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MISSION

USIP's Insights Newsletter aims to challenge and refine major assumptions about the theory and practice of peacebuilding and contributes to the design of specific peacebuilding tools applicable in conflict situations worldwide.

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STATE OF THE ART

Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice

by Steven Heydemann, Ph.D, vice president, Center for Applied Research on Conflict, USIP

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) is a rapidly expanding field of practice. Despite its impressive growth, CVE has struggled to establish a clear and compelling definition as a field; has evolved into a catch-all category that lacks precision and focus; reflects problematic assumptions about the conditions that promote violent extremism; and has not been able to draw clear boundaries that distinguish CVE programs from those of other, well-established fields, such as development and poverty alleviation, governance and democratization, and education. In addition, in reframing work in such fields in terms of its contribution to the prevention of terrorism, CVE poses significant risks to practitioners and participants whose local engagement may be seen as extensions of America's often-controversial counterterrorism (CT) policies and thus as legitimate targets of critics of such policies.

Addressing these problems will not be easy and may require a reassessment of whether CVE is a useful or effective framework for field-based interventions. Developing a sharper, narrower, and more focused definition of CVE; tightening the boundaries between CVE as a field of practice and its related fields of development, governance, and conflict mitigation; and a stronger commitment to testing the causal assumptions underlying CVE work are initial steps that would improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of CVE programming. Identifying CVE as a classic case of a "wicked problem," unpacking its component elements, and establishing which components are most tractable to specific kinds of interventions would be an important step in this direction.

The Problematic Origins and Development of CVE

In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, the U.S. embarked on a Global War on Terror. The Bush administration, with bipartisan support, elevated counterterrorism into a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy: Military action—the use of force, or "kinetic" measures—became the preferred means for countering terrorism. Over the course of the 2000s,

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PEACE ARENA

In each Newsletter, the Peace Arena offers a space for discussion between scholars and practitioners as they comment on a selected quote. This week we feature a discussion on CVE between Dr. John Horgan, Director of the Center for Terrorism and Security Studies at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and Tom Parker, Advisor on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism at the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF). The selected quote comes from Georgia Holmer, Senior Program Officer at USIP's Center for Governance, Law and Society (GLAS). Holmer published a Special Report entitled "Countering Violent Extremism: A Peacebuilding Perspective" in September 2013.

Theory vs. Practice

"As the domain of CVE continues to mature and expand, moving further upstream to address root causes of extremist violence, much of the work touches the realm of peacebuilding. Violent extremism is a driver of conflict, and violent extremists are often spoilers in peacebuilding efforts."

by Tom Parker

I am always a little cautious about references to the '"root causes" of extremist violence since it suggests that there are a discrete number of generic causes of extremist violence whereas both social science and field experience suggest that the drivers of extremism and violent behavior come in many forms and combinations, some deeply personal and others more societal in nature, and differ from person to person.

What is, I think, fair to say is that the grievances articulated by violent extremists are often grounded in the same political realities that peacebuilding efforts are designed to engage, although practitioners must take care not to draw facile connections as proximity is not always causation. Poverty is a classic case in point. Poverty is often cited as a root cause of terrorism, more often than not by governments mired in a security crisis and seeking financial aid from international donors. Yet the social science suggests that personal experience of poverty is not highly correlated with extremist violence—think of the students in Germany and Italy who embraced Marxist terrorism in the early 1970s. Many—like Susanne Albrecht, who assisted in the attempted kidnap and murder of Jürgen Ponto, Chairman of the Dresdener Bank, and the failed assassination attempt on Alexander Haig, NATO Commander-in-Chief—came from affluent backgrounds. The same has been true of many of the recruits that have joined al-Qaeda.

Those involved in peacebuilding efforts need to be aware of extremist narratives and grievances but should not allow extremist narratives to dominate their approach. Extremist groups require the support of their aspirational client communities to survive, what the Irish academic Louise Richardson has called "complicit surround." This complicit surround should be the focus of peacebuilding efforts. If the client community turns its back on the extremists then their days are likely to be numbered as a political force.

by Dr. John Horgan

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), for many, is more about preventing violent extremism from taking root in the first place. Because of this, those who espouse CVE quickly find themselves in a no-win situation. It is not unlike being shipwrecked with a tiny rowboat for survival. You may have the company of others but will face no end of disagreement about what to do. Once you realize that staying put is not a feasible option, it can be impossible to know in which direction you should row, and you might never know if you have succeeded. Worse, if rescued, it may not be because of anything that you actually did.

