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SPECIAL REPORT

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Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism

Summary

- Interest and space for including religious actors in policy on countering violent extremism (CVE) has grown over the past few years, but debates over the degree to which ideological, religious, or structural factors contribute to violent extremism have not yielded clear guidance for policymakers and practitioners.
- The role of religion as a potential driver of violent extremism is significant, but religion usually interacts with a wide range of other factors and causality is not linear.
- An alternative approach that focuses on the role or function of religion in violent extremism—facilitating mobilization, providing a counternarrative, providing a justification, and sanctifying violent acts—shows promise.
- Religious leaders are integral members of civil society and key contributors to public and political discourse. Engaging them in all spheres of government work, carefully and with sensitivity to power asymmetries and potential risks, is needed.
- Understanding how religious factors affect violent extremism can help inform the design and implementation of CVE solutions that engage the religious sector.
- The track record highlights ways in which religious actors can be partners, including when and how to engage them, how to design effective training, and how to ensure effective partnerships across sectors through inclusivity and addressing potential political obstacles.
- Recommendations for policymakers and practitioners include a focus on CVE roles for faith actors beyond the religious sector, practical approaches for avoiding undue governmental entanglement in religion, and suggestions for how to ensure appropriately sized and inclusive engagement with religion and religious actors in the CVE context.

About the Report

This report explores the role of religion and engagement with religious actors in the context of efforts to counter violent extremism (CVE). Drawing on insights from recent policy discussions, academic activities, and the practical experience of CVE experts, it offers practical guidelines for policymakers and practitioners seeking to better understand the role of religion in violent extremism and best practices for partnering with religious actors to address the challenge. The report is part of ongoing United States Institute of Peace (USIP) efforts to develop and implement training and capacity-building programs that support CVE objectives.

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Background

The past few decades have seen increasing recognition of the significant role religious actors play in peace and in conflict. In a world in which the vast majority of people identify as religious,[1] the religious peacebuilding field has evolved to consider ways in which people of faith can, should, and do have an impact on conflict, as both preventers and instigators. As counterterrorism and CVE became a focus of US foreign policy after 9/11, policymakers have sought to better understand how to effectively engage religious ideas, actors, and institutions as part of this endeavor. The administration of George W. Bush established a White House team focused on faith sector engagement in 2001. A year later, an analogous office was created at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to focus on the role of religious actors in international development. It was during the Obama administration that US government engagement with the religious sector in foreign policy, including in peacebuilding, development, and human rights, became more formalized, strategic, and institutionalized. This began with the establishment of the Religion and Foreign Policy working group as part of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society in 2011 and culminated in 2013 with the establishment of a dedicated Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the Department of State.[2] Simultaneous with the increased interest in the religion and foreign policy field was a marked shift in prevailing approaches to understanding and preventing radicalization and extremist violence. Where the previously dominant focus on counterterrorism had involved efforts to directly combat or degrade the capacity of organized terrorist groups, the emerging paradigm of preventing or countering violent extremism focused instead on the various societal factors and drivers that lead individuals and small groups to embrace or otherwise support militant ideologies.[3] Although CVE was not an entirely new approach, the shift in this direction that began in 2015 was more expansive and systematic than at any time since 2001. Religion has figured into multiple waves of CVE approaches, at times more directly and intentionally than others.

The White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism convened by President Obama in February 2015 confirmed the place of CVE within his administration's foreign policy agenda, spurring a deluge of related conferences, conversations, and considerations globally.[4] In addition to institutionalizing strategy and standardizing the lexicon, the summit identified gaps and opportunities in domestic and international approaches. In its wake, regional summits were convened around the globe, inspired by or directly connected with the White House initiative, and in part a response to President Obama's call on global partners to join the CVE effort in his September 2015 speech to the UN General Assembly.[5,6] In May 2016, the Department of State and USAID issued the Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism.[7]

