the ‘war on terrorism’”.⁸¹ The “meteoric rise” of P/CVE policies also began then.⁸² The aim was to combine the “‘shock and awe’” of often-indiscriminate CT with “new programmes aimed at winning ‘hearts and minds’” – that is, P/CVE.⁸³

Here is a thumbnail sketch of how P/CVE emerged as a global field of practice. The Dutch government enacted “[t]he first practical steps towards developing a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policy” in the wake of the murder of filmmaker Theo Van Gogh by a Muslim citizen. Following terrorist attacks in the London transport system in 2005, the UK government introduced their Preventing Violent Extremism policy in 2006 (renamed *Prevent* in 2011), which swiftly became “the most elaborate and well-funded counter-extremism policy in the world, and a key reference point for the globalization of CVE policy”.⁸⁴

Subsequently, the U.S. Department of State (DoS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) “undertook extensive efforts to define CVE, to establish what constituted best practice in the field of CVE, and to set out operational principles and guidelines to inform the development of CVE programming”.⁸⁵ By 2011, “the White House published a domestic Preventing Violent Extremism strategy – the first of its kind in the US”. That same year, 29 countries plus the European Union formed the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) – and “quickly established” CVE policy “as a core priority”.⁸⁶

76 Jeremy Prestholdt, *Icons of Dissent: The Global Resonance of Che, Marley, Tupac, and Bin Laden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 137.

77 Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes, *The globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism policies: Undermining human rights, instrumentalising civil society* (Transnational Institute, February 2018), 4, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-globalisation-of-counter-terror-violent-extremism-policies>.

78 Jill Kimball, “Costs of the 20-year war on terror: \$8 trillion and 900,000 deaths”, *News from Brown*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-09-01/costsofwar>.

79 Margaret Purdy, “Countering Terrorism: The Missing Pillar”, *International Journal* Winter 60, no. 1 (Winter, 2004/2005), 5.

80 Michael J. Boyle, 2019, “The Military Approach to Counterterrorism”, in *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, ed. Andrew Silke (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 612.

81 Owen Frazer and Christian Nünlist, “The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism”, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zürich, December 18, 2017, <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/server/api/core/bitstreams/b42735d9-b4e1-47ef-8f50-06c386f5cf97/content>

82 Sadi Shanaah and Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “What Drives Counter-Extremism? The Extent of P/CVE Policies in the West and Their Structural Correlates”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 8 (2023), 1725.

83 Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes, “The globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism policies: Undermining human rights, instrumentalising civil society”, (Transnational Institute, February 2018), 4, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-globalisation-of-counter-terror-violent-extremism-policies>.

84 *Ibid.*, 6-7.

85 Steven Heydemann, “State of the Art: Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice”, *Insights Newsletter*, no. 1, (Spring, 2014), U.S. Institute of Peace, 9.

86 Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes, “The globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism policies: Undermining human rights, instrumentalising civil society” (Transnational Institute, February 2018), 9, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-globalisation-of-counter-terror-violent-extremism-policies>.

The rising profiles of PVE and CVE, together with the interchangeability of the two terms, peaked in 2015.⁸⁷ So did awareness of a global Islamist challenge featuring IS advances in Syria and Iraq (and online propaganda inspiring thousands to join), together with “[a]l-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and other groups with links to [a]l-Qaeda, in Yemen, Mali and beyond”. In February 2015, US President Barack Obama hosted the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) with top officials from 70 countries.⁸⁸ Then in December, UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Ban Ki-moon released his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which owed “a heavy intellectual debt to US terms and ideas”.⁸⁹

The landmark UN document highlighted the formative role that one particular radical Sunni Islamist organisation (al-Qaeda) has played in the establishment of violent extremism as a major global concern:

Over the past two decades, the international community has sought to address violent extremism primarily within the context of security-based counter-terrorism measures adopted in response to the threat posed by [al-Qaeda] and its affiliated groups.

The UNSG also merged violent extremism with terrorism, identifying two additional “terrorist groups”: the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL; also known as the Islamic State) and Boko Haram. Alongside al-Qaeda, these three organisations “have shaped our image of violent extremism and the debate on how to address this threat”. The UNSG further explained why terrorism and violent extremism lack widely agreed definitions. The freedom to determine the meaning of these extremely potent terms is solely the prerogative of Member States – even if the definitions they come up with “must be consistent with their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law”.

From the UNSG, we thus learn that PVE and CVE emerged as reactions to VEO actions, and that governments are in the driver’s seat concerning what constitutes a terrorist or violent extremist threat and what should be done about them.⁹⁰ If violent extremism is “rarely defined”,⁹¹ “remains opaque and deeply contested”,⁹² and confusingly is “[c]onceptualized both as an ideology and set of actions”,⁹³ the reason is apparent: this loaded political term is fuzzy and imprecise by intention.

Precisely the same can be said about CT, CVE and PVE. If the actions of al-Qaeda ignited the expansion of modern CT and the emergence of CVE and PVE globally, the galvanised outcome never inspired agreed definitions of the three fields of endeavour. Defining CT is particularly challenging because a shared definition for what is being countered (that is, terrorism) remains in limbo.

87 David H. Ucko, “Preventing violent extremism through the United Nations: The rise and fall of a good idea”, *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018), 251.

88 Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik, *Countering Violent Extremism* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law, 2017), 7, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/countering-violent-extremism>.

89 David H. Ucko, “Preventing violent extremism through the United Nations: The rise and fall of a good idea”, *International Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2018), 251.

90 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General*, United Nations General Assembly A/70/674, Seventieth session, Agenda items 16 and 17, Culture of peace: The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (December 24, 2015), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/456/22/pdf/n1545622.pdf>

91 Andrew Glazzard and Martine Zeuthen, *Violent Extremism, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC), Professional Development Reading Pack no. 34* (February 2016), 1, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0895ae5274a31e000002c/Violent-extremism_RP.pdf.

92 UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, *Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*, United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/43/46, Human Rights Council, Forty-third session, 24 February–20 March 2020, Agenda item 3, Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development (February 21, 2020), 5, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3872336?ln=en&v=pdf#files>.

93 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilaus Tarp and Christina Schori Liang, *Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon of violent extremism*, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva Paper 24/19 (August 2019), 11, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10XuCSaBlvYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

This has opened the door for CT to become whatever a government wants it to be. As one scholar observed, “[i]f terrorism is presented as an absolute threat, then counterterrorism measures must also be unlimited”. Accordingly, The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy does not define what CT is. It merely describes what CT actions might include.⁹⁴ As for P/CVE, there is an “absence of a clear definition of almost every word in the phrase ‘preventing and countering violent extremism’”.⁹⁵

How PVE and CVE Respond to VEOs

Definitions

Gauging the meaning of PVE and CVE from the titles themselves, it would appear that the ‘prevention’ idea within PVE complements the ‘countering’ concept within CVE. If so, then PVE has “the advantage of discussing upstream prevention” while CVE has a “security-driven framework”. Other views hold that PVE is “a subset of CVE” or “a strategic re-labelling of CVE”. But most common is the tendency to “use the two terms interchangeably”.⁹⁶ Shanaah adds still another term to the mix (counter-extremism) yet nonetheless finds that regardless of which label is used – PVE, CVE, P/CVE or counter-extremism – they all signify the very same thing: “using non-coercive means to reduce involvement in terrorism”.⁹⁷

Accordingly, since CT remains “traditionally reliant on hard power instruments”,⁹⁸ P/CVE is envisaged as a means for addressing what CT cannot: “the myriad of factors that can fuel violent extremism, including discrimination and marginalisation, poor governance and lack of accountability of the state”.⁹⁹ The CT-P/CVE fit seems about right: CT handles hard power while P/CVE takes on the soft side.

One contextual element challenges this approach. CT and P/CVE actors usually operate with at least the tacit approval of governments that brandish precisely the sort of misrule that provides VEOs with opportunities to rise up or move in. Such a stance might be necessary: it is virtually impossible to operate in a country without its government’s approval. Yet this positioning invites the following irony to impact action on the ground: *In order to counter or prevent violent extremism, P/CVE actors often have to align themselves with the main contributors to the conditions that can lead to violent extremism.* To shield this uncomfortable reality, rebranding or continually justifying initiatives may be necessary.

Excepting hard security measures, the possible directions for CVE and PVE endeavours are practically endless. The field itself facilitates this. One researcher of P/CVE policy, for example, concluded that the field is so “amorphous and broad” that it has become a kind of “toolbox from which countries ‘take’ counter-extremism configurations relevant to their own main policy problems”.¹⁰⁰ UNDP demonstrates

94 There are four “measures” that member states can enact. They combine generally defined security measures (“to prevent and combat terrorism”) with others that “address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism”, “ensure respect for human rights for all and the rule of law”, and, not least, highlight the need to “build [Member] States’ capacity to prevent and combat terrorism”. United Nations General Assembly, *The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/60/288 (September 20, 2006), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n05/504/88/pdf/n0550488.pdf>.

95 UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, *Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism*, United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/43/46, Human Rights Council, Forty-third session, 24 February–20 March 2020, Agenda item 3, Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development (February 21, 2020), 6. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3872336?ln=en&v=pdf#files>.