Violent extremism poses tremendous challenges for explanation and, thus, response. It comes in many forms. It has multiple, sometimes overlapping causes. It attracts multiple and differentially motivated participants, spawning diverse effects for participants and victims alike. Its reality is rarely as we would like it to be, and our responses do change it. Ironic then that so far CVE is unimpeded by the dueling metaphors that have plagued efforts to understand radicalization.

Even if we reach consensus on where to focus resources for prevention (e.g., structural conditions), we should never assume that one kind of cause takes priority over another— a point borne out in conflicts where identity is a core driver. We still cannot even grasp the simple fact that the motivation of the violent extremist is rarely the cause of their behavior.

The perennial challenge of violent extremists is to engineer revolution and mobilize the masses. By and large, they fail. They anchor their vision in whatever crisis they can. The more they externalize blame for that crisis, the greater potential to gain uncritical supporters. And yet, that the pace and nature of CVE is almost exclusively responsive to short-term terroristic gains is a testament to how unimaginative and lackluster our efforts in this space continue to be.

Tom Parker, Cont.

However, as the quote notes, extremists can often have private, even mercenary reasons, for prolonging conflict, making them potential spoilers in peacebuilding efforts even when legitimate grievances are being addressed. In such circumstances, it is worth bearing in mind that some violent extremists can also become powerful advocates for peacebuilding efforts precisely because of their past commitment to violent struggle.

Martin McGuinness, alleged former Head of the Provisional IRA's General Army Council now deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland, has played a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland peace process. In a remarkable statement in 2009, he described the rejectionist murderers of two British soldiers outside Massereene Army Barracks as "traitors to the island of Ireland"—a powerful repudiation of rejectionist aims, which carried substantial weight with the wider republican community. All views expressed are those of the author and do not represent official UN policy.

Tom Parker's response to John Horgan:

John makes a compelling plea for flexibility of both thought and action, with which I fully concur. CVE is imprecisely understood both within academia and the policymaking community—yet it is also currently in vogue because it seems to some to offer solutions to pressing problems. However, what we actually have are not solutions but rather a basket of insights culled from case studies around the world that may or may not be transferable from one conflict to another, and drawing analogies between conflicts is fraught with its own perils. Awareness of CVE research can certainly help inform peacebuilding strategies, but it falls well short of offering a roadmap to successful outcomes. ■

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Some Final Comments by Georgia Holmer:

The term "root cause" as used in this debate is a good illustration of how CVE and Peacebuilding are indeed distinct domains of policy and practice, each with its own dialect. "Root cause" theory in terrorism studies, and simplistic causal explanations for violent extremism, are dated ideas and, as John Horgan cautions, "offer misleading and serious ramifications for formulating responses to violent extremism." In conflict analysis and among peacebuilders, and in the context of this particular quote, the term refers to structural drivers of conflict. The quote attempted to capture the evolution of CVE policy from an emphasis on countering the "pull" of ideology to addressing the more structural "push" factors and, perhaps more importantly, the relatively new engagement of CVE practitioners in what have been traditional peacebuilding "spaces," such as civil society and the education sector. Regarding the overlap of the two domains, John Horgan astutely asserts that "though it ought to be distinct from peacebuilding, CVE can be part of it, and lessons from peacebuilding can inform CVE." Tom Parker critically notes that "awareness of CVE research can certainly help inform peacebuilding strategies, but it falls well short of offering a roadmap to successful outcomes." Both perspectives are largely consonant with the USIP Special Report from which the quote was taken. ■

John Horgan, Cont.

That we do not know precisely what we are preventing, let alone knowing how or whether we might have prevented it, does not make for a bright future. We cannot hide behind complexity. It is already too late to prevent the inevitable flood of recruits to Syria and probably too late also to adequately prepare for the increasing likelihood of a crisis that will emerge from at least some returnees.

We have a rapidly diminishing opportunity to figure out what CVE can be, and we must seize it. Scalability must be a core feature. CVE efforts should be big and small but also fast and slow and both preemptive and responsive. They can never be top-down. Community-level engagement (even online) will remain a critical rate-limiting success factor. Though it ought to be distinct from peacebuilding, CVE can be part of it, and lessons from peacebuilding can inform CVE. We can limit spoiler impact by better enhancing resilience, but we cannot seriously talk, even implicitly, a game of prevention unless we are willing to acknowledge our glaring limitations and plan accordingly.