Debates on the precise definition and parameters of the CVE endeavor continue. The 2016 Joint Strategy defines CVE as "proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence."[8]

One particularly tough definitional quandary concerns the meaning of the term *violent extremism,* which is not spelled out in any detail in the State-USAID strategy document. Indeed, the very terms purportedly being defined—*countering*, *violent*, and *extremism*—are all incorporated into the definition. Violent extremism is in one instance defined as "violence undertaken by nonstate actors that is inspired or justified by, and associated with an extreme political, religious or social ideology." Like terrorism, the notion of extremism can be highly subjective. Most who work in the CVE space, however, understand it to focus on the intersection of violent behavior and the ideas that inspire, justify, or give meaning to that violence—often with a strong emphasis on identifying the contextual factors

(psychological, social, political, economic, security) in any given setting that make such ideas seem relevant or attractive.[9]

Interest and space for including religious actors in the process, discussion, and implementation around policy to counter violent extremism has grown over the past few years. The White House Summit on CVE notably mentioned "religious leaders and faith community engagement" among three stakeholder categories with which to increase collaboration on CVE. The State/USAID Joint Strategy indicates that the two agencies "will support. . . initiatives aimed at building the capacity of women, youth, religious, and other community leaders to advance CVE objectives."[10] Two recent major think tank studies on CVE also make multiple references to the importance of mobilizing or enlisting religious leaders and institutions to counter violent extremism, emphasizing the point that governments are often ill-suited to directly address the religious dimensions of violence and conflict—a theme to which we will return below.[11]

Religion as a Driver of Violent Extremism

Briefly setting aside the role of religion and religious actors in addressing the challenge of violent extremism, discussions and debates about whether and how religion serves as a driver of violent extremism are critical. A 2016 conference on the relationship between religion and CVE offers a key insight:

> The relationship between religion and violence is complex and defies any neat account of direct causation. In some cases of violent extremism, religion is not a primary driver, whereas in others it may be more prominent. Efforts to prevent or counter radicalisation and extremism therefore need to "right-size" religion as both a contributing factor and part of the solution.[12]

Most of the current thinking about CVE has given up on the idea that it is possible to identify any single root cause of violent extremism. Indeed, the nature of terrorism has itself evolved, becoming increasingly transnational and decentralized, and therefore so have responses to terrorism in adapting to this new reality. Some of the immediate post-9/11 debates on this issue entertained the possibility of there being a single factor associated with most cases of terrorism—such as poverty or ideology. Most recent analysis, however, emphasizes the importance of identifying and understanding localized drivers, as well as the recognition that these factors can vary considerably from setting to setting. This insight has been reflected in policy as well, perhaps most clearly in remarks given in early 2016 by former Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken:

> So here's what we know. There is no single type of violent extremism, no single method of recruitment, no single source of motivation or support, there's no single story, no easy synonym for one region, religious tradition, or culture . . . in short, the nature and range of possible drivers of violent extremism can vary greatly.[13]

Recognition of widely varying local drivers of violent extremism is now commonplace. At the same time, it is also fair to say that most everyone working in the CVE field operates with the assumption that religion is part of the story—even if its precise role, function, or bearing in each instance of violent extremism is not always fully explained.

What, then, is a more constructive way to think about religion as a causal factor in violent extremism? There is now significant evidence to suggest that high levels of religious devotion or observance are poor predictors of support for or participation in violent extremism.[14] Indeed, some leading analysts have suggested that a strong grounding in religion can actually reduce the likelihood of people accepting the narrative of violent extremist groups.[15] In policy spaces, the debate about the relative importance of religion as a driver

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of extremism has tended to play out as a distinction between those who view CVE primarily as a war of ideas and those who emphasize underlying structural factors in society such as politics or socioeconomic issues. In the years immediately following 9/11, discussions about winning the war of ideas were part of Washington policy discourse, giving way under the Obama administration to greater emphasis on societal drivers. More recently, the Trump administration has signaled renewed interest in foregrounding religion in its approach to violent extremism and counterterrorism, including the possibility of renaming the CVE endeavor to reflect a primary focus on Islam ("Countering Islamic Extremism" or "Countering Radical Islamic Terrorism").[16] The most recent iteration of the UK government's counter-extremism strategy, issued in 2015, also emphasized ideological factors such as religion.[17]

