

A G20 Interfaith Forum Policy Brief
POLICY AREA: Peace

Religious Actors Addressing Extremism and Violence: Sharpening the Focus
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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 beliefs and institutions linked to 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. G20 Summits, alongside UN and other efforts, should address these CVE debates as a priority topic. 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 2020 G20 summit with action recommendations.

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, lack of education and opportunities, 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:

- Divisive debates about non-state violence especially with religious connotations 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 those claiming a basis in Islam, 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.
- C/PVE practitioners tend to rely on religious actors exclusively as purveyors of “moderate” religious messages, neglecting the broader salience of religion across the full range of factors that drive violent extremism—including governance, socioeconomic issues, and local conflicts.
- Negative consequences of broad CVE policies include restrictions on civic space and alienation of large communities.

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 supremacy, ultra-nationalist Hindu organizations, and Boko Haram. Extensive military and internal security responses to the threats of non-state violence consume vast resources. They 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 have primarily focused on security and intelligence methods in 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 (though many violent non-state actors seem driven by objectives that are not ideological). 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 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.

Ambiguities in CVE debates 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 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 seek 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. 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. Politicians’ and

policy-makers' language and assumptions around fighting terrorism need to be stripped of false religious language.

The focus needs to shift 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 deep rooted causes which generate grievances driving extremism—such as politics, socioeconomics, and localized conflicts—and highlight the positive potential to build peaceful, pluralistic societies.

Various governments—including several G20 members—have explored building capacity to engage with religious actors across a wide range of foreign policy and national security concerns. For example, 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. A Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy established in 2015 as 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. OSCE in 2018 completed its first step in exploring more effective ways to engage with religious actors. In sum, G20 governments are starting to develop related capacity, but challenges still remain.

The challenge of religious engagement demands wise interventions that start with strategic knowledge of institutions and the politics of leadership. Differing views on human rights often need to be addressed, especially with respect to roles of women and youth. Careful assessment of leadership patterns is needed: 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 as diverse voices are a must at negotiating tables. Religious factors affecting violent extremism vary by country and region according to government religious relationships. 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 contributors to public and political discourse, can engage as partners in many fields, when engaged with care and sensitivity to power asymmetries and potential risks. Religious institutions and communities need to be understood as broad, deep, and complex, looking to “lived religion”, beyond official religious authorities and formal institutions.

Recommendations

Better alignment between counter-ideology or counter-narrative efforts is needed, focused on drivers of violent extremism. The goal is an informed, nuanced, and constructive approach to religious matters 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, looking beyond theology or counter-messaging 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.
- Take care that CVE is 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.
- Make CVE debates a priority topic in G20 processes. 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 2020 G20 summit with action recommendations.

Religious coordinating networks can and should:

- Focus on developing proposals that reflect inclusive involvement of their communities. Understandings of religious actors should reflect 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, 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.
- Emphasize the need for specific attention and resources to formal and informal institutional engagement of religious agencies in responding to CVE and PVE.

- Build intra and inter religious community intervention programs to insure that CVE and PVE efforts are done jointly and contribute to building sustainable relationships.¹

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