John Horgan's response to Tom Parker:

I agree wholeheartedly with Tom Parker's arguments about the limitations of "root cause" arguments. They offer misleading and serious ramifications for formulating responses to violent extremism and other conflict-centered challenges. Equally, his point about the continuity of conflict (often for reasons that differ from the original "causes") is well taken. Ironically, however, a lesson in pointing out the extraordinary—and genuine—transformation of Martin McGuinness from terrorist leader to elder statesman is that it was the movement to which McGuinness once belonged that essentially was one of the major catalysts for change in Northern Ireland. Of course a multitude of important actors were involved in peacebuilding in Northern Ireland, but one could argue that it was the Provisional IRA many would say effectively choreographed the nature and pace of that process, at least until 2001–02. If the pursuit of CVE is implicitly a suggestion that its advocates are able to exert control and influence, we would do well to reflect on the examples raised by Parker. ■

IN PRACTICE

Countering Violent Extremism: The Nigerian Experience

Michael Olufemi Sodipo, Peace Initiative Network

Nigeria is diverse, like the causes and characteristics of its ubiquitous conflicts, especially if the analysis stretches over time. Intermittent eruptions of sectarian strife, corruption, mutual distrust, and social intolerance provide the backdrop to extremist ideology in Nigeria. In June 2011, the federal government created the Joint Task Force (JTF), a special military force comprising the Nigerian armed forces and the police, aimed at mitigating the threat of violent extremism.

Despite the acclaimed success of Nigerian CVE operations, paradoxically the terror campaign of Boko Haram is yet to abate, rather becoming more sophisticated and lethal. The politicization of discourse on violent extremism, the lack of intelligence on insurgent activities, and the alleged human rights abuses by the security forces undermine CVE efforts. In addition, the lack of national consensus on the best approach to counter extremist groups continues to be an albatross in the fight against violent extremism. The JTF strategic operations, very much in line with traditional counter-terrorism approaches, include military crackdowns on extremists through house-to-house searches, military stop and search checkpoint, raids, and demolition of homes occupied by suspects. Noncoercive CVE instruments deployed by the Nigerian government include the establishment of dialogue committees, security sector reform, economic development initiatives, and youth empowerment programs.

Civil society actors, religious leaders, community elders, and the media pursue a wide range of activities to increase community engagement, promote peace education, and build tolerance, social healing, security, and a culture of peace in Nigeria. The Nigerian government and the UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force in January 2012 unveiled projects under the Integrated Assistance for Counter-Terrorism initiative to support Nigerian efforts in combating the scourge

Source: Wikimedia Commons

of extremism. The U.S Department of State listing of Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in November 2013 is the latest move by an international partner in the effort to counter violent extremism in Nigeria.

The dynamics and manifestations of violent extremism in Nigeria have changed over the years. The phenomenon has deep roots in poor governance and the culture of corruption that pervades every level of Nigerian society and feeds extremist ideology. A CVE policy that does not address these drivers of violence is unlikely to succeed. ■

CVE in Pakistan

Nadia Naviwala, Pakistan Country Representative, U.S. Institute of Peace

Most bilateral and multilateral missions in Pakistan are concerned with mitigating violence in or emanating from the country. While they each have offices that could be considered to fall under the umbrella of "CVE," their definitions, objectives, and approaches are very different —reflecting the ambiguity of the term and the complexity of conflict in Pakistan.

The United States has the clearest commitment to the term, collapsing the work of many offices—public affairs, stabilization, governance, and rule of law—under the overarching policy objective of countering violent extremism. The U.S. approach is also the most expansive, seeking to counter all forms of ideological extremism that justify the use of violence. The most interesting iteration has been in Karachi, where countering violent extremism has meant trying to counter participation in political violence, ethnic violence, and even criminal gangs among youth. The term "stabilization" is often seen alongside CVE, so that the objective is strengthening domestic peace and stability in Pakistan.