At one level, the debate about ideological versus structural factors in violent extremism represents a genuine disagreement about the relative importance of different categories of drivers in specific instances of terrorism, but one that—with enough evidence and data—can ultimately be resolved. However, a political dimension to this discussion is important insofar as which side one falls on in this debate often has an important bearing on how one understands the phenomenon of global terrorism more broadly. Emphasizing religious ideology as the primary cause of violent extremism makes it easier to reduce terrorism to the inherent malignancy of foreign ideas, a position that requires no change in US foreign policy. Emphasizing structural factors, on the other hand, entails confronting the idea that violent extremism is sometimes linked to political or economic drivers—which include a direct or indirect function of US foreign policy and global conduct.

Another way of thinking about the role of religion in violent extremism, and one that helps get beyond exclusively quantitative debates about "how much" religion contributes to one or another instance, is to focus on the specific role or function religion can play in particular cases:

- As a **source of collective identity and solidarity**, religion can aid in mobilization. This can be a particularly effective tool when violent extremist groups are trying to recruit alienated or disaffected young people in settings where they have been blocked from successfully embracing other forms of identity (such as citizenship, ethno-national affiliations, or professional status). For example, extremist recruiters in Europe will often focus on young second- and third-generation Muslims to exploit their sense of being trapped between disjunct national identities (such as British and Pakistani) by offering a new, primarily religious, framework for belonging and collective action.
- As a **narrative that helps organize and give meaning** to disparate sources of disaffection and grievance, religion may help violent extremist movements to frame world events and political developments in ways that resonate with an individual's personal life experience.[18] Shiv Sena, a far-right Indian political party ideologically based in the Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist, movement is one example in which a religious framework has been employed to rally around and sometimes literally fight for political causes, including, in this case, a "purer" India for Hindus.
- As a **justification or "moral warrant,"** religion can legitimize extremist acts, including violence. In some cases, nonreligious factors may have brought an individual or group of individuals to a point where they are willing to contemplate the use of violence, but need an additional impetus to convince them to engage in behavior they might otherwise regard as unlawful or unethical. For example, an individual may have suffered mistreatment or violence at the hands of the state but refrained from seeking revenge until provided with a theological basis for engaging in behavior that they perceive as transcending prevailing law.

- As a way to **imbue a higher or eternal purpose**, religion can intensify and raise the stakes of a conflict. To emphasize the importance of action, violent extremist groups may instrumentalize religious narratives to transform a conflict arising from conventional political factors into something that needs to be understood as having grand and transhistorical—perhaps even eschatological—significance. For example, some Israeli settler groups that have used violence justify it in terms of territorial claims they regard as based in scripture.

Understanding more precisely how religious factors bear on given cases of violent extremism makes it perhaps possible to design and implement CVE solutions that address religious factors without getting directly caught in the tricky minefield of religious discourse. For example, when religion serves as a source of identity and solidarity in the absence of other forms of affiliation, a CVE strategy might address those factors in the social environment that make it difficult for someone to find a sense of self-affirmation in other forms of belonging and community membership.

Although much of the policy discourse and action on religion and CVE today is focused on the self-proclaimed Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other groups claiming a basis in Islam, extremist movements connected with other faiths and ideologies use religion in some of the same ways, even if the language, symbols, and framings vary across traditions. Recognizing this is imperative. Groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda (Christianity), MaBaTha in Myanmar (Buddhism), Shiv Sena in India (Hinduism), and various white supremacist and far-right groups in the United States and Europe (Christianity) have all invoked religion—either directly or indirectly—to explain, justify, and inspire violence by positing the existence of a direct and imminent threat to a particular religious in-group.