96 Sadi Shanaah and Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “What Drives Counter-Extremism? The Extent of P/CVE Policies in the West and Their Structural Correlates”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 8 (2023): 1724-1727.

97 Sadi Shanaah, “Explaining the variation and contestation of P/CVE policies around the world: a public policy approach”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 16, no. 3 (2023), 477, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2023.2234708>.

98 Anne Aly, Anne-Marie Balbi and Carmen Jacques, “Rethinking countering violent extremism: Implementing the role of civil society”, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 10, no. 1 (2015), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2015.1028772>.

99 International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), “Programmes: Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)”, ICCT, n.d., <https://www.icct.nl/node/2670>.

100 Shanaah, “Explaining the Variation and Contestation of P/CVE Policies”, 477.

the sheer vastness of what implementing P/CVE might entail with the following activity list:

1. Promoting a rule of law and human rights-based approach to PVE;
2. Enhancing the fight against corruption;
3. Enhancing participatory decision-making and increasing civic space at national and local levels;
4. Providing effective socio-economic alternatives to violence for groups at risk;
5. Strengthening the capacity of local governments for service delivery and security;
6. Supporting credible internal intermediaries to promote dialogue with alienated groups and reintegration of former extremists;
7. Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment;
8. Engaging youth in building social cohesion;
9. Working with faith-based organisations and religious leaders to counter the abuse of religion by violent extremists;
10. Working with the media to promote human rights and tolerance;
11. Promoting respect for human rights, diversity, and a culture of global citizenship in schools and universities.¹⁰¹

The expanse of ambition is underscored by growing interest in applying a public health approach to P/CVE and, by extension, entire societies. This features primary interventions (those that “aim to build social cohesion and resilience”), secondary interventions (“usually targeted at individuals and groups who are thought to be at immediate risk of [...] being recruited or drawn into extremist groups”), and tertiary interventions (mainly involving the disengagement and rehabilitation of former extremists).¹⁰²

And so on: CVE and PVE definitions are as ambitious as they are all-encompassing. Taken together, the collective aim of P/CVE policies is to positively impact nothing less than “entire populations, specific social groups, and individuals in order to reorient them from potential future involvement and support of violent extremism, including terrorism”.¹⁰³

Such approaches are costly and call for explicit, even legitimising partnerships with states – including those whose misrule gives rise to violent extremism. Facing exceedingly proficient VEO adversaries with a never-ending set of imprecise, far-reaching tasks, together with the routine reliance on suspect governments, P/CVE almost seems designed either to come up short or dodge core challenges.

Three Framing Assumptions

The already daunting P/CVE challenge is made even more arduous via a striking determination to pursue goals informed by largely unproven assumptions. This has, of course, contributed significantly to a faltering programme evaluation record (an issue examined shortly). It also has inspired a boatload of experts to weigh in and share examples.

A sampling of what they have surfaced follows in the next two sections. Here, three assumptions that can frame the P/CVE work generally are shared. In the next section, assumptions about four kinds of programmes (concerning youth, gender, large-scale holistic approaches, and counter-messaging and counter-narrative campaigns) are provided.

¹⁰¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A development response to addressing radicalization and violent extremism*, (2016), 5, <https://www.undp.org/publications/preventing-violent-extremism-through-inclusive-development-and-promotion-tolerance-and-respect-diversity>.

¹⁰² Greg Barton, Matteo Vergani and Yenny Wahid, “Introduction”, in *Countering Violent and Hateful Extremism in Indonesia: Islam, Gender and Civil Society*, eds. Greg Barton, Matteo Vergani and Yenny Wahid (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 15-16.

¹⁰³ Sadi Shanaah and Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “What Drives Counter-Extremism? The Extent of P/CVE Policies in the West and Their Structural Correlates”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 8 (2023), 1724-1725.

1. Fragile States Are Too Weak to Counter Extremists

Across Africa and the Middle East, authoritarian governance and political corruption is widespread and enticing.¹⁰⁴ That is because the benefits of violent, corrupt governance are so significant. For leaders, “it requires minimal effort or investment”, it does not call for “the sorts of concessions necessary to build popular legitimacy”, and governments do not have to provide services to their citizens. It also makes big leaders rich.

VEOs frequently exploit this “pattern of state-society relations”.¹⁰⁵ The “state predation and marginalization that drives desperate citizens to look for alternatives” often leads them toward VEOs. This is considered a “key source” of ongoing VEO expansion.

Yet two experts have argued that, paradoxically, the government leaders who drive this dysfunction actually “thrive on extremist violence to consolidate their predatory hold.” The assumption that fragile states “are too weak to counter the extremist threat” is thus turned upside down. For some international actors, a state that is fragile inspires a drive to prop it up. This may be a mistake, because in reality “the predatory nature of the elite class has been a powerful driver of violent extremism all along”.¹⁰⁶ Fragile states thus may be insubstantial on purpose and VEOs aid the leaders of fragile states. As a result, even though predatory, corrupt governance has been identified as central driver of extremist violence,¹⁰⁷ “international actors often enable” the rulers of fragile states and frequently “make things worse”.¹⁰⁸

Mali’s recent history has exemplified this dynamic. Writing during a period of considerable political instability in Mali (2013), Boukhars and Wehrey described “a leadership [that was] incapable of combating terrorist groups and unwilling to rectify its weaknesses”. They included political leaders who “actively collude[d] with organized crime”. During this period, international stakeholders were “all too eager to dispense economic and military aid to Mali”. Their investments coincided with “a dramatic increase in organized criminal activity”.¹⁰⁹

The current military regime in Mali (led by Assimi Goïta) has been found to compound the fragility of the Malian state via the government’s treatment of citizens. The United Nations independent expert on the human rights situation in Mali has detailed “a poisonous climate marked by suspicion and mistrust” where the government’s security forces have employed “atrocious, cruel and barbaric torture” against citizens.¹¹⁰ Immersed in VEO and insurgent attacks, Mali’s government is thought to control only twenty percent of its territory.¹¹¹ In neighbouring Burkina Faso (also under assault by VEOs), the UN estimates that the government controls less than half of the country.¹¹²

104 For evidence of current trends in the Middle East and North Africa, see: Transparency International, *CPI 2022 for Middle East & North Africa: Corruption Fuels Ongoing Conflict* (2023), <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2022-middle-east-north-africa-corruption-fuels-ongoing-conflict>. For evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa, see: Nkosingiphile Mkhize, Sobongile Moyo and Siphon Mahoa, 2024, “African solutions to African problems: a narrative of corruption in postcolonial Africa”, *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2327133>. For both regions, see: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict: Highlights from Freedom House’s annual report on political rights and civil liberties* (2024), https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/FIW_2024_DigitalBooklet.pdf.

105 Nathaniel Allen, Michael Marcusa, and Lawrence Rubin, “How States Foster Violent Extremism and What the United States Should Do About It”, *Lawfare*, June 16, 2019. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/how-states-foster-violent-extremism-and-what-united-states-should-do-about-it>.

106 Lauren Van Metre and Linda Bishai, “Why Violent Extremism Still Spreads”, *Just Security*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/63169/violent-extremism-spreads/>.

107 Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of state: Why corruption threatens global security* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2015).

108 Nathaniel Allen, Michael Marcusa, and Lawrence Rubin, “How States Foster Violent Extremism and What the United States Should Do About It”, *Lawfare*, June 16, 2019, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/how-states-foster-violent-extremism-and-what-united-states-should-do-about-it>.

109 Anouar Boukhars and Frederic Wehrey, *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 187.

110 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Mali: UN expert gravely concerned by deterioration of security and human rights situation”, *OHCHR*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/08/mali-un-expert-gravely-concerned-deterioration-security-and-human-rights>.

111 U.S Department of State, *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mali* (2022), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mali/>.

112 David Lewis, Jessica Donati and Kaylee Kang, 2024, “Why West Africa is now the world’s terrorism hotspot”, *Reuters*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-africa-becomes-global-terrorism-hotspot-western-forces-leave-2024-09-24/>.

2. Extremist Viewpoints Lead to Terrorism

One common assumption asserts that those holding “extreme or radical views [...] lie at the heart of terrorism”. However, “evidence shows that the overwhelming majority of people who hold radical beliefs do not engage in, nor support, violence”.¹¹³ Additional research suggests that even those who may support or have sympathy for VEO violence may not actively contribute to it.¹¹⁴

3. Extreme Religious Ideologies Lead to Violent Extremism

There exists a “[l]ack of empirical data to support the assumption that religious ideology supports terrorism”.¹¹⁵ “Hundreds of millions of dollars, pounds, and euros” have been invested in research aiming to uncover “a correlation between extremist Islamist ideology, however defined, and political violence”. It has never surfaced: “no empirical data has been found to support the assumption that extremist ideology causes terrorism”.¹¹⁶

Initiatives (and their Assumptions)

Until recently, there had been a rapid global expansion of P/CVE programming since its inception two decades ago.¹¹⁷ Then, in 2025, the US government dismantled its terrorism and extremism prevention programs (including those considered P/CVE) at the Department of State, the now-shuttered USAID, and the US Institute of Peace (renamed the Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace).¹¹⁸ The UK government is also reported to have cut P/CVE programmes that had been operating in many countries in 2025.¹¹⁹

The international P/CVE programme field operating outside the Global North nonetheless remains substantial. Over time, it has grown to encompass government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and for-profit entities. It has also adopted a broad framework for its activities. While P/CVE efforts may address the political, social and economic dimensions of marginalisation and exclusion,¹²⁰ the way these approaches have been implemented tend to be broad and generalised rather than calculated and targeted.

