Sharpening the focus:
Religious actors addressing extremism and violence

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Abstract: Governments worldwide seek effective policies to address the ravages caused by non-state social and political movements that deliberately use violence to achieve their ends. However, experts disagree sharply about why such movements persist and on the most appropriate response. How religious factors contribute to extremism and violence is a central and sensitive topic. The common framing as "Countering Violent Extremism"—CVE, or "Preventing Violent Extremism"—PVE, mask underlying complexities that demand sensitive understandings of religious roles and engagement with religious actors. Explicit or implicit assumptions that religious factors and especially Islam are centrally involved in both extremism and violence exacerbate intergroup tensions and impede efforts to engage leaders in meaningful response. Negative consequences include dominance of security perspectives, threats to human rights, and tradeoffs that undermine development efforts. Understandings and approaches involving religious factors need to be revamped. The G20 Summit should highlight CVE debates as a priority topic; alongside UN and other efforts, the G20 platform with its sharply focused agenda can generate fresh insights and shift counterproductive debates. A multi-stakeholder task force that includes economic and religious actors should report to the 2019 G20 summit with action recommendations.

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(citation) "Current CVE approaches are flat out dumb and misbegotten" former US government official

The Challenge

Few topics challenge conventional thinking about social cohesion more forcibly than the violence linked to extremist movements. Views differ widely as to why extremist ideologies are attractive to certain groups and what those involved aim to achieve through violent acts. Are there common causes or is each situation sui generis? Are religious ideologies central or marginal as explanatory factors? If grievances are linked (in varying ways) to economic inequalities, poor governance, and failures of development, what action does that imply? How far and under what circumstances do security dominated approaches aggravate the situation?

Several observations frame the topic as a global challenge that deserves priority focus by the G20:

- Policies and programs responding to non-state violence show mixed results; damage associated with such violence (including in lives lost) is on the rise.
- Divisive debates at international and national levels undermine effective and coordinated response
- Security centered responses color institutional accountability, deployment of financial resources, and development and diplomatic efforts. They too often override human rights concerns.
- The focus on extremist religious movements, especially Muslim, oversimplifies their complex and diverse part in violence and contributes to polarization within and among communities
- CVE approaches can obscure grievances that underlie specific local conflicts, and can aggravate rather than mitigate underlying tensions
- Inadequate information, much largely anecdotal, on patterns of violence complicate both analysis and policy debates.
- Sound guidance for policymakers and practitioners on responding to religious aspects of extremist movements is often not available.

In short, large strategic gaps impede efforts to engage religious actors intelligently in responding to extremist violence.

Background

Widely varied non-state violent acts, often characterized as terrorism and perpetrated by movements and individuals using violent tactics, are disrupting societies in many regions. They include ISIS (Daesh), Al Qaeda, anti-Rohingya, White supremacism, and Boko Haram. Extensive military and internal security responses to the threats of non-state violence consume vast resources. They also are transforming civic space and contribute to curtailing human rights including religious freedom. They exacerbate social polarization and impede development efforts including education, health care, and business development.

A central policy question for governments and policy makers is why movements characterized as extremist attract followers and tacit support among large communities. A key related issue is how to respond to extremist violence in ways that win support from the larger community of co-religionists who are not prone to violence, rather than stirring resentment and further radicalization of others. Clearer answers are needed to reshape optimal policy responses that prevent violent actors from undermining democratic societies and values and that assure the human security that is a priority national and international objective.

These challenges affect different world regions but have especially dominated policy debates in the United Nations, the United States, and Europe since terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. Past counterterrorism efforts focused on combatting organized terrorist groups directly or degrading their capacity. The contemporary paradigm labelled as preventing or countering violent extremism (CVE and PVE) focuses more on the various societal factors and drivers that lead individuals and small groups to embrace or otherwise support militant ideologies. Responses have focused on security, with a marked shift towards preventing radicalization and extremist violence through better knowledge and information campaigns. CVE is not an entirely new approach, but the current focus is more expansive and systematic and has involved significant research on understanding root causes and the proper response to them. Responding to non-state violence has focused significantly on religious ideas, actors, and institutions. Some movements (prominently ISIS, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram) frame ideologies in religious terms and use them as motivation. Religion has thus 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 highlighted CVE in the administration's foreign policy agenda, spurring a deluge of related conferences, conversations, and considerations globally. Besides institutionalizing strategy and standardizing the lexicon, the summit identified gaps and opportunities in domestic and international approaches. Subsequent regional summits around the globe were inspired by or directly connected with the White House initiative. They responded at least in part to President Obama's call for global partners to join the CVE effort in his September 2015 speech to the UN General Assembly. A May 2016 Department of State and USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism defined 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." Parallel efforts within the United Nations and in Europe and Australia have followed similar CVE/PVE approaches.

Understandings of CVE highlight ambiguities that contribute both to tensions and problematic tactics. The terms *countering, violent*, and *extremism* are all ambiguous. Like terrorism, the notion of extremism can be highly subjective, as is violence. Most problematic is the common association of extremism with political, religious or social ideology and especially Islam. It makes eminent sense to work to understand the intersections of violent behavior and the ideas that inspire, justify, or give meaning to that violence—identifying the contextual factors that support both ideologies and recourse to

violence. However, Governmental adoption and validation of such categories can feed unhelpfully into sectarian dynamics and cycles of conflict in settings characterized by complex and often longstanding tensions within and between religious groups. By defining "violent extremism" as a distinct issue or problem and addressing it via various policy and programmatic mechanisms, the CVE paradigm can serve to mask and distract from more fundamental political and geopolitical drivers of violence.