In sum, the effort to understand the role of religion in violent extremism is not a matter of trying to crudely calculate the balance of ideational versus structural factors because such an approach offers little analytical utility. Rather, and to quote again from the Wilton Park Statement on religion and CVE, the task is more studying "the interplay between religion and widely varying local or contextual factors such as state violence, corruption, certain kinds of socioeconomic deprivation, localized conflict, youth disaffection and identity crisis." Only when religion's bearing in any given instance of violent extremism is more accurately understood can we begin to think about how religion might be part of the solution.

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Assessing the Policy Discussion to Date

Numerous efforts, including policy papers and policy-oriented symposia, have over the past few years acknowledged that the religious sector should be involved at all levels in efforts to counter violent extremism.[19] Internationally, policymakers are targeting portions of their CVE strategy to directly work with religious partners, convening gatherings with various stakeholders to better understand whom to engage and how. On a national level, governments are considering the role of religion in various components of violent extremism and, in varying degrees and levels of effectiveness, recognizing that the religious sector can have positive roles in CVE, especially on a local level. But for policymakers and government and security actors to work effectively with religious actors, they must engage carefully and appreciate their unique, sometimes complex roles within their communities.

CVE policy, internationally and domestically, has tended to instrumentalize religious actors—if they are referenced in a positive, collaborative way at all. For example, a government initiative may seek moderate religious leaders to offer counternarratives to violent interpretations of religious scripture, often offering to support the religious leader or

organization in various ways, including financially or through skills-based training. Yet, as the Wilton Park conference statement on religion, radicalization, and CVE cautioned,

> Recognise that appealing to religious believers to be "moderate" in the face of world events can be offensive and disempowering. CVE initiatives should therefore help channel the desire for social change in positive and productive directions rather than seeking to pacify and neutralize political instincts.[20]

Another example is when security officials call on religious leaders to provide surveillance and report any signs of radicalization among their community members, as has been happening around the world. In the coastal region of Kenya, in cities such as Mombasa, imams have been asked to monitor and report on suspicious activities within their community. When leaders comply, however, they risk being perceived as agents of the government and as no longer credible in their community.[21]

Instrumentalizing religious actors is counterproductive at best, and dangerous (even potentially life threatening) at worst, given the complex positionality of many religious leaders in their communities and societies. Furthermore, such an approach ignores the positive contributions of lay religious actors, including religious women and youth. Religious actors can contribute to CVE, and indeed are important to include and engage because of their unique positions of authority, the credibility that they often hold within their respective communities, their ties to their community members, and their access to and knowledge of institutional resources. But this engagement must be done carefully, respectfully, and inclusively, and include a recognition that the same approach cannot be effective in every setting.

Outcomes of several conferences, summits, symposia, dialogues, and reports aimed at policymakers have highlighted the nuanced roles of religious actors and shed light on ways in which they can be effective partners in collaborative approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism. At these gatherings, a wide array of topics have been discussed, from issues of physical security to digital communications, partnership building to skills-based training, and many issues in between. Across the many discussions around religion and CVE that have been held since 2014, certain common themes, questions, and issues have emerged:

- the when and how of engagement with religious actors;
- training, such as skills-based and in religious literacy, for religious actors and those working with them;
- the relationship between religious actors, government, and security; and
- inclusion.