Although it has been established that understanding the complexity of violent extremism is essential for effective P/CVE programming,¹²¹ the current analysis of the field largely remains surface-level and insufficiently evaluated.¹²² Even in cases where programmes are reported to be effective, evaluations

113 Faiza Patel and Meghan Koushik, *Countering Violent Extremism* (New York: Brennan Center for Justice, New York University School of Law, 2017), 9, https://www.brennancenter.org/media/254/download/Report_Brennan%20Center%20CVE%20Report_0.pdf?inline=1.

114 See, for example, Khalil, James, John Horgan, and Martine Zeuthen, “The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 3 (2022), 425–450; and Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko, “Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model”, *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017), 205–16.

115 UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, “Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism”, United Nations General Assembly A/HRC/43/46, Human Rights Council, Forty-third session, 24 February–20 March 2020, Agenda item 3, Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development, February 21, 2020, 7, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3872336?ln=en&v=pdf#files>.

116 Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes, “The globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism policies: Undermining human rights, instrumentalising civil society”, *Transnational Institute*, February 2018, 12, <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-globalisation-of-countering-violent-extremism-policies>.

117 Wesam Charkawi, Kevin Dunn and Ana-Maria Bliuc, “Evaluations of Countering Violent Extremism Programs: Linking Success to Content, Approach, Setting, and Participants”, *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, vol. 77 (2024), 100674, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1756061624000260>.

118 Kris Inman, “Trump administration cuts to terrorism prevention departments could leave Americans exposed”, *The Conversation*, August 10, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/trump-administration-cuts-to-terrorism-prevention-departments-could-leave-americans-exposed-261630>

119 Mason Boycott-Owen, 2025, “UK spending cuts leave anti-ISIS projects in limbo”, *Politico.eu*, March 25, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-spending-anti-terror-rachel-reeves-government-savings/>.

120 Lauren Van Metre, Thomas Leo Scherer, and Analise Schmidt, “The Evidentiary Failures of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism”, Unpublished internal document, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2021.

121 Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), *Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism* (2014), <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/GCTF%20Good%20Practices%20on%20Women%20and%20CVE.pdf?ver=2016-03-29-134644-853>.

122 Lauren Van Metre, Thomas Leo Scherer, and Analise Schmidt, “The Evidentiary Failures of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism”, Unpublished internal document, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2021. See also: Peter Romaniuk, *Does CVE Work? Lessons Learned From the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism* (New York: Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2015), https://globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/Does-CVE-Work_2015-1.pdf.

often emphasise countable outputs rather than tangible outcomes. Furthermore, for smaller initiatives that appear successful, there is a lack of systematic analysis to determine the level of investment needed to achieve a substantial impact. This limited scope is comparable to vaccinating only a small fraction of a population in a pandemic scenario, where small-scale efforts may fall short of addressing the broader need and risk is rendered inconsequential.

As a result, P/CVE programme aims tend to be broad and general, often following an all-of-the-above, simplified approach, and lacking context-specific targeting and responsiveness. Enhancing the resilience of individuals and communities against the appeal of radicalisation and extremism is a major theme. This orientation has invited a scope of activities so expansive that increasing numbers of international development and humanitarian interventions are being labelled as ‘CVE-relevant’, even as their connection to preventing or countering violent extremism is unspecified.¹²³

Analysis reveals that much of the available information on CVE programmes is similarly limited to brief summaries in evaluations or communications materials. There is a general lack of detailed information regarding who the programmes are targeting, what outcomes are projected, or what strategic frameworks will guide efforts (such as a Theory of Change, or ToC).

Where programme documents report success, it is usually defined in terms of delivery metrics and immediate outcomes, rather than verified prevention or countering effects. Accordingly, while some programmes may claim success in delivering services, receiving encouraging short-term participant responses, and/or achieving proximate outputs, the evidence base is insufficient to substantiate claims about preventing or countering VEO impacts.

In addition, the research and analysis did not uncover a widely accepted evaluative standard for determining and measuring what constitutes success for P/CVE initiatives. Instead, most assessments emphasise descriptive reporting over reliance on basic evaluation principles. As a result, it remains difficult to identify exceptions where prevention or countering outcomes can be credibly confirmed. There thus is insufficient evidence to substantiate claims of programme success in preventing or countering violent extremist recruitment or action.

Of course, some programme implementers may be constrained from sharing substantial information about their programmes publicly, given security concerns that may surround their activities in the field. At the same time, the loosely defined programme landscape makes it challenging to measure the effectiveness of programme designs. As one set of analysts observed:

This cacophony of theories and programs were often evaluated at the project level, but with no effort to test the major assumptions of the field through systematic reviews across projects or contexts. [...] Just as medicine rigorously tests new interventions before using them widely, so should P/CVE rigorously test new interventions to understand what works in what contexts.¹²⁴

Gender (which often only refers to women), youth (which often refers only to male youth), religious actors, and community resilience have been key areas of P/CVE programme focus. Reflecting this orientation, between 2013 and 2022, the European Union (EU) funded 114 projects (with a total budget of €407,923,575). The EU’s wide range of funded programmes highlights what is considered to be P/CVE. The programmes are centred around eight key areas of engagement: education development, media capacity building, women’s empowerment, youth engagement, socioeconomic inclusion, governance strengthening, transitional justice, and inter-communal activities.¹²⁵ While the 44-page

¹²³ Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2019, *Countering Violent Extremism II: A Guide to Good Practice* (2019), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/countering-violent-extremism-two/>.

¹²⁴ Lauren Van Metre, Thomas Leo Scherer, and Analise Schmidt, “The Evidentiary Failures of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism”, Unpublished internal document, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2021, 1.

¹²⁵ Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), *Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Stories from the EU’s Work Around the Globe* (2021), <https://www.gcerf.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/PCVE-stories-from-the-EUs-work-around-the-globe.pdf>.

document published by the EU about this effort offers a comprehensive overview of the EU's P/CVE efforts, it does not reference any programme evaluations.¹²⁶

The majority of P/CVE programmes reviewed for this study focus predominantly on Muslim-majority areas. While this narrow geopolitical focus signals a pronounced orientation (or bias) within the P/CVE field, this subject is not addressed. Also often sidestepped are rationales that inform the specific goals and methods of P/CVE programmes. Although many initiatives emphasise prevention (particularly in the areas of programming for youth and women), there frequently is a noticeable disconnect between programme activities and how they will prevent or counter violent extremism.

Drawn from the vast array of programme materials in the field, the following examples highlight four sets of particularly prominent P/CVE (or P/CVE-relevant) approaches and challenges. Each section opens with a set of assumptions that have been found to inform activities on the ground. Analysis of the programmes follows.

Youth Programmes

Assumptions: *Youth = male youth (and unemployed male youth become violent extremists)*

Assumptions about youth play a formative role in determining the direction of P/CVE work. Youth are “by far, the primary target group for recruitment into non-state violent extremist groups”. There also is the following fact: most young people never become violent extremists, regardless of whether a P/CVE initiative is present.¹²⁷

Three assumptions about youth predominate. The first is the research finding that the *youth* term mainly refers to male youth.¹²⁸ The second assumes that youth unemployment is a driver of violent extremism. However, “no significant correlation” has been identified “between unemployment and susceptibility to violent extremism”. In a major study on violent extremism in Africa, “[m]ost voluntary recruits self-identified as having some level of employment at the time of joining”.¹²⁹ Notwithstanding the absence of a proven correlation, some research has found that financial incentives motivate some youth to join VEOs.¹³⁰ A third assumption emerges from youth bulge theory, which contends that “surplus populations of ‘idle youth’ excluded from economic opportunity are especially prone to being radicalised and pulled into violent (and other) forms of extremism”. This assumption remains unconfirmed.¹³¹

Research instead points toward an entirely different outcome: that governments of nations with youth bulge populations “are more repressive than other states”.¹³² The proactive nature of their repression leads states, not youthful citizens, to inadvertently lay the foundation for VEO recruitment. As has been noted, “[m]any of those who join [VEOs] and support these [VEO] movements have borne the brunt of decades of state corruption, poor governance, repressive regimes and poor development policies”.¹³³

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Marc Sommers, *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism* (Washington, DC: Promundo-US (Equimundo), 2019), 5 37, <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/youth-and-the-field-of-countering-violent-extremism/>.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 17.

For research on the development field, see Marc Sommers, *The Outcast Majority: War, Development, and Youth in Africa*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 157.

¹²⁹ UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 17, 71–72.

¹³⁰ See, for example, James Khalil, Rory Brown, Chris Chant, Peter Olowo and Nick Wood, 2019, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab*, RUSI Whitehall Report 4-18 (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, January 2019), https://static.rusi.org/20190104_whr_4-18_deradicalisation_and_disengagement_in_somalia_web.pdf

¹³¹ UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 71.