Source: USIP Website

The UK approach is very different. Instead of the term CVE, their policy objective is

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STATE OF THE ART

Something Old, Something New: The Emergence and Evolution of CVE Effort

by Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Head of Research and Analysis at the Global Center on Cooperative Security

Over a decade after the attacks of September 11, 2001, terrorism continues to factor heavily in national security concerns. Its association with other transnational security challenges, including drug trafficking, organized crime, and armed conflict, has underscored the need for a more preventive and multidimensional response. Moreover, the ability of extremist groups to continue generating support and sympathy has prompted awareness among governments that law enforcement approaches alone are insufficient to counter terrorism and violent extremism in the medium to long term, despite some of the short-term successes afforded by decapitation strikes that have targeted al-Qaeda leaders and affiliates. The phenomenon of radicalized "self-starter" groups or individuals—"lone wolves"—also prompted greater focus by governments and counterterrorism practitioners on the need to challenge extremist narratives and ideologies to reduce their appeal and recruiting potential early on.

In recent years, this evolution of the threat has prompted efforts to counter violent extremism or "CVE" allowing practitioners to complement counterterrorism strategies in a number of countries and regions. The unpredictability of terrorism today, characterized by increasingly diffused transnational networks and the phenomenon of "self-starters" that no longer need extensive training or contact with identifiable terrorist organizations, further underscores the need for a preventive approach that addresses the conditions and ideologies that may create an enabling environment for terrorism. While the terminology and the policy framework of CVE is relatively new, it builds on longstanding bodies of work to counter radicalization and prevent violence and draws on a number of related areas of practice, including public diplomacy, strategic communications, development, and conflict prevention or mitigation. Today, CVE is an articulated interest of numerous international organizations and associations, including the United Nations, European Union, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF).

An assessment of contemporary CVE

The preventive focus of CVE reflects the importance attached to addressing what the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy calls the "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism." While no definitive causal relationship has been established, given that violent radicalization appears to be a highly individualized and complex process, there is widespread agreement among policymakers, experts, and grassroots practitioners that prolonged conflict, underdevelopment, weak governance, and human rights infractions make for powerful drivers of violence and extremism. While these "push factors" are often generalized at a global level, they create a particular set of environmental enablers in different contexts, allowing extremist groups and recruiters to exploit local grievances and offer alternative narratives and mechanisms for addressing them. The range of personalities and backgrounds of extremists underscores the highly individualized nature of the process by which individuals support violent extremist ideas or groups; it may be just one or all of the factors mentioned above that provides the necessary conditions. In addition to the right combination of structural drivers, "pull factors" such as charismatic recruiters, appealing communications, and material benefits may also prompt recruitment and support for extremist groups.

Conflicts in South Asia, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, for example, have demonstrated that violent extremism is not only related to terrorism but can play a large role in fuelling sectarian tensions, intra- and interstate violence, transnational insecurity and criminality, and

hindering socioeconomic development. Consequently, CVE efforts include a mix of security and development approaches and provide an important platform to build bridges across divergent areas of policy and practice that focus on the prevention and mitigation of violence. Thus, while CVE emerged from the counterterrorism portfolio, in practice it is closer to efforts to address the structural causes of conflict, while serving as one instrument in the conflict prevention and mitigation toolkit.

The absence of a clear consensus on the drivers of violent extremism and the particularities which shape grievances and reactions make it difficult to determine exactly which push or pull factors will motivate individuals or groups to support violent extremist ideas and groups—or even go that extra step and perpetrate a terrorist act. This discord raises the thorny question of the basis for CVE engagement and policies. Some international actors have had the resources and political support to dedicate resources for needs assessments and the mapping of dynamics that can foster violent extremism. However, not all are able to invest adequately—either in terms of time or finances—to gain a deep understanding of local or regional dynamics. On the other hand, it may be unrealistic to expect any external actor to gain a deep understanding of local dynamics when the threat landscape is constantly fluid and they are caught between domestic, international, and other policy priorities. How then to develop a better starting point for CVE interventions? At the very least, by ensuring sufficient resources and time—which is often in even less supply than money—to undertake field visits and research to understand not only local and national but also regional dynamics and, where relevant, have the opportunity to interact with important external actors either in the diaspora or neighbouring states. No state or community is an island, and the threat scenario, and opportunities to intervene, may well be found in such relationships.

From Ideas to Action

CVE has manifested itself in a broad range of initiatives that include building the capacities of financial, criminal justice, and rule of law institutions; developing media products and messages to challenge extremist narratives and counter their ideologies; training police and frontline officials about CVE; and strengthening engagement with civil society groups working on violence prevention and related development issues. A number of innovative activities have been undertaken to further CVE efforts, such as youth engagement and employment projects, educational programs, and the development of TV, radio, and other media programming to showcase alternative narratives to those propagated by extremists.