Religious actors should be engaged early and often. This recommendation was drawn from several major conferences, at which traditional and nontraditional religious leaders felt that they were too often consulted after decisions concerning them or their community had been made by government officials or others less intimately familiar with the issues confronting them. Participants felt that, for CVE policies to be more effective, policymakers should first consult with religious actors and others with grassroots access and insight to hear about and understand their needs before new policies are even drafted.[22] The UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations framed this engagement:

> The international community and national governments should support religious leaders in spreading their messages of peace, harmony and hope. . . . we need to take into account to employ human centered approaches. . . listening to the concerns and experiences of communities, particularly marginalized communities, that have long struggled with violence and violent extremism.[23]

Many discussions at religion and CVE gatherings revolved around training—*what type of training would be useful, if any, for whom, and organized or sponsored by whom*. Some religious actors requested physical safety training, noting their high risk and vulnerability when they work to counter violent extremism in their communities.[24] Others have noted that they want better training in technology and communications to help them expand their reach and countermessaging to younger and larger demographics.[25] Some religious actors have expressed interest in expanding and formalizing their roles as mediators and counselors in their communities through skills-based training. Still others noted interest in learning how to better navigate the donor-community system with lessons in how to identify donors, apply for funding, and implement projects involving their religious community.

At the same time, a need for training in religious literacy was identified at several of these gatherings. Religious representatives expressed interest in improving their intra- and interfaith engagements; nonreligious actors, such as government or security or international policymakers, said they would like to better understand religious nuances in a community. Religious literacy should be addressed in various forums, to include community members, local leaders, and government officials. Religious literacy helps build bridges of understanding and the capacity to think critically and contextually. Training in religious literacy can also help other stakeholders identify access points within a religious community or understand the different roles of various religious figures and how their relationship could affect community dynamics.

The relationship between religious actors and the government and security sectors is dynamic, inconsistent, evolving, and often mistrustful. Although all three sectors are very much involved in CVE efforts locally, domestically, and internationally, their efforts are not coordinated. Their consensus that they should be working together does not extend to how they should do so. When security officials ask religious leaders to observe and report on their community, as in coastal Kenya, religious leaders are putting their lives at risk and the effectiveness of their efforts are directly inhibited. Yet religious actors and security officials can work together effectively to counter and prevent violent extremism. Better communication and increased trust would mitigate risk and improve effectiveness around issues such as returnee reintegration and rehabilitation or addressing the psychosocial needs of a community.

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Conversations around space—regulating it and creating safe or neutral spaces of engagement—have been broached frequently. Government regulation of religious space is a delicate issue in many countries and fraught with risk. For example, should the government control or monitor what an imam or a pastor says in a sermon? When the government contributes financial resources to a religious institution, should that give the government more authority to make decisions on behalf of its leaders? On what occasions is it appropriate for security officials to interfere with the daily routines of a religious community, and in what capacity? What impact will such actions have on the social contracts that bind society and the state? These questions are complex and warrant unique responses to each community context, but to better inform CVE strategy they must be addressed and explored.

When considering gaps in communication and trust between government and security actors and religious actors, one proposed opportunity comes in the form of a safe "third" space.[26] This neutral space, which would be both physical and theoretical, enables stakeholders invested in CVE to convene to safely address their goals and grievances and strategize ways in which to collaboratively implement projects. This concept is effective only when the convener is trusted by both sides, such as a local or international nongovernmental organization.

For a CVE policy to be effective, it must be inclusive. Inclusion would mean not only that religious representatives are present throughout the process of scoping, developing, and implementing new strategies and guidelines, but also that those who are included are traditional and nontraditional religious actors, including women and youth, taking into account the multiple identities and roles of different religious actors.

Another dimension to the question of inclusive religious engagement has been more contentious. Some analysts and practitioners have argued that engaging "quietist" extremists—those who hold ideologically extreme views but either stop short of or actively renounce violence—can be an effective CVE tactic. The logic is premised on the idea that quietist extremists are ideologically closer to their violent counterparts and therefore carry more credibility than moderates in trying to convince violent extremists to turn away from militancy. Some critics of this approach express concern that in empowering quietist extremists, CVE practitioners would be indirectly promoting the intolerant, antipluralist, and misogynistic positions many of them hold. Others believe that nonviolent forms of extremism serve a conveyor-belt effect that heightens the risk of adherents eventually embracing violence—or, at the very least, that a more ideologically charged environment increases the likelihood that violent expressions of that ideology will arise.[27] Although most governments have rejected the idea of simple and linear conveyor-belt effects, the pros and cons of engaging with extremists or ultraconservative religious groups such as Salafis continues to be debated.[28]