¹³² Ragnhild Nordås and Christian Davenport, “Fight the Youth: Youth Bulges and State Repression”, *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013), 926.

¹³³ Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, *Challenging Conventional Wisdom, Transforming Current Practices: A Gendered Lens on PVE*, Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series no. 13 (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 2018), 30. <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/challenging-conventional-wisdom-transforming-current-practices-a-gendered-lens-on-pve>.

Analysis

Youth has been a central theme in P/CVE programming since the field's inception. Problematically, programming often has focused on youth deviance and risk, which has reinforced harmful stereotypes. This orientation has persisted even as attention eventually shifted to addressing the underlying grievances that drive some youth toward violent extremism. Ironically, although P/CVE is fundamentally a youth-centred field, the characterisation of youth as “at risk” and excluded has resulted in their exclusion from programme design, assessment, and evaluation work. In reality, youth are far more likely to be victims of violence. The vast majority remain peaceful, even when facing widespread marginalisation and exclusion.¹³⁴

Additionally, there is a widespread assumption that youth programs (which mostly target young men) decrease the likelihood that youth will support or join a VEO. However, available evaluations of such programs have largely debunked this assumption, showing that these interventions may not lead to those outcomes. One example of such a programme is INVEST, an employment initiative in Afghanistan that Mercy Corps ran and the UK Department for International Development (DfID; now a part of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, or FCDO) funded. Initially, the programme's theory of change focused solely on economic outcomes and did not account for social, political, or violence-related impacts. However, due to the shared interest of Mercy Corps and DfID in exploring how programmes like INVEST might contribute to broader stability goals, the programme offered a unique opportunity to investigate whether improved economic conditions could reduce individuals' inclination toward violent extremism.¹³⁵

An evaluation of the programme revealed insights that challenge common assumptions about youth employment and violent extremism. The findings caution against linking youth employment programmes to P/CVE efforts, as creating jobs for young people does not necessarily lead to a reduction in violence. The evaluation found that employment initiatives that focus on P/CVE can end up prioritising political goals over economic ones, potentially failing on both fronts. It also highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the drivers of conflict, including why youth join VEOs in the first place.¹³⁶ Interestingly, the evaluation also uncovered unexpected drivers of violence. Factors typically seen as positive, such as having more business and social connections, increased self-confidence. Meanwhile, identifying as Afghan above tribal or religious affiliations was associated with a higher likelihood of political violence.

These findings suggest that programmes targeting such outcomes may unintentionally worsen the status quo by reinforcing dynamics that contribute to political violence. For instance, fostering a strong national identity over tribal or religious affiliations, while seemingly positive, may heighten tensions by creating a sense of exclusion or competition between different groups. Similarly, promoting increased self-confidence and expanded social networks might empower individuals to participate in or support political violence if they feel it aligns with their sense of identity or purpose. The evaluation concludes that further research is needed to explore these relationships and ensure that interventions do not inadvertently cause harm. The example of INVEST serves as a reminder of how little the field truly understands about youth in the context of P/CVE and VEOs. It underscores how assumptions in the field remain largely unevaluated and undocumented.

An additional set of often-overlooked issues concerns access: who gets into P/CVE youth programmes – and whether their profile aligns with the profiles of youth entering VEOs. For example, if VEOs are targeting marginalised, outsider youth, it might be expected that programmes would aim to do

¹³⁴ Lauren Van Metre, Thomas Leo Scherer, and Analise Schmidt, “The Evidentiary Failures of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism”, Unpublished internal document, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2021, 6.

¹³⁵ Mercy Corps, *Does Youth Employment Build Stability? Evidence from an Impact Evaluation of Vocational Training in Afghanistan* (Portland, OR: Mercy Corps 2015), https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/MercyCorps_AfghanistanINVEST_ImpactEvaluation_2015.pdf.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

the same. However, at least two potentially significant constraints may limit this possibility. One is systemic. It concerns the approach of development-oriented responses to P/CVE. One set of analysts of P/CVE programming for youth stated that these approaches have a tendency to “fall short in dismantling the social rules, practices, and structures that systematically deny youth and other groups participation in political decision-making in their communities”. They further warned that “[i]t is these deeply entrenched systems of exclusion that lie at the heart of the violent extremist problem”. The analysts recommended that programme officials must “recognize and confront the norms and beliefs that support the unequal distribution of power and inequality of opportunities in local communities”.¹³⁷ They also urged that P/CVE policies and programmes “pay attention to the critical role played by political actors and institutions in perpetuating youth marginalization”.

A second potential constraint involves the process of entry into programmes. Confidential interviews with youth programme officials involved in international development work revealed how some officials revealed how some officials inserted elite, insider youth into programmes – but did not document this. A reported rationale for this was that encouraging well-adjusted young people to access programmes tended to yield more encouraging programme outputs – which donors pressure programme officials to produce.¹³⁸

Although the presence and extent of this trend in the P/CVE field is largely unrecorded, one CVE expert identified two kinds of youth (*reachables* and *unreachables*) who may access P/CVE initiatives. The expert defined reachable youth as “either self-selected youth leaders or just the ones who are willing to come talk to us”. In contrast, “[t]he unreachables are our target audience”. However, the official stated that “we don’t know how to talk to them. We don’t know their avenues of communication or what makes them tick”. As a result, the so-called unreachable youth are unlikely to access programmes. If this practice is prevalent in the P/CVE field, it runs the risk of promoting inequality within youth cohorts and inadvertently making it easier for VEOs to recruit outsider youth who cannot access P/CVE youth programmes.¹³⁹

Despite a lack of clarity over whether youth intervention programmes prevent or counter VEO inroads with youth, they continue to be favoured by numerous development actors working to promote P/CVE.¹⁴⁰

Gender Programmes

Assumptions: Gender = women (and women are peaceful)

Research for this study revealed that no P/CVE area of endeavour drew on more assumptions than gender programming. Nearly all the assumptions are foundational. Seven assumptions that have been found to inform P/CVE gender initiatives are shared here.

1. ‘Gender’ Means Women

An Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) study found that “[g]ender is still understood to relate only to women”. The tendency to view “‘gender’ as code for ‘women’” is especially prevalent in the security sector.¹⁴¹ Interviews with experts in the P/CVE and international development fields strongly supported this finding, revealing that *gender* is understood to refer

137 Lauren Van Metre, Jasmine Ramsey, Opeyemi Adejojo, and Karen Bernstein, *Youth, Social and Behavioral Change, and Violent Extremism in Niger*, Policy Note (Washington, DC: Resolve Network, November 2024), 4-5, <https://beyondconflictint.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Youth-Social-and-Behavioral-Change-and-Violent-Extremism-in-Niger.pdf>.

138 Marc Sommers, *The Outcast Majority: War, Development, and Youth in Africa* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 164-165.

139 Sommers, *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism*, 17.

140 Kurtz, J., Tesfaye, B., & Wolfe, R.J., “Can economic interventions reduce violence? Impacts of vocational training and cash transfers on youth support for political violence in Afghanistan” (Washington, DC: Mercy Corps, 2018), https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/CanEconomicInterventionsReduceViolence_Afghanistan_MercyCopr_Feb2018.pdf

141 Melissa Johnston (with Dr. Sara Meger), *The Linkages between Violent Misogyny and Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism*, Policy Brief (OSCE Secretariat, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), 2022), 7.

mainly (or exclusively) to women (while *youth* refers to male youth).¹⁴² The predominance of the implicit gender = women definition in the P/CVE field is further illustrated in this passage (on masculinities and PVE):

*While a gender perspective on violent extremism should, of course, seek to understand and include women's and girls' experiences, it is crucial – given that men account for the majority of violent extremists – to consider that men and boys are gendered, as well.*¹⁴³

The positioning of males and masculinity on the back burner of gender work in the P/CVE field is common. It also is highly problematic, not simply because of the demographic dominance of men in VEOs (particularly in combatant roles). A second key reason is that “masculine gender norms play a key role in driving violent extremism”.¹⁴⁴

VEOs also may not operate with such constricted notions of gender: the contrast with the considerable gender expertise that some VEOs demonstrate – concerning females and femininity as well as males and masculinity (reviewed earlier) – is stark.

2. Women Are Good

The assumption about “the innate goodness of women” connects to another assumption: “that women who choose to deviate from their expected gender norms do so only on rare occasions and as a result of manipulation or force”. Yet analysts have pointed out that most research does not support these contentions. Instead, it “suggests that the active participation of women in violent extremist movements is not new or rare and that VEOs intentionally exploit gender dynamics in the service of their objectives.”¹⁴⁵

3. Women Are Passive, Peaceful, and Moderate

The fact that most violent extremist combatants are men has inspired the following “key assumption guiding P/CVE interventions”: that women are “inherent peacebuilders” and “can positively influence violent men if empowered to do so”. It is further assumed that women are “more peaceful” and “more religiously moderate than men”.¹⁴⁶

Given all of this apparent peacefulness and moderation, it is further assumed that women must be forced into engagement with violent extremists. In much literature on women and violent extremism, women “are viewed as passive or coerced actors or supporters rather than active participants or perpetrators of terrorism and violent extremism”.¹⁴⁷ All of these assumptions can be directly challenged, since “it is not possible to assume that women will be peaceful or moderate at all times or under any circumstances just by virtue of their gender”.