"While CVE emerged from the counterterrorism portfolio, in practice it is closer to efforts to address the structural causes of conflict."

Do any of these work? Evaluating any preventive measure remains an enormous challenge as it necessitates "measuring the negative" and attributing causality where none can be fully determined. However, that does not mean it cannot be done at all. Where particular structural conditions have been directly linked to violent extremism, projects addressing those conditions can be evaluated for their impact in mitigating the threat. Moreover, where projects have a clearly defined objective, target audience, and articulated theory of change, developing a set of benchmarks or indicators becomes more feasible. Most CVE projects that have been evaluated in a thoughtful manner have taken this latter approach. Like development work, CVE is a long-term strategy with a more uncertain outcome than kinetic measures but is an important instrument in the prevention toolkit since the narratives and activities that fuel recruitment and support for violent extremism cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

Although progress has been made, there remain a number of critical challenges for CVE policymakers and practitioners. First, despite the proliferation of CVE activities, there remains a lack of clarity or shared understanding among different governments and experts regarding the definition of the term and its implications for programming. For some actors, CVE efforts constitute outreach by security sector actors to gain intelligence and information; for others, CVE entails a broader range of prevention efforts including initiatives by social workers, educators, and development actors, which traditional security actors may not consider related to counterterrorism. This ambiguity poses challenges in the determination of funding for projects, for cohesive messaging across different government entities, and for the evaluation of CVE projects. Without agreement on a working premise, if not a definition of CVE, it is difficult to determine what projects are specifically focusing on CVE and what projects address related issues but have attendant benefits for CVE. Moreover, this makes it difficult to evaluate programs and better understand their impact, especially when the theories of change and the objectives of the projects remain unclear.

Second, and not unrelated to the first, is the challenge of the "CVE" label. Without a shared understanding of the term "CVE" it is difficult to know which programs can accurately be labelled as such. The

political sensitivities around counterterrorism programs have made it problematic for a number of grassroots groups to receive funding and support under a CVE rubric without compromising the relationship with their constituencies. Moreover, there remain concerns about the securitization of development programs and instrumentalization of local partners, as well as the safety of personnel associated with counterterrorism efforts in the field. Such concerns have constrained engagement between security and development practitioners, though there are some indications of positive change in this regard. Revisions to the United Kingdom's "Prevent" program and efforts to couch CVE in terms applicable to local contexts reflect an evolution from the earlier approaches in which a broad spectrum of activities were labelled as "CVE" and generated some backlash from communities who believed they were being unduly stigmatized and securitized.

Third, scaling up CVE projects and moving from a tactical to a strategic approach remains a challenge. Evolving or unclear funding mechanisms for projects have not always been conducive to the kind of multiyear support required for CVE projects that focus on addressing structural prevention, such as educational or development activities focused on youth or women, or capacity-building initiatives to strengthen key institutions. While counterterrorism efforts have traditionally focused on responsive interventions to proximate threats, CVE takes a longer-term approach which is not always easy to fit into financial and political cycles. On the flip side, the government proclivity for funding large projects has sometimes sidelined smaller grassroots groups that have sought support for more localized and smaller-scale CVE projects.

Fourth, governments and international organizations face constraints when trying to keep up with the strategic communications of extremist groups. Unhampered by bureaucracy and political sensitivities, extremist groups like al-Qaeda have demonstrated adaptability and resilience in crafting messages and communications that can both radicalize and mobilize supporters and link local grievances and events to a global narrative of struggle. In contrast, it appears government actors are left with the task of countering a narrative that has been established by extremists—of responding rather than proactively shaping it.

"Responding to terrorist acts without taking a more preventive and multi dimensional approach will not prove sufficient."

Fifth, there remains a need for more effective balancing of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Local partners are essential to determine the dynamics of violence and radicalization in a local or regional context and to determine the environmental factors most relevant in driving support for extremist groups. Moreover, local partners are often best placed to shape contextually appropriate CVE interventions that are more likely to gain traction with critical audiences. However, this engagement needs to be complemented with top-down support from governments to ensure the political space and support for the implementation of CVE projects.