Given the many varieties of, for example, quietist Salafism throughout the Muslim world, it is difficult to identify a conclusive and generalizable answer to this question. The policies of some governments, such as the United Kingdom, have evolved on this question. Although Salafi groups in South London were cited in the early 2000s by the London Metropolitan Police as valuable CVE partners, the UK government has more recently adopted a policy of nonengagement with Salafis. It is clear that engaging with ideologically extreme but nonviolent religious leaders can carry significant downside risk that may not always be readily apparent. The assumption that ideologically extreme religious leaders will always carry greater credibility in the eyes of militants also seems suspect, particularly given that, as mentioned, many who participate in violent extremism do not do so on the basis of theological inspiration.

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Identifying Challenges and Opportunities

Two of the themes identified—how governments should relate to religious actors in the context of CVE and the importance of broad and inclusive engagement—merit additional unpacking and discussion. Looking at these issues against the backdrop of a growing track record of efforts to incorporate religious engagement into CVE efforts is a first step to identifying a more specific set of challenges and opportunities around which concrete recommendations for action can be developed.

With respect to the relationship between governments, religion, and religious actors, three broad issues need to be explored: first, a set of challenges around the concept of moderate approaches to religion; second, the question of identifying credible religious voices as partners in CVE; and, third, concerns arising from direct employment of religious language and concepts in government messaging.

Religious moderation is appealing but not always effective. It is common for policy and programmatic efforts seeking to engage religion as part of CVE to focus on the importance of promoting moderate forms of religion on the assumption that such narratives can challenge or neutralize extreme interpretations of religion. The terms *moderate* and *extreme* indicate

intensity or extent but nothing more than that. They are vague and subjective descriptors that may carry some utility in instances when flexibility is politically or legally desirable but used alone can also make it hard to identify either a specific source of concern or a desired outcome. For example, if in a given case the primary concern is violent bigotry targeting a specific group, then citing that risk will usually be preferable to referencing extremism in the abstract. Likewise, if by moderation the idea is to foster greater pluralism and respect for human rights, then that goal should be explicit.

Recognizing the risks that can arise when these terms are juxtaposed with specific religious traditions (such as moderate Islam) is imperative. Emphasis in policy discourse on generating or amplifying moderate variants of a given religious tradition can give unintended credence and a false sense of scale to violent extremist groups by counterposing in a false equivalence their inevitably fringe and marginal nature with the majoritarian nonviolent expression of a given religion. In addition to creating an inaccurate image of religious orientations and categories, such framing and language can also cause great offense within religious communities.

Finally, we need to ask whether urging religious moderation is an effective strategy for addressing the messages and ideology of extremist groups. If groups such as the Islamic State are effective, at least in part, because they are able to tap into a sense of perceived injustice, political grievance, or desire for an active sense of belonging and identity, it is highly questionable whether discourses of religious moderation will be viewed as a compelling alternative among those at risk for recruitment into extremist movements. In short, if the impulses behind extremist recruitment are political or driven by a psychosocial need for recognition, meaning in life, or adventure, then urging people to embrace moderation is likely to be ineffective at the very least. This is not to say that in some cases providing religious critiques of violence does not have a role (particularly where someone is already starting to have doubts) or that it is inappropriate to invoke religion as one component of an alternative approach to engaging political grievances and social injustice. Rather, the point here is simply that using moderation as the branding for a broad-based communications or counternarrative strategy will most likely cause such messages to miss their target audience.