142 Interviews of experts in the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) field revealed that: “the primary inherent meaning of ‘gender’ is women” while “many of the CVE experts interviewed for this paper reported that ‘youth’ contains a common unspoken reference to male youth”. Sommers, *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism*, 17. For research on the development field, see Marc Sommers, *The Outcast Majority: War, Development, and Youth in Africa* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 157.

143 Abby Fried (with Giovanna Lauro and Gary Barker), *Masculinities and Preventing Violent Extremism: Making the Connections* (Washington, DC: Promundo-US (Equimundo), 2020), 4, <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/masculinities-and-preventing-violent-extremism-making-the-connections/>.

144 Abby Fried (with Giovanna Lauro and Gary Barker), *Masculinities and Preventing Violent Extremism: Making the Connections* (Washington, DC: Promundo-US (Equimundo), 2020), 27, <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/masculinities-and-preventing-violent-extremism-making-the-connections/>.

145 Mathias Bak, Kristoffer Nilas Tarp and Christina Schori Liang, “Defining the Concept of ‘Violent Extremism’: Delineating the attributes and phenomenon of violent extremism”, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Geneva Paper 24/19, August 2019, 18-19, <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10xuCSaBlvYTDbinjPokvyDO2XLpn5jG4va93JVUzppqj08EDHwnC>.

146 Emily Winterbotham, “What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives: Assessing the Evidence Base for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism” Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), May 2020, 7, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/what-can-work-and-what-has-not-worked-women-centric-pcve-initiatives-assessing-evidence-base>.

147 Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger and Rafia Bhulai, 2016, “Introduction”, in *A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism*, eds. Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger and Rafia Bhulai (Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016), 9, <https://hedayah.com/app/uploads/2021/09/File-44201684919.pdf>.

4. Mothers Have Inborn Talents That Counter Violent Extremism

Entire P/CVE initiatives centre on the assumption that all mothers have “a perceived innate ability, as primary caregivers and as ‘first teachers’, to better spot signs of radicalisation”. This broad assumption draws from a second one: “that children listen to their mothers because they view them as figures of respect and authority and that women, situated at the heart of families, can be critical in stopping their children or even husbands from following a radical path”.

Such programmes tend to promote the idea of women as matriarchs with exceptional influence. Some further assume that mothers cannot be “engaged in promoting any of the traits, such as encouraging warrior-based masculinities, that lead to vulnerability to radicalisation”. This has not proven to be the case.¹⁴⁸

5. Muslim Women Have Strong Maternal Instincts and Shun Violence

Stereotypes about Muslim women appear to strongly influence P/CVE efforts. Two experts highlighted the widespread assumption that all Muslim women are homemakers who “are assumed to be guided by their maternal instincts” and are inherently peaceful. Taken together, this puts them in “a better position to spot the signs of radicalization in their children”.¹⁴⁹ Such stereotyping also has stirred “the need to protect peaceful Muslim women from Muslim men, by empowering women, specifically mothers, with security measures aimed at their communities”.¹⁵⁰

6. Women Who Participate in Violent Extremism Are Victims of Gender-Based violence

An additional gender assumption holds that gender-based violence (GBV) can lead to participation in VEOs. This has been considered simplistic and based merely on a correlation (not demonstrated causality).¹⁵¹

7. Gender Equality Weakens Violent Extremism

Still another assumption contends that empowering women and increasing gender equality leads to “positive impacts in P/CVE outcomes”. However, this ambition is not supported by evidence. Research has not established “a causal relationship between gender inequality and violent extremism”.¹⁵²

Analysis

Although gender frequently is a focus in P/CVE programming, failure to understand the specific needs of their target populations or the local contexts in which they operate is common. Many interventions also fail to address the distinct needs of men as well as women. A review of programmes reveals that authentic gender-sensitive needs assessments are rarely undertaken. This leaves many programmes gender-blind and guided by simplistic assumptions about men.¹⁵³

148 Emily Winterbotham, “What Can Work (And What Has Not Worked) in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives: Assessing the Evidence Base for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism”, Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), May 2020, 8, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/what-can-work-and-what-has-not-worked-women-centric-pcve-initiatives-assessing-evidence-base>.

149 Gayatri Sahgal and Martine Zeuthen, “Analytical Framing of Violent Extremism and Gender in Kenya: A Review of the Literature”, *The African Review* 45, no. 1 (2018), 5.

150 Winterbotham, “What Can Work in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives”, 7.

151 Abby Fried (with Giovanna Lauro and Gary Barker), *Masculinities and Preventing Violent Extremism: Making the Connections* (Washington, DC: Promundo-US (Equimundo), 2020), 4, 27, <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/masculinities-and-preventing-violent-extremism-making-the-connections/>

152 Winterbotham, “What Can Work in Women-Centric P/CVE Initiatives”, 27.

153 Katherine E. Brown and Iman Sayed Taha, “Policy Framework: UN Women’s Engagement in Support of Counter Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism (CT and PVE)”, UN Women, 2022, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/UN-Womens-engagement-in-support-of-counter-terrorism-and-prevention-of-violent-extremism-en.pdf>.

There also are questions about impact. For example, one set of analysts, who reviewed 26 programme evaluations and research articles on gender in P/CVE, stated that “it was difficult to find high-quality evidence around gender-related P/CVE”.¹⁵⁴ They found that evidence of impact was weak and limited to relatively few interventions and contexts. They noted that gender programming in the P/CVE space is stuck in a kind of “dead end”, where buzzwords attract donor attention while programme toolkits repeatedly cover the same topics. The often-superficial approach to gender inclusion in P/CVE has been described as a box-ticking exercise lacking in depth and analytical focus.¹⁵⁵

VEOs have consistently included female members. In recent years, studies have increasingly focused on exploring women’s roles as violent actors (including pathways to radicalisation and involvement in extremist groups) as well as their contributions to P/CVE efforts. A major turning point in P/CVE programmes was evidence showing how the Islamic State actively recruited and influenced women.¹⁵⁶ This realisation was reflected in the broader P/CVE field, as well:

*Practitioners, academics and policymakers are increasingly aware of the need to formulate gender-specific responses. However, key concepts commonly remain elusive and difficult to put into practice. Despite the growing interest, gender-disaggregated data continues to be scarce and sorely lacking, part of a body of knowledge largely based on male perspectives and experiences. Given these challenges and blind spots, fostering high-quality gender-sensitive interventions remains a challenge.*¹⁵⁷

A review of UN Women’s engagement in support of counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism highlights several criticisms of the UN’s broader agenda in this area. Concerns include the inconsistent use of terminology, the diversity and complexity of national legal frameworks, and a lack of focus on women’s agency and gender equality within P/CVE efforts. Moreover, the absence of accountability frameworks, such as monitoring and evaluation systems, combined with a shortage of gender-sensitive data in P/CVE programmes, remain significant challenges.

Holistic Programmes

Assumptions: *Whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches are strategic*

Experts have warned that P/CVE efforts can “go only so far if local patronage politics, oppressive central governance and an increasingly unsettled world order continue to swell the ranks of the marginalized”.¹⁵⁸ Such concerns point to the need for a more strategic and effective approach to addressing state-driven practices that promote patronage, oppression, and marginalisation. Yet the far more common method favours imprecision and assumes that states can and will reform themselves, regardless of their practices and underlying aims.

This P/CVE method is broadcast in the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024. The aspirational Summit document states that “[w]e, the Heads of State and Government” will undertake an extensive list of actions. One of them is to lead “the fight against terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism” by implementing “a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to prevent and combat terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism, including by addressing the drivers of terrorism, in accordance with international law”.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Lauren Van Metre, Thomas Leo Scherer, and Analise Schmidt, “The Evidentiary Failures of Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism,” Unpublished internal document, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2021, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), “Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism”, 2014, <https://www.thegctf.org/Portals/1/Documents/Framework%20Documents/GCTF%20Good%20Practices%20on%20Women%20and%20CVE.pdf?ver=2016-03-29-134644-853>.

¹⁵⁷ Rositsa Dzhejkova and Ariane Wolf, “Gender-specificity in Practical P/CVE: Reviewing RAN Practitioners’ Activities in 2021”, Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2022, 4, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/ran_ad-hoc_gender_in_pcve_15082022_en.pdf.

¹⁵⁸ Nathaniel Allen, Michael Marcusa, and Lawrence Rubin, “How States Foster Violent Extremism and What the United States Should Do About It”, *Lawfare*, June 16, 2019, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/how-states-foster-violent-extremism-and-what-united-states-should-do-about-it>.

¹⁵⁹ United Nations, “Summit of the Future Outcome Documents: Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact, and Declaration on Future Generations”, September 2024: 1, 19, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sof-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf.

As the terms suggest, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to violent extremism are encompassing. The whole-of-government approach is envisioned as a way for all relevant government actors to work together. They might include: “police; national security committees; committees on religious affairs, youth, and women; and ministries of interior, labour, education, and social welfare”.¹⁶⁰ Since the research did not uncover guidance for how to implement this approach within predatory states, it appears that whole-of-government approaches are assumed to be appropriate for all governments (regardless of their nature, purpose, and capacity).