Going Forward

As a number of conflict dynamics grow increasingly complex, violent extremism is one of several ingredients contributing to a lethal cocktail of insecurity, criminality, and conflict. In contrast to traditional counterterrorism approaches, CVE offers the opportunity for a reaction more clearly tailored to the contemporary threat. Responding to terrorist acts without taking a more preventive and multidimensional approach will not prove sufficient for an effective response to these threats, making CVE a critical component of counterterrorism strategies and a contribution to broader efforts to prevent violence and promote human security.

Post-9/11 counterterrorism responses have at times created fissures between states focusing on the threats generated by al-Qaeda and its affiliates and those states concerned that their development priorities would be superseded by the counterterrorism agenda. The balance between the need to address "structural causes" and "hard" security responses was struck in the United Nations' 2006 Global Strategy and is reflected in the broad spectrum of CVE initiatives. The CVE framework therefore offers a valuable opportunity to take a more integrated approach to violence and conflict and can build on longstanding experiences and lessons learned from related fields of practice.

Multilateral actors, such as the United Nations, Global Counterterrorism Forum, and European Union, have increasingly emphasized the importance of the multidimensional preventive approach encapsulated in CVE policies and programs. The UN's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force and Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate are working on a number of initiatives that promote dialogue and understanding to counter the appeal of terrorism, as well as efforts to inhibit incitement to terrorism. The GCTF's CVE Working Group offers an important platform for international action on this front, illustrated by the establishment of Hedayah, the international centre of excellence on CVE in Abu Dhabi, and the announcement of a Global Fund for Community Engagement and Resilience. The latter will offer a first time vehicle for public-private partnerships on CVE and facilitate support to local

grassroots actors furthering CVE efforts in the field.

The proliferation of these opportunities and activities, however, also underscores the need for collaboration, cooperation, and information sharing among relevant actors to reduce the scope for duplication and avoid saturating communities and regions with programming beyond the absorption capacity. Emphasis on holistic approaches for CVE needs to be matched by "whole of government" approaches in countries as well as within these organizations. Over the past few years the CVE policy framework has been developed, refined, and revised. While in the early stages the framework was largely determined by security and intelligence actors, the emphasis on engaging local actors and communities presents an opportunity for CVE to be situated within a truly multidimensional paradigm.

Going forward, CVE efforts will need to continue engaging a broad range of practitioners in the various fields in which core CVE activities are undertaken—development, education, conflict prevention, and media. Rather than rush to relabel all these activities as "CVE," it is more opportune to mainstream CVE objectives—a preventive approach to violent extremism—into these activities to meet the overall objective of preventing violence and conflict and promoting sustainable development. To that end, while the existing expertise and experiences of several countries in addressing violence and extremism have contributed to a global knowledge base of good practices and lessons learned, there remains a need to ensure that responses are more closely tailored to the context in which they are implemented. Fitting these responses requires translating macro-level assessments of "push" and "pull" factors into assessments of local and regional drivers of violence and extremism based on research and engagement. These might include mapping exercises to determine perceptions of violent extremism and identify needs and credible interlocutors. Such a baseline will provide an important foundation upon which responses can be developed that help prevent extremist groups from preying on vulnerable communities and recruiting youth into a violent path that hinders prospects for both individual and national development. ■

"There remains a need to ensure that responses are more closely tailored to the context in which they are implemented."

CVE in Pakistan cont.

counterterrorism. Counter radicalization and rule of law, especially strengthening the police and justice systems, serve this objective. The British focus is to prevent the next terrorist attack in the UK by preventing people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorist organizations, specifically al-Qaeda and its affiliates. They are also not shy in their concern with "violent Islamist ideology" and promotion of liberal values—democracy, human rights, equality—which they believe undermine that support.

Other actors, like USIP, work towards CVE objectives within their work on conflict management. The Germans, who experienced violent extremism in the form of Nazism, do support work around conflict mitigation but deliberately avoid the term.

While CVE is an attractive political concept, most missions and their civil society partners struggle to operationalize it. "Extremism" is an awkward way to describe conflict in a country where it takes so many shapes: political, ethnic, sectarian, separatist, and criminal. And using ideology as a point of departure neglects the many other explanations for how conflict has emerged in the course of the country's political development. Finally, in the local context, the term can be offensive and end up exacerbating conflict between secular and religious communities.

"There is little if any evidence of the impact of these types of interventions on shifting individual beliefs or societal norms."