Credible voices may be anything but. Many CVE efforts look to engage and partner with what are termed credible voices within specific vulnerable communities and religious leaders are frequently cited as a key constituency of such work. Too often, *credible voices* ends up being code for religious figures who articulate views that are aligned with official government policy, or who refrain from directly criticizing political leaders. Where governments hold up, amplify, or otherwise support (including with funding) specific religious leaders, they actually risk discrediting such figures or even—as described—turning them into targets for extremist groups. A more credible religious voice is likely to be someone who combines an erudite critique of a violent extremist group's religious justification with another of injustices arising from the policies of governments targeted by those groups. Figuring out where exactly to draw the line can be difficult, especially when a given religious leader criticizes one form of violence and justifies others, but engagement efforts limited to a comfort zone are unlikely to have the desired impact.

A related point can be made about the tendency of governments to rely on specific groups within a given religion (such as Sufis in Islam or Buddhist monks) assumed to be inherently peaceful or apolitical.[29] At one level, such assumptions are simply fallacious because history and even recent memory are replete with instances of supposedly mystical or spiritualist groups engaging in political action and religiously inspired violence in places such as Yemen, the Caucuses, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. Such an approach is also problematic when the religious Other of such groups—such as Salafis in the Islamic tradition—are, by extension and

converse logic, treated as inherently predisposed toward violence. Governmental adoption and validation of such categories can feed unhelpfully into sectarian dynamics and cycles of conflict in settings characterized by existing tensions between religious groups.

When it comes to religious authority, governments often assume that someone who carries specific formal theological credentials or institutions of a particular pedigree carry meaningful weight. This is not always the case. In many settings, the direct influence of formal religious leaders—even in matters of religion—is questionable. Religious leaders who actively put themselves forward as CVE partners—particularly those active on transnational interfaith circuits and in global "peace summits"—do not necessarily have the greatest following within communities. Religious leaders at the local and provincial level are likely to be more trusted and to have a more granular understanding of the specific issues facing their communities.

Similarly, institutions of religious higher learning closely associated with or regulated by the state may not be the most credible source of CVE messages. In recent years, for example, a number of countries in the Middle East have established counterideology messaging centers, imam training programs, or otherwise offered to propagate "moderate Islam" as part of their contribution to broader counterterrorism efforts.[30] Although some of these efforts can be valuable contributions based on the historical role certain countries have played in particular subregions—such as Morocco vis-à-vis the Sahel and West Africa—honesty about recognizing the limitations of government-sanctioned religious propagation is critical.[31]

Finally, the risks associated with governments directly using religious language or concepts in official statements and messaging must be recognized and acknowledged. In most cases, governments have no standing in the eyes of many believers to make pronouncements in matters of religion, or at the very least are not seen as credible religious messengers. When governments trade in religious terminology and tropes, they invoke complex, norm-laden symbols whose invocation can easily backfire or lead to unintended consequences. In certain cases, such as that of the United States, legal risk is inherent in such statements because the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the US Constitution explicitly bars the US government from taking positions on matters of religion. Recent statements by senior American leaders—such as former secretary of state John Kerry's labeling the Islamic State members as apostates or President Donald Trump's speaking of the condemnation of souls—are thus counterproductive on multiple levels.

Although the discussion to this point may seem to foreground the many pitfalls associated with engaging religious actors in CVE, such partnerships also offer opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to counter violent extremism. Two positive approaches involve the need to question or set aside common assumptions about the role of religious leaders in society and to question who counts as a religious actor.

Religious leaders do more than religion. The temptation when thinking about religious actors in the context of CVE is to assume that their primary role should be about providing counterideological messages or theological antidotes to extremist interpretations of religion. The approach has its shortcomings. One way to work more effectively with religious leaders on CVE is to recognize that in many communities and societies their roles transcend spaces, activities, and institutions conventionally demarcated as religious. Because most current policy frameworks for addressing violent extremism, including the UN's preventing violent extremism strategy and the US State Department–USAID Joint Strategy emphasize the varying and diverse drivers of extremism, it becomes possible to imagine wider roles for religious actors in CVE by thinking of them as social actors who have influence in a broad range of sectors including governance, human development, economic growth, and peacebuilding. Nudging religious actors out of a discrete domain of religion in the imagination and

viewing them instead as an integral component of broader civil society makes it possible to recognize and create roles for religious leaders in development projects and programs that focus on issues such as corruption, socioeconomic malaise, and conflict mediation—but that nonetheless also have a CVE dimension. Religious figures help shape the public and political discourse around a wide range of issues and therefore have a place in public consultations, program design, and project implementation around broad, nonreligious domains of activity.