As for the whole-of-society approach, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism stipulates that a wide array of organisations – in civil society, the private sector, academia, foundations, networks and associations, in addition to regional organisations – are expected to “drive innovation and strengthen the design, development and implementation of ideas, projects and innovative solutions to counter terrorism and to prevent and counter violent extremism”.¹⁶¹ The approach also implies “genuine partnership between non-governmental actors — especially civil society actors — and governments”.¹⁶²

Concerns have been raised that whole-of-society approaches cultivate “an environment in which the threat of violent extremism is ubiquitous and pervasive”. That is because it expects “various actors in society” to “detect ‘signs of radicalization’” on behalf of governments.¹⁶³ This may include providing educators “with relevant tools for responding to violent extremism, such as being able to properly identify those who may be most vulnerable or susceptible to violent extremist ideologies.”¹⁶⁴

However, since “reliable scientific understanding of the process that makes individuals turn to violent extremism” does not exist, this work essentially amounts to profiling certain types of citizens based on faulty assumptions. This can lead to the “overselection and overreporting, largely on prohibited discriminatory grounds” of those thought to be dangerous, or even potentially dangerous. It can directly imperil citizen “rights to freedom of religion and expression and privacy.”¹⁶⁵

Analysis

The whole-of-community approach is a strategy that is increasingly adopted in P/CVE programming. It involves multiple stakeholders, including government, civil society, and local communities, who work together to address the underlying drivers of violent extremism. It emphasises collaboration across sectors to strengthen governance, accountability, and resilience within communities. The holistic orientation is virtually identical to the whole-of-society orientation endorsed by the United Nations (noted earlier).

The USAID CEGAH (“Prevent”) Activity in Indonesia was an example of the whole-of-community approach. The programme, which ran from 2016 to 2021 and cost an estimated USD \$24.8 million, aimed to strengthen the country’s anti-corruption efforts while also addressing the potential linkages between corruption and violent extremism (thus connecting it to P/CVE). CEGAH focused on improving the transparency and accountability of governance institutions and justice systems, while also enhancing the role of civil society in preventing corruption and holding the government accountable. The programme also explored the intersection between corruption and violent extremism, based on

¹⁶⁰ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), “A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for Central Asia”, March 2020, 10, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/444340>.

¹⁶¹ United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, “Partnerships”, n.d. <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/partnerships>

¹⁶² Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), “A Whole-of-Society Approach to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for Central Asia”, March 2020, 58, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/444340>.

¹⁶³ UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism, “Human rights impact of policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism”, United Nations General Assembly A/HRC/43/46, Human Rights Council, Forty-third session, 24 February–20 March 2020, Agenda item 3, Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development, February 21, 2020, 12, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3872336?ln=en&v=pdf#files>.

¹⁶⁴ Hedayah, 2021, “Countering Violent Extremism through Education,” *Human Rights Education in Asia-Pacific* 11 (2021), 243, https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/asia-pacific/section1/hreap_v11_surveys_and_research2.pdf.

¹⁶⁵ UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism, “Human Rights Impact of P/CVE Policies”, 12.

the assumption that corruption exacerbates grievances that fuel extremist ideologies. It established the National Complaint Handling System (SP4N LAPOR!) and supported anti-corruption education, aiming to reduce the sort of systemic corruption that could generate support for extremist movements.

However, an evaluation of the CEGAH programme's efforts identified limited connections between corruption and violent extremism.¹⁶⁶ This suggests that while state corruption is often cited as a contributing factor to violent extremism, its connection to violent extremism is nuanced, contingent on the specific context, and may not be direct (as is commonly assumed). The findings underscored the potential for governance interventions to inadvertently cultivate grievances and undermine P/CVE aims.

Counter-Messaging and Counter-Narrative Programmes

Assumptions: Countering VEO narratives and messaging works

Creating narratives or messaging to confront those propagated by VEOs is one of the most common types of P/CVE initiative. Much of this work takes place on internet sites, which are “widely assumed to play a central role in radicalization processes.” The assumption draws on the contention that the internet: (1) Essentially is “an ‘echo chamber’ where individuals find their ideas supported by like-minded people,” and/or (2) Creates “opportunities for self-radicalization”. However, there is “very limited evidence” to assess either of these claims.¹⁶⁷ Research with African youth directly challenges the pervasive assumption that “access to and use of the internet leads to increased opportunities for radicalization”. For youth in Africa, “the less frequently a respondent used the internet, the higher the likelihood of voluntary recruitment”. Those living in remote locations who are digitally disconnected and “cut off from the world” appear to be at risk of “increase[d] vulnerability to recruitment”.¹⁶⁸

Regardless of location, P/CVE efforts to counter the narratives and messages of VEOs (online or elsewhere) are based on shaky evidence. The underlying premise is that the “messages, myths, promises, objectives, glamour and other enticements propagated through violent extremism” can be “replaced with, or dismantled by, an alternative set of communications” produced by P/CVE (or even CT) actors. However, while some research indicates limited success in countering VEO narratives and messaging,¹⁶⁹ “there is no robust data showing that that approach works”.¹⁷⁰

Analysis

Media-based approaches, such as counter-messaging and counter-narrative campaigns, are popular P/CVE strategies for addressing the ideological, behavioural, and psychological drivers of radicalisation. In general, they aim to raise awareness and shape narratives about violent extremism, and thus positively influence social dynamics. They often focus on providing alternative narratives to challenge extremist ideologies and spark community discussions about the factors that drive violent extremism. For example:

Counter-narratives—defined as messages that can “[demystify], deconstruct or delegitimize extremist narratives” have become a key part of western efforts to combat terrorism. Placed at the softer end of counter-terrorism (CT) tactics, the use of communications in order to disrupt organizations committed to violent extremist causes has come to occupy the ‘upstream’ space of preventative measures available to governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil-society actors wishing to counter political violence at the ideational level.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Social Impact, Inc., *Final Performance Evaluation of USAID CEGAH*, 2020.

¹⁶⁷ UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa*, 97.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 97, 99.

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, James Khalil, Yahye Abdi, Andrew Glazzard, Abdullahi Ahmed Nor and Martine Zeuthen, *Reaching behind Frontlines: Promoting Exit from al-Shabaab through Communications Campaigns*, RESOLVE Network Research Report, RESOLVE Network, December 2023.

¹⁷⁰ UN Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism, “Human Rights Impact of P/CVE Policies”, 9.

¹⁷¹ William Allchorn, *Building a Successful Radical Right Counter-Narrative Campaign: A How-To Guide*, (Hedayah and Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 2020), 3.

One such example of this form of P/CVE programming is *Voices for Peace*.¹⁷² The initiative used educational radio dramas (also called “edutainment”) to counter violent extremism in the African Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Chad, and Cameroon). The programme aimed to reduce support for violent extremism, encourage collaboration with security forces, and raise awareness about factors contributing to extremism. It also promoted participatory governance. In the Seno province of Burkina Faso, a radio drama titled *Wuro Potal* was broadcast in 132 villages. It focused on violent extremism, governance, corruption, and migration. Participants engaged in weekly listening sessions to promote dialogue and counter-extremism narratives.

The evaluation of *Voices for Peace* concluded that further research is needed to determine the long-term impact of the intervention.¹⁷³ While the edutainment approach showed potential in changing behavioural intent, it remains unclear whether these intentions inspire actual behavioural change, and whether such changes are sustainable over time.¹⁷⁴

Two comprehensive assessments of counter-messaging/counter-narrative efforts raised questions about the broader impact of this sizable category of P/CVE initiatives. One study reviewed over two thousand documents before identifying fifteen published evaluations that met the researchers’ criteria. After noting the “overwhelming consensus” that “the concept of the counter-narrative is underdeveloped”, the analysis of their impact surfaced “sparse yet discouraging evidence” of the programmes’ overall effectiveness.¹⁷⁵

A second systematic review led to even more concerning results. Observing that “counter-messaging campaigns have increasingly played a central role” in CVE efforts, the researchers reviewed “all publicly available campaign evaluations”. Their findings were consistently disappointing. They uncovered “[t]he use of basic or overly simplistic study designs to evaluate complex phenomena”. Evidence of limited positive impact arrived with an asterisk, since the evidence was “largely derived from studies of low or moderate quality”. This left “a high risk of bias” in their findings. Only two of 25 campaigns “used a theory of change”, even though they are “fundamental to good project implementation”.¹⁷⁶ A single evaluation study was considered high quality, with the majority classed as low quality. These two review articles foreshadow similar results emanating from the discussion in the next section.

Accountability

There is an emotional dimension to P/CVE action. Research has indicated that “P/CVE policies are to a large degree driven by past terrorist attacks as well as the number of lives these attacks [have] claimed”.¹⁷⁷ The rush to act becomes a political imperative when citizens and their governments are under real or perceived threat.