Ironically, while the ambiguity of the term may have led to some operational challenges, its flexibility has also given missions and offices space to develop programming that is adaptive and responsive to the context. But whether it is successful in achieving its objective of changing mindsets and preventing violence is very difficult, maybe impossible, to measure. Most discussion about work in this space focuses on outputs—work with religious leaders, flashy media. There is little if any evidence of the impact of these types of interventions on shifting individual beliefs or societal norms. ■

Countering Violent cont.

however, U.S. officials came to recognize the limits of kinetic tactics. Killing terrorists might prevent or deter but could not respond to the factors that cause terrorism in the first place and could be counterproductive by provoking violent reactions to U.S. counterterrorism efforts. In response, and without diminishing the role of military tools in CT, the U.S. government expanded its focus to include strategies for addressing the root causes of terrorism. This shift reflected growing appreciation among American officials that effective counterterrorism required addressing the underlying conditions that promote violent extremism.

The field of CVE has diverse origins and links to earlier efforts to address violent forms of political mobilization. Yet its expansion as a field in the 2000s can be linked to the response of U.S. agencies to the growing priority they attached to the threat of violent extremism and the conditions that support it. In effect, CVE as currently configured within the U.S. policy system can be seen as a bureaucratic response to shifts in the policy priorities of the U.S. as its war on terror matured.

Beginning in the late 2000s, the State Department 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. In keeping with USAID's longstanding focus on issues of development and poverty alleviation, CVE was initially seen as tightly linked to—and an offshoot of—broader strategies aimed at enhancing economic development. It soon expanded beyond this, however, becoming a catch-all category that was embraced by agencies and bureaus across the U.S. policy system—notwithstanding tensions across agencies in what CVE priorities should be and how they should be pursued.

Within the State Department, the Bureau of Counterterrorism added a new office focusing on CVE. In line with this trend, other governments and international institutions, including the UK (in its CONTEST counterterrorism strategy released in July 2011), the UN, the GCC, and the EU, also began to develop their own CVE programs. In December 2012, an international coalition of governments established the Hedayah International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism in the United Arab Emirates. Where donors lead, contractors and implementing organizations are not far behind: Within the span of only a few years, a large number of USAID contractors moved to establish their capacity to manage government-funded CVE programs. Their counterparts in the UK and elsewhere followed suit.

"CVE as currently configured within the U.S. policy system can be seen as a bureaucratic response to shifts in the policy priorities of the U.S. as its war on terror matured."

As part of their efforts to define and give coherence to CVE as a field of practice, U.S. officials, through USAID, sought to identify the conditions that were believed to promote violent extremism and what might be done to address them. In keeping with the diffuse, unfocused, yet expansive identity of the field, these conditions encompassed an unwieldy assortment of factors, including "high levels of social marginalization and fragmentation; poorly governed or ungoverned areas; government repression and human rights violations; endemic corruption and elite impunity . . . cultural threat perceptions . . . access to material resources, social status and respect from peers; a sense of belonging, adventure, and self-esteem or personal empowerment that individuals and groups that have long viewed themselves as victimized and marginalized can derive from the feeling that they are making history; and the prospect of achieving glory or fame."

Causal Confusion versus Causal Complexity

For practitioners struggling to unpack the causal pathways that lead individuals into extreme violence, create or reinforce pathways out of it, and remove or weaken the factors that produce it in the first place, this list poses a daunting challenge. Which factors matter most? If they all matter, which should we prioritize? How do we know whether our assumptions about the causes of violent extremism are valid? What if causality is too complex to imagine that we can counter violent extremism through piecemeal interventions? Do we have confidence that the tools and interventions available will produce meaningful results, especially given the uncertainty about whether the causal claims that USAID advances are right? These are the kinds of questions about what works and what does not with which practitioners in more established fields have wrestled for decades. In many cases, years of testing and field experiments have yielded only modest results. Yet for advocates of CVE, there is little sense that such uncertainty about causal relationships has informed its development as a field of practice.

As a result, key elements of the effort to define "best practice" in the field of CVE have had problematic effects. Five such

elements deserve further attention here.

(1) The U.S. and other government sponsors of CVE programs acknowledge that the motivations that lead individuals to embrace violent extremism may be too varied and too idiosyncratic to be generalizable and may not respond to external interventions unless they are very narrowly targeted. Yet diffuse and vague guidance concerning the design of CVE programs encourages broad-spectrum interventions that often lack the specificity to clearly assess their effects.