The religious sector is broad, deep, and complex. Although we conventionally equate religious influence and authority with publicly visible figures holding formal titles (bishop, mufti, lama, and so on), or with specific organized institutions (churches, madrasas, shrines), these are not always the most relevant religious interlocutors for a given community. When thinking about effective engagement with religion in any setting, it is important to understand how the concept of *lived religion* operates in that context.[32] Recalibrating understanding of the religious sector to get beyond official religious authorities and formal institutions makes it possible to discern a far more complex religious landscape populated by a far more complex array of actors and voices. For example, although many religious traditions limit formal religious authority to older males, in practice women play a major role in shaping understandings and interpretations of religion—both within families and as public religious leaders.[33] Focusing only on men can serve to reproduce male domination of religious space and miss opportunities for more effective and impactful engagement. For similar reasons, younger or more junior leaders are often omitted from efforts to engage religious actors when they are often more credible and effective communicators, particularly with their peers in local communities. Finally, the boundaries of specific religious traditions and denominations as they exist in scripture or in textbooks about religion rarely reflect the social reality of religion on the ground. In many settings, traditional forms of religion and spirituality coexist and cross-fertilize with modern, formalized modes of theology. For example, properly engaging with or contextualizing Indonesian Islam is at best difficult without an appreciation of its cross-fertilization with centuries of Hindu and Buddhist influence.

Recommendations

These broad recommendations and guidelines are intended to inform governments and organizations working at the intersection of religion and CVE.

Ensure alignment between counterideology or counternarrative efforts and work focused on other drivers of violent extremism. Doing so will in turn help to ensure a "right-sized" approach to religion in CVE, and help recognize that ideological drivers of extremism always occur and gain traction within settings defined by a wide range of other factors.

Think beyond theology when assessing potential roles for religious actors in CVE. Neutralizing extremist interpretations of religion is often not the most appropriate or effective role for religious figures. As part of civil society, religious actors are relevant to a much broader range of sectors and activities associated with CVE—for example, combating corruption, alleviating socioeconomic inequalities, resolving conflict, and peacebuilding.

Think beyond old men in churches and mosques. Ensure that understanding of the religious sector reflects the relevance of actors beyond formal religious authorities and official institutions. Women, younger religious leaders, and traditionalist faith practices are key players in the religious landscape and often more influential than their formal and titled religious counterparts.

Do not let CVE become a pretense for proscribing religion. The risk is real that some governments may use CVE policy discourse as top cover for violations of religious freedom and other human rights, or to crack down on religious groups or forms of religious expression they perceive as political opposition.

Avoid endorsing particular interpretations of religion or using religious language and symbols in official government statements. State actors are generally not regarded as credible voices when it comes to religion. Referencing specific interpretations of religion (or approved religious actors) risks discrediting or even harming those cited.

Conclusion

A track record—positive and negative—of work focuses on understanding the religious dynamics surrounding violent extremism as well as efforts to integrate engagement with religious actors into CVE policy and practice. That experience needs to be systematically assessed to develop clearer guidelines and best practices for integrating religious actors into the practice of CVE. The intersection of religion and public policy is complex and sensitive even at the best of times, but even more so when security issues are concerned and in a climate of public discussion in which religion has become a particularly polarizing topic. Going forward, and as discussion and debate about CVE policy evolves in governmental and intergovernmental forums, approaching the question of religion with great care and in close consultation with the religious actors and communities that have a stake—and whose lives are sometimes at stake—in such work will therefore be especially important.

Notes

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