One outcome is for major donor governments to experience “increasing pressure to demonstrate positive outcomes, value for money, and accountability to taxpayers” for the P/CVE (and CT) initiatives they fund.¹⁷⁸ Given the high stakes, P/CVE must work. A way to ensure this result is to skew

172 NORC at the University of Chicago, ‘Voices For Peace’ Impact Evaluation of a Radio Drama to Counteract Violent Extremism in the Sahel Region in Burkina Faso; Endline Report (NORC at the University of Chicago, USAID, 2019), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00w4g3.pdf.

173 Ibid.

174 See also: Elizabeth Levy Paluck, “Reducing intergroup prejudice and conflict using the media: a field experiment in Rwanda”, *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 96, no. 3 (2009), 574-87. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2009-02415-005>.

175 Sarah L. Carthy, Colm B. Doody, Katie Cox, Denis O’Hora and Kiran M. Sarma Shanaah, “Counter-narratives for the prevention of violent radicalisation: A systematic review of targeted interventions”, *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 16, no. 3 (2020), 1, 2.

176 Samantha Treacy, Alastair Reed and Andrew Glazzard, “A systematic integrative review of counter-messaging communication campaigns targeting terrorism or violent extremism”, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2024), 1, 2, 32, 34, 35.

177 Sadi Shanaah and Charlotte Heath-Kelly, “What Drives Counter-Extremism? The Extent of P/CVE Policies in the West and Their Structural Correlates”, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 35, no. 8 (2023), 1744.

178 Andrew Glazzard, Martine Zeuthen, and Jessica White, *Executive Summary and Recommendations: A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities* (Royal United Services Institute and the Policy and

evaluations by constricting or skirting professional evaluative procedures. Analysts have spotlighted the “fear of negative findings, potential human rights violations, and public backlash” surrounding P/CVE initiatives, which “has discouraged policymakers and implementers from conducting rigorous evaluations”.¹⁷⁹

An environment driven by haste and duress is clearly not conducive to thoughtful, unbiased assessment. Even if quality evaluations are sought, success is difficult to prove. The challenges begin with the launch point for P/CVE evaluations: “the impossibility of ‘measuring a negative’”. No evaluation can prove that “violent activity or radicalization” would have taken place if a P/CVE programme was not there. A second major challenge concerns the need to account for “the large number of variables that may have contributed to, enabled, or affected outcomes beyond the P/CVE intervention”.¹⁸⁰ A third arises from heavy reliance on unproven assumptions as program rationales (examples of which were provided earlier). A fourth concerns “challenges accessing official [government] data on relevant statistics due to sensitivity of data”.¹⁸¹ Still more exist, such as time and resource limitations.

One evaluation response to this array of constraints has been to radically narrow the assessment scope. A systematic examination of the evaluation record found that “evidence of effectiveness of CT and P/CVE programming is largely limited to whether specific projects succeeded in delivering their activities”. The idea is merely to investigate whether an initiative undertook what it had promised to do (a very low bar) – but not the programme’s direct relation to preventing or countering violent extremism. Even within this intentionally constricted and artificial landscape, it nonetheless remains difficult to specify “which ‘ingredient’ is really working”, even for programmes that “appear to have had beneficial effects”. Unsurprisingly, “[e]vidence of impact (i.e., the extent to which interventions have reduced terrorist threats or the incidence of radicalisation) is very scarce.”¹⁸²

Researchers have called attention to this significant concern. One analyst stated that P/CVE programs remain “worthless” without an evaluation.¹⁸³ Yet the paucity of quality impact evaluations remains a pronounced sector-wide weakness. One study found a “dearth of publicly available data” on PVE programmes.¹⁸⁴

A review of programmes further indicated that the lack of consistent or universally agreed-upon terminology/definitions within the P/CVE space translates into an absence of universally agreed-upon frameworks for P/CVE programmes.¹⁸⁵ The absence of a shared vocabulary results in diverse and inconsistent approaches to programming.

Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, February 2021), 3, https://www.ioe-evaluatie.nl/site/binaries/site-content/collections/documents/2021/02/01/literatuurstudies-contraterrorisme-en-voorkomen-and-tegengaan-van-gewelddadig-extremisme/Rusi_Summary_and_recommendations_202102.pdf.

179 Amy-Jane Gielen and Aileen van Leeuwen, *Debunking Prevailing Assumptions About Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies*, Policy Brief, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), December 2023, 8, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-12/Debunking%20Prevailing%20Assumptions%20About%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation.pdf>.

180 Georgia Holmer and Peter Bauman (with Kateira Aryaeinejad), “Measuring up: Evaluating the Impact of P/CVE Programs”, US Institute of Peace, 2018, 4, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/preventing-countering-violent-extremism-measuringup.pdf>.

181 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism Programming: A toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation*, 2018, 62, <https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2021/08/PVE-Improving-Impact-Programming-Toolkit-Ed3-EN-2018.pdf>.

182 Andrew Glazzard, Martine Zeuthen, and Jessica White, *Executive Summary and Recommendations: A Systematic Literature Review of Effectiveness of Counter-Terrorism and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Activities* (Royal United Services Institute and the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, February 2021), 3.

183 Security Web Portal in South East Europe, “An interview with Dr. John Horgan – Terrorism, Psychology, and Major Issues in the Field”, Regional Cooperation Council, November 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3UPDkp6>.

184 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Improving the impact of preventing violent extremism Programming: A toolkit for design, monitoring and evaluation* (2018), 125. <https://www.international-alert.org/app/uploads/2021/08/PVE-Improving-Impact-Programming-Toolkit-Ed3-EN-2018.pdf>.

185 Amy-Jane Gielen and Aileen van Leeuwen, *Debunking Prevailing Assumptions About Monitoring and Evaluation for P/CVE Programmes and Policies*, 5-6.

This makes it more difficult to identify encouraging practices or draw broader lessons from across the field. This broad programme variance undermines efforts to create a cohesive body of evaluative work in P/CVE or articulate both what P/CVE programming is and what it isn't.

In a comprehensive appraisal of P/CVE evaluations from 2001 to 2020, 74 programs were analysed. Of these, “[o]nly 32% of the studies deemed the intervention successful, 55% described limited success, and 8% deemed the program had failed”.¹⁸⁶ Many of the programmes fell short of meeting their objectives. Some even resulted in unintended negative outcomes, such as fostering resentment or increasing the likelihood of alienation and stigma within communities. In a starkly worded conclusion, the authors stated that:

*Success was largely a self-assessed measure by the facilitators or stakeholders of the programs or the evaluators of the study[...] without a generally accepted set of metrics and no cohesive framework for conducting evaluations.*¹⁸⁷

A second extensive review of P/CVE programme evaluations unearthed similar results. The research team highlighted “a gap between observed changes in attitudes, behaviours, and social networks and actual impacts in [violent extremism] outcomes”. Their main recommendation was elemental. They called for the “need to establish clear correlations between intermediate changes and tangible [violent extremism] results to better identify which interventions lead to meaningful reductions in [violent extremism]”.¹⁸⁸ Calling for an evaluation procedure this basic – connecting what programs do to their impact on VEO activities – underscores the generally low quality of P/CVE programme evaluations.

A third assessment of P/CVE evaluations identified only one in five studies that used another familiar evaluation practice: a control group. This is a notable finding, given the utility of control groups as a means to measure programme impact: “Generally speaking, a valid causal inference requires comparison between a treatment group, or participants in a program, and a control group, [who are] non-participants in a program”.¹⁸⁹

With such evaluation basics so often swept aside and pressure to fudge evaluation results so intense, the following method of measuring the impact of a P/CVE initiative is revealing. It comes from civil society officials undertaking P/CVE programming in areas where they fully realise that VEOs also are present. In a private interview, they related how they learned that their programme was making an impact. It began when VEO operatives secure their mobile phone number. Once that occurred, VEO members texted the civil society officials, indicating that they knew where their spouse worked and where their children went to school. Their threats were clearly designed to force the P/CVE programme and its staff to withdraw.

This intimate indication of impact calls attention to the vast distance between ordinary P/CVE programmes and their evaluations from the actual task of moving the needle against the unyielding predations and encroachments of VEOs. The gathered analysis of available documentation indicates that most policies and programmes labelled Preventing Violent Extremism or Countering Violent Extremism do not precisely aim to prevent or counter what VEOs do. The pursuit of crafty, adaptable and dangerous adversaries via expansive, costly efforts whose impact is unclear comes across as an unfair fight.

¹⁸⁶ Wesam Charkawi, Kevin Dunn and Ana-Maria Bliuc, 2024, “Evaluations of Countering Violent Extremism Programs: Linking Success to Content, Approach, Setting, and Participants”, *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 77 (2024): 100674, ISSN 1756-0616, 1.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Jessica Baumgardner-Zuzik, Shaziya DeYoung, Allyson Bacht, Brandon Kendhammer, Shreya Gautam, and Kelsey Edmond, *Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism Monitoring, Evaluation, & Learning (MEL): Prevention, Long-term Assistance and Services for Research – Partners for University-Led Solutions Engine (LASER Pulse Consortium, Purdue University) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID)*, January 2024, 6. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5db70e83fc0a966cf4cc42ea/t/67b8c3d339141d619b8f14dd/1748355670498/MEL+-+PV.pdf>

¹⁸⁹ Caitlin Mastroe and Susan Szmania, *Surveying CVE Metrics in Prevention, Disengagement and Deradicalization Programs*, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, March 2016, 7, 14, https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_SurveyingCvemetrics_March2016.pdf.