Thus CVE approaches can have negative effects. They tend to give priority to approaches that blur the boundaries between security responses and the tools of diplomacy and development. This in turn complicates or impedes efforts to address root grievances and to focus on improving welfare, including social cohesion, for the community at large. Further, because CVE approaches often link both extremism and violence to religious and especially Muslim teachings and communities. they can exacerbate bias against Muslims in non-Muslim societies and accentuate counter-productive divides within and among communities. Shifting the focus from CVE to PVE responds to some but not all concerns.

Current CVE/PVE approaches commonly overstate and oversimplify religious dimensions; actual and perceived religious links color policy responses. Various countries have established counter-ideology messaging centers, imam training programs, or otherwise sought to propagate "moderate Islam" as part of their contribution to broader counterterrorism efforts. Some such efforts can be valuable but there are deep flaws both in highlighting "moderate Islam" and in governments engaging in government-sanctioned religious propaganda. The risks associated with governments directly using religious language or concepts in official statements and messaging are substantial; governments rarely have standing to make pronouncements in matters of religion, or at the very least are not seen as credible religious messengers. Governmental adoption and validation can feed unhelpfully into sectarian dynamics and cycles of conflict in settings characterized by existing tensions between religious groups.

Relationships within and among religious communities are critical factors in social cohesion, albeit with different manifestations that are linked to history, welfare (inequalities, for example), political organization, leadership stance, and other factors. The specific roles that religious beliefs and mobilization play in contemporary extremist movements is the subject of intense analysis and debate.

Both CVE and PVE debates and policies need to be delinked from their over-simplified religious association as significant research shows that religious beliefs are rarely the primary cause of extremism. The implications of how religious dimensions affect violent extremism extend far beyond security, involving economics, politics, and social welfare. Politicians' and policy-makers' language and assumptions around fighting terrorism need to be stripped of false religious language.

The focus needs to shift instead to constructive engagement of religious actors in efforts to understand better the motivations behind extremist views and to find solutions. Religious actors are best placed to challenge problematic religious interpretations of extremist groups. They can help reframe religious narratives to address grievances driving

extremism—such as politics, socioeconomics, and localized conflicts—and highlight the positive potential to build peaceful, pluralistic societies.

In recent years, a number of governments—including numerous G20 members—have begun to explore the importance of enhancing their capacity to engage with religious actors across a wide range of foreign policy and national security concerns. The George W. Bush administration established a White House team focused on faith sector engagement in 2001. An analogous office at the US Agency for International Development (USAID) focused on the role of religious actors in international development. US government engagement with religious actors in foreign policy, including in peacebuilding, development, and human rights, became more formalized, strategic, and institutionalized during the Obama administration, particularly through the creation at the U.S. State Department of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs. But this interest and capacity is not confined to the United States. 2015 saw the establishment of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy, a coordinating mechanism for governmental engagement with religion in foreign policy whose membership includes fifteen foreign ministries from across the Euro-Atlantic region, the European Union, and the United Nations.

The challenge of religious engagement demands wise interventions that start with strategic knowledge of both institutions and the politics of leadership. G20 governments are starting to develop that capacity, but challenges still remain. Differing views on human rights often need to be addressed, especially with respect to roles of women and youth. 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 their 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. Creative efforts to address approaches to equity and equality are often needed. Diverse voices must be at negotiating tables.

Understanding better how religious factors affect violent extremism can help inform the design and implementation of solutions to violence. These must vary by country and region according to government/religious relationships and practical assessments of effective potential roles. Approaches that focus on roles or functions that religious teachings and beliefs play in violent extremism—facilitating mobilization, shaping narratives, providing a justification, and sanctifying violent acts—shows promise. Religious actors, as integral members of civil society and key contributors to public and political discourse, can engage in many fields, if done with care and sensitivity to power asymmetries and potential risks. Religious actors can be partners. Success factors include engaging them at the right time, designing effective training, and ensuring effective and inclusive partnerships across sectors. Above all, it is vital to understand religious institutions and communities as broad, deep, and complex. The concept of lived religion is important, to go beyond official religious authorities and formal institutions.

Negative consequences of broad CVE policies include restrictions on civic space and alienation of large communities. Distorted understandings undermine the effectiveness of response in practice and can have high human rights, financial, social, and economic costs.

Proposals:

The G20 members and engagement groups:

- Should work to ensure better alignment between counterideology or counternarrative efforts focused on drivers of violent extremism. The goal is turn an informed, nuanced, and constructive approach to religion in relation to non-state violence. That means recognizing that ideological drivers of extremism always occur and gain traction within settings defined by a wide range of other factors.

- The G20 members in setting and implementing agendas should take religious factors more systematically into account. That means thinking beyond theology when assessing potential roles for religious actors in addressing social violence and extremist views. 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.

- It is important that CVE not be used as a pretense for proscribing religious freedom and human rights. Some governments 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 interpretations of religion or use of religious language and symbols in official government statements that can accentuate problems, especially when state actors claim to speak for religious actors by favoring some views over others.

- The G20 Summit should highlight CVE debates as a priority topic; alongside UN and other efforts, the G20 platform with its sharply focused agenda offers a chance for fresh insights. A multi-stakeholder task force that includes economic and religious actors should report to the 2019 G20 summit with action recommendations.

Religious coordinating networks:

- Should focus on developing proposals that reflect inclusive involvement of their communities. They can ensure that understandings 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.

- Develop a strategic analysis of track records of religious engagement on non-state violence with a view to highlighting best and worst practice and practical guidelines for action.

Resources:

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The OSCE Document (Kishan Manocha and ODIHR)