Reconceptualizing the drivers of violent extremism: an agenda for child & youth resilience
Executive summary

Radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism, sit at the forefront of today’s policy discussions, in both Arab and non-Arab states. The fear these phenomena have instilled, their connection to wider tensions between and within religions, and how they have exposed a lack of social cohesion in seemingly resilient societies, have impacted communities in fundamental ways.

Characteristic of today’s violent extremist networks is the disproportionate participation of youth. While this is not uncommon in violent extremist groups, it is unusual that the demographic is so heavily skewed towards young people, and at the same time so geographically dispersed. An even more atypical trend is the roles being played by children, off the battlefield, and as soldiers, executors and suicide bombers. These trends present myriad risks for, and impacts on, children and youth in conflict-affected, fragile and developing countries alike. The different hats they wear — actors within the executors and suicide bombers. These trends present myriad risks for, and impacts on, children and youth in conflict-affected, fragile and developing countries alike. The different hats they wear — actors within the conflict, bystanders in theatre, sympathisers, activists or observers — means that individuals might be simultaneously vulnerable to recruitment, mistreated within a legal system and pose a danger to national security.

In response, this report examines the phenomenon of violent extremism, and the unique vulnerabilities of, impacts on and consequences for children and youth. It starts by presenting a new way of conceptualizing violent extremism; that individuals join a violent extremist group either in rejection of/rebellion against a given state of affairs, or driven by highly personal returns, and then enabled by contextual conditions. Structural motivators include, inter alia, repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality, discrimination and hostility between identity groups. Individual incentives include a sense of purpose, adventure, belonging, acceptance, status and/or material reward. Enabling factors include the presence of extremist mentors, access to social networks with violent extremist associations, and religious ideology.

Against this understanding, we critique both legal and security measures that have evolved to protect against the threats of violent extremism, as well as ‘softer’ preventative measures aimed at dissuading the vulnerable from pursuing or joining violent groups. It explains that, for the most part, such approaches have had little impact on the integrity or strength of extremist group structures. A key difficulty is that the drivers, motivations and enabling factors identified are largely rooted in chronic, political-development challenges that have no easy or quick solutions. Indeed, the pervasiveness of lack of opportunity, fragmented social identity, and exposure to social injustice, typecast the majority of youth in many countries, as vulnerable to extremism. Moreover, even if these challenges could be overcome, it does not necessarily follow that the problem of violent extremism would be extinguished.

Responses to date have also, at least in some cases, had disproportionate and negative consequences for the protection of children and young people. A key example is when security measures encroach on rights to privacy, impact freedom of speech or belief, deny fair trial protections, or are perceived as targeting a religious or ethnic group, perceptions of marginalization can be exacerbated or new grievances created.

Against these challenges, we offer a different framework for preventing violent extremism by promoting a more integrated and resilience youth society. We argue that strategists and policy-makers will need to find new ways to interrupt the pathways that lead an individual to engage in violence for political or ideological ends. More simply, if the causal drivers cannot be eliminated, and agency can/should not be revoked, then the only way to compete with extremist groups is to offer more attractive alternatives. This discussion centers around the kind of environment youth need in order to reject violent extremist groups. A key takeaway is from the literature on youth development, which highlights that young people need to be equipped with a range of experiences, skills, and assets in order to transition to adulthood and have the resilience to overcome adversity.

Building upon this, we set out areas of youth engagement with high potential for bolstering youth life satisfaction, and thus an enabling framework for preventing violent extremism at the individual level: sports and extracurricular activities; alternative pathways for ‘would-be’ fighters and ideological radicals to constructively, but non-violently, address their concerns; and creative messaging that bolsters youth critical thinking skills and respects their agency. We also discuss the importance of mechanisms and facilities to provide information, guidance and support to those at risk of or wishing to disengage from a violent group, and the need to align legal frameworks with minimum rights standards and elaborate diverisonary and rehabilitative structures for children and youth in the specific context of violent extremism.

For the purposes of this report, we use the terms ‘violent radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’. This departure away from the more common vernacular of radicalism and extremism is deliberate. It reflects the importance of distinguishing radicalization — the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs — from action pathways — the process of engaging in violent extremist behaviors. Moreover, it supports the idea that radicalism and extremism are not phenomena that necessarily can — or even should — be extinguished. Indeed, radical and extreme thinking can manifest as positive forces; they can also be understood as processes that naturally — but not universally — accompany adolescent development. Finally, it is important to highlight that while the discourse is focused on Islamist extremist groups, our definitions apply to the violent extremist phenomenon more generally. We acknowledged that the pages of history are littered with extremist groups with a range of goals — including political, religious and social ones. In all cases, extremists represent only a minute proportion of the population group whose name they claim to act in. Only when this becomes a universally-accepted truth can the fight against violent ideology commence.
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Introduction

Radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism, sit at the forefront of today’s policy discussions, in both Arab and non-Arab states. The fear these phenomena have instilled, their connection to wider tensions between and within religions, and how they have exposed a lack of social cohesion in seemingly resilient societies, have impacted communities in fundamental ways. This report examines how these impacts specifically and disproportionately affect children and youth. It sets out how both security frameworks and prevention interventions have — albeit not deliberately — operated to expose these groups to rights violations and forces that render them more vulnerable to violent extremist recruitment.