Part Four: Next Steps?

Conclusion: VEOs, Governments, and Youth

Thirty-three years after the US military first entered Somalia (initially during a civil war, eventually for CT efforts against Al-Shabaab), the US Embassy and its personnel reside within the Aden Adde International Airport compound in the nation's capital city, Mogadishu.¹⁹⁰ Officials follow strict security protocols and cannot visit the centre of the city.¹⁹¹ Like the aftermath of Operation Barkhane in Mali, CT operations frequently are on the back foot. In such situations, it is challenging (at best) for P/CVE efforts to take flight.

The twin contexts underscore the exceptionally difficult challenges that PVE and CVE initiatives routinely face. International violent extremist organisations are cagey, resilient, adaptable, ferocious and patient.

Meanwhile, P/CVE actors function as distanced partners to CT operatives that sometimes cede ground to VEOs. They also often cooperate with governments whose unsavoury methods cultivate the ground for violent extremism and vigorously deny VEO-driven realities. P/CVE also becomes inherently dangerous whenever it enters areas where VEOs operate. And regularly, a nation's vulnerable youth are cornered and exploited by governments while also targeted and exploited by VEOs.

Analysis of available relevant publications for this study strongly suggests that the sprawling international field of P/CVE rests on uncertain ground. P/CVE actors institute programming that often lacks surgical precision or urgency. Most significantly, their efforts are largely disconnected from the specifics of what VEOs do and how governments behave. However valid their intent, P/CVE initiatives typically do not actively strive either to prevent or counter the explicit actions and designs of VEOs or the truly destructive impacts of governments.

P/CVE efforts are further hampered by a sequence of internal matters reviewed in this paper, including:

1. *The P/CVE field cannot draw on collectively agreed definitions of terrorism, violent extremism or P/CVE.* Broad, ambitious, and often-conflicting definitions crowd the field. Some contend that widely agreed definitions will never exist. The launching point for what P/CVE is, what it should do, and how it connects to CT efforts thus remains unclear. As a result, there is a lack of precision about how P/CVE efforts prevent and/or counter violent extremism. The ambiguity and fuzziness surrounding the field has facilitated the regular and unstrategic merging of security-oriented P/CVE efforts with the non-P/CVE world of international development and humanitarian action.
2. *Reliance on (and sometimes collaboration with) governments whose record of violence and misrule effectively opens the door for VEO enemies to enter and take root.* A common approach to governance is to sidestep national government operations. This unintentionally may validate (and perhaps even legitimate) their destructive and self-destructive tendencies. It also sidesteps the prime driver of VEO development and expansion: government misrule, violence, and abuse.
3. *An unclear connection between VEO actions and government behaviour – and the P/CVE response.* The agendas of P/CVE action are influenced by many forces, agendas, traditions, orientations, and priorities. The twin threats of the specific tactics and strategies of VEOs, together

¹⁹⁰ James Bennett, "Brief: US Embassy Restricts Movements in Somalia Due to Threat Intelligence", *Atlas*, April 8, 2024,

¹⁹¹ Larry Socha, 2023, "Mogadishu: Somalia's historic capital hosts a U.S. embassy once again", *State Magazine*, September 2023, <https://statemag.state.gov/2023/09/0923pom/>; Travel.State.Gov, "Somalia: The Somali Republic, Travel Advisory, Somalia - Level 4: Do Not Travel, Safety and Security", May 14, 2025.

with particular government tendencies and abuses, do not consistently inform and guide P/CVE action.

4. *A confusing and uncompetitive approach to gender and youth.* The P/CVE field does not clarify the difference or overlap between *gender and youth concerns*. Much more common are the implied conventional meanings of gender as women and youth as male youth. Additional generic assumptions relating to gender and youth, largely unsupported by evidence, burden the P/CVE approach to both. A perplexing P/CVE oversight is not prioritising the predominance of male youth in VEO fighting forces.

Contrast this to common VEO approaches to gender and youth. Exploiting female and male youth fragilities and vulnerabilities concerning threats of severe exclusion and emasculation, together with the search for a life with purpose, have proven to be VEO specialties. So has manipulating women's disempowerment to their advantage. The result is a P/CVE field bound by tradition and more attuned to addressing mainstream development objectives than responding to rising security threats emanating from savvy, adaptable VEO adversaries with demonstrable, penetrating, and highly effective gender and youth expertise.

5. *Regular dependence on unproven assumptions to inform and guide action.* Basing aims, rationales, and objectives on assumptions that may not or cannot be true runs the risk of undermining P/CVE initiatives and possibly creating adverse and unintended outcomes.
6. *An approach to evaluation work that routinely sets aside basic assessment principles and frequently favours declarations of positive impact that are unproven.* The difficulty of proving that a P/CVE initiative either prevented a future VEO incursion or countered those that have already taken place are weighty evaluation constraints. At the same time, basic evaluation fundamentals regularly are not implemented. The paucity of quality impact evaluations remains a prominent sector-wide weakness.

The absence of urgency in much documentation about the P/CVE field contrasts with steady VEO advances on the ground. Two decades into the P/CVE endeavour, the assets and advantages of VEOs are so significant, and the woes caused by national government misrule are so pronounced, that an upgraded approach to the vital endeavour of preventing and countering violent extremism is required.

Nine P/CVE Policy Challenges: Questions to Address

Research and analysis for this paper strongly suggests that the current international P/CVE enterprise would benefit from substantial reform. To facilitate policy discussions, the following nine sets of elemental challenges (presented in question form) aim to inspire critical examination and reflection on how to upgrade and sharpen the exceptionally important work of P/CVE:

1. *VEOs:*
 - Should P/CVE compete for relevance, credibility, and legitimacy with VEOs?
 - Should P/CVE change what they do in order to compete?
 - Should P/CVE create new subfields or expand existing ones to prevent or counter major and largely unchallenged VEO endeavours (such as in money laundering, human, arms and drug trafficking, and other illicit economic activities)?
 - How can P/CVE lessen VEO advances in contexts where VEOs have the upper hand?
2. *Governments and Governance:*
 - Can governments known for misrule lead the way against VEOs?

- How might the position of predatory governments – as recognised UN member states – impact the efforts of P/CVE actors and their diplomatic and CT counterparts?
- What should be the role of P/CVE actors, and their diplomatic and CT counterparts, in promoting authentic governance reforms?
- Should P/CVE address state violence, corruption, the profound marginalisation of particular groups, degraded public services, faulty justice, and other major governance issues that transform into VEO advantages?
- What areas of leverage can be identified and used to encourage impactful governance reforms?

3. CT:

- What does a strategic relationship between CT and P/CVE actors look like?
- How can it be achieved?
- How should P/CVE actors respond if CT efforts enhance state military responses that undermine P/CVE work?

4. *Development and Humanitarian Efforts:*

- Should P/CVE initiatives separate from international development and humanitarian action?
- Does allowing P/CVE to merge with development and humanitarian work run the risk of cultivating counterproductive outcomes and undermining credibility?

5. P/CVE:

- Is it important to settle on whether a difference exists between PVE and CVE?
- If so, should PVE and CVE clarify any differences and establish complementary identities, policies, and practices?

6. *Gender and Youth:*

- Should the predominant gender = women, and youth = male youth approaches in P/CVE be reformed?
- Should P/CVE actors compete with the often-exceptional gender and youth expertise and strategies that many VEOs employ?
- If so, how?

7. Access:

- Who should get into P/CVE programmes? For example, are P/CVE programmes competing with VEOs for the same female and male youth?
- If the carrying capacity of all VEOs is limited and the people they target is precise and strategic, should P/CVE actors respond with sharply focused strategies – or rely on broad, whole-of-society, and whole-of-government approaches?

8. *Assumptions:*

- Should P/CVE actors continue to derive rationales from assumptions?
- If not, what should replace them?

9. *Evaluations:*

- Should P/CVE invest additional resources and expertise to address its underwhelming evaluation record?
- How should P/CVE respond to evidence of little or no positive impact from P/CVE initiatives?

About the Authors

Marc Sommers

Marc Sommers is an internationally recognised youth, gender, conflict, education, and P/CVE specialist. Across his career, he has blended peacebuilding and diplomacy with field research and training. He was a member of the CVE Working Group at the US Department of State and was seconded to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Djibouti to work on violent extremism and CVE. He also has served with the US Department of Defense. Marc has published a book on trust-based field methods for researching violent extremism and a report on youth and CVE. He has written on violent extremism and governance for Just Security. Marc received his PhD in Anthropology from Boston University and is an affiliated researcher with the African Studies Center at Boston University.

Mai Ibrahim Nasrallah

Mai Nasrallah is a youth and education in emergencies specialist with 10 years of experience representing donors, NGOs, and research institutes in development and humanitarian settings. She has led efforts in programme and strategy design, programme evaluations, research, and programme management, including some initiatives with links to CVE.

Mai has served as an education and youth specialist at USAID in Jordan and a Youth Expert with the Norwegian Refugee Council. She holds a Master's in Human Rights from the London School of Economics.



International Centre for
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E: info@icct.nl

www.icct.nl