(2) An exceptionally large and diverse number of variables are understood to contribute to the decision by individuals to embrace violent extremism, including social, political, economic, psychological, and cultural factors—a list that is so encompassing that virtually any set of conditions could be viewed as drivers of violent extremism. As funding for work defined as CVE has expanded, this lack of focus has produced mission creep, the relabeling of existing programs in terms of CVE, and other tactics that undermine efforts to determine what is distinctive about the work of countering extremism and to design and test models and tools that explicitly target specific drivers of extremism.

(3) The frameworks developed by the U.S. government rest on very poorly anchored assumptions about the causal relationship between various factors and the decision by an individual to become a violent extremist. Assumptions about links between poverty and violent extremism have been questioned by economists. Political scientists have challenged whether socially marginal populations are more likely to embrace terrorist ideologies than are well-educated and relatively well-off segments of society. Yet uncertainty about the causes of violent extremism has not influenced the pace or scale of U.S. government funding for CVE programs.

(4) The boundaries between CVE and other more established fields are quite porous, including rule of law, security sector reform, governance and democratization, mediation and negotiation, gender and peacebuilding, religion and conflict, conflict prevention, and development. This blurring of boundaries reinforces perceptions of CVE as a catch-all category lacking well-defined conceptual, organizational, and empirical foundations as a field of practice.

(5) Finally, despite the rise of CVE as an attempt to temper the kinetic and coercive aspects of counterterrorism policy, it is widely seen as furthering the militarization of the many fields that are brought under the CVE umbrella and which, for reasons both political and financial, become redefined in terms of their utility in advancing a CVE agenda.

"Advocates of CVE should develop a sharper, narrower, and more focused definition of the field."

Collectively, these factors have had a profound and problematic effect on the trajectory and growth of CVE as a field of practice. It has become an amorphous category, lacking theoretical or applied focus; encompasses a confusing and occasionally contradictory array of approaches; has become a label of convenience for interventions that would otherwise be defined in terms of better established categories, such as security sector reform, governance, gender and peacebuilding, rule of law, and conflict prevention, among others; has developed practices that rest on poorly understood and poorly documented assumptions about what causes violent extremism, virtually ensuring that CVE programming will be unsuccessful; and has such diffuse and wide-ranging scope that efforts to establish what constitutes success in CVE—as opposed to success in reducing poverty, improving literacy, reforming a security sector, empowering women, improving governance, creating jobs, mitigating sectarian violence, promoting democracy, etc.—are poorly defined. As noted by McCants and Watts, "[A]lthough U.S. government documents frequently employ the term CVE, there is not a shared view of what CVE is or how it should be done. Definitions range from stopping people from embracing extreme beliefs that might lead to terrorism to reducing active support for terrorist groups. The lack of a clear definition for CVE not only leads to conflicting and counterproductive programs but also makes it hard to evaluate the CVE agenda as a whole and determine whether it is worthwhile to continue."

Redefining CVE?

Is it worthwhile to continue? Despite the reservations and concerns associated with the emergence of CVE as a field, it should not be summarily set aside as a framework for programming. Its presence has the potential to focus the attention of practitioners on the root causes of violent extremism as a problem distinct from outcomes defined in terms of development or governance. It creates incentives for practitioners to integrate CVE objectives into programs that may previously have viewed mitigating extremism as ancillary to success in, say, enhancing political participation, reducing corruption, or improving service provision.

These benefits are not trivial. Yet they are insufficient to demonstrate the value-added of CVE as a discrete field, distinct in some meaningful way from its component parts. To realize its potential as a field of practice, CVE will need to do more than increase the amount of money spent on interventions that have not proven their effectiveness. Most important, advocates of CVE should develop a sharper, narrower, and more focused definition of the field. This effort should be accompanied by a stronger commitment—including through the allocation of resources—to defining and testing the

causal assumptions underlying CVE, efforts that would improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of CVE programming. Identifying CVE as a classic case of a "wicked problem," unpacking its component elements, and establishing which are most tractable to specific kinds of interventions are important steps in this direction.

To implement these recommendations will require that CVE programming become more self-reflexive and self-critical. Moves in this direction will require that donor organizations commit themselves to support "dual-purpose" programming: approaches that exploit interventions as opportunities to test causal assumptions, explore the efficacy of tools, clarify and sharpen the boundaries of the field, and refine strategies and practices. In the absence of such efforts, the field of CVE is unlikely to answer the central question of whether it deserves to be understood as a distinct field of practice. ■

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