In searching for more effective intervention frameworks, the policy and programmatic communities have been constrained by limited understanding of how the violent radicalization and extremism process evolves, including drivers, pathways and tipping points.

One challenge is that there are no clear or universally accepted definitions that can be applied to the current concepts of radicalism, extremism and violent extrem-
ism. Radicalism, for example, can be understood benignly, as the active pursuit of far-reaching societal change, that may or may not involve violence. It is not a new phenomenon, nor is it necessarily a negative one.

Indeed, most progressive social change was initiated and driven by so-called radicals; pertinent examples include the civil rights movement, feminism, and LGBT mainstreaming. Groups as diverse as Occupy Wall Street, the Vietnam-era ‘draft-dodgers’ and Greenpeace have each been referred to as radical organizations.

Likewise, the concept of extremism, while it differs technically from radicalism only in nuanced ways, has evolved to exhibit more negative connotations, such as irrevocably implying a process by which people come to support terrorism and violent extremism and, in some cases, then to join terrorist groups.1 The same binary understanding can be applied to the notion of extremism.2

The reasons for this are multifaceted. It can be said, however, that the dominant discourse has trended towards risk minimization, in some contexts it has been shaped by stereotypes and ethno-religious prejudice. The risks associated with this emphasize the importance of using terminology that is approached prudently and evidentially.

In response, and for the purposes of this report, we use the terms ‘violent radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’. Radicalism and even extremism are not understood as phenomena that can — or even should — be resisted or interrupted. Instead, radical and extreme thinking can often manifest as positive forces; alternatively they can be understood as processes that naturally — but not universally — accompany adolescent development.

When articulating definitions, and while acknowledging that the current discourse is focused on Islamist extremism, it is important to highlight the fact that individuals might be simultaneously vulnerable to the terms ‘violent radicalization’ and ‘violent extremism’.3

While children have traditionally been utilized by militant groups for pragmatic reasons (they are cheaper to maintain and easier to manipulate),4 groups such as Daesh have a more complex strategy in play. As elaborated in the Quilliam report ‘The Children of the Islamic State’, children are being used in battlefield, as soldiers, executioners and suicide bombers.5 Likewise Boko Haram has recruited perhaps thousands of children, and used dozens as suicide bombers and in civilian attacks.6 This is not only efficient (the lightweight and simplified nature of modern weaponry make children as effective as adult fighters), but breaching international norms on how children are used in theatre has yielded significant propaganda returns.

The nature of these trends presents myriad risks for, and impacts on, children and youth in conflict-affected, fragile and developing countries alike. The different hats they wear — actors within the conflict, bystanders in theatre, sympathisers, activists or observers — means that individuals might be simultaneously vulnerable to recruitment, mistreated within a legal system and pose a danger to national security. As such they may require protection, empowerment, resilience or a combination of these. Response strategies thus need to be both flexible and multidimensional, with a careful balancing of protection, harm minimization and reintegration.

Whichever of these are prioritized, the case for intervention is compelling.

Notes


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9 ‘Children and Counter-Terrorism’ UNODC (2016) 50.

10 The People’s struggle for self-determination in the context of the Palestinian people: The Right to National Self-Determination. Rome. International Labor Organization (1966). 16: ‘The right to self-determination is an inalienable right of all peoples to freely determine their political, social and economic system of life, and to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources’.

11 The notion of an extremist organization warrants more detailed examination. It is not contested that groups such as Daesh have built their organizations around a religious concept. But as Benor points out, citizens are divided between those arguing that the militant ideology put forward by Daesh has no basis in Islamic doctrine, and those who believe that the two are inseparably entwined. The point is that it is unlikely to be easy to discern from these debates for political correctness. Indeed, while the vast majority of Muslims do not ascribe to violent extremism ideology, it is also the case that the vast majority of attacks have been perpetrated in the name of Islam and there are tenets that need to be discussed and addressed. R Benor ‘Radicalization into Violent Extremism: A Review of Social Science Theories’. Journal of Strategic Security, No.4 Vol. 4 (2011) 2-3.

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Part 1. Explaining the journey from radicalism into violent extremism

While estimates vary significantly, upwards of 30,000 foreign fighters, from 81 countries, joined violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2017. These figures include a disproportionate youth participation, and unprecedented numbers of women and children. While the Middle East was the largest contributing region, around 20 percent hailed from Western states, fueling wide interest in the causal factors and enabling conditions in play. Indeed, how extremist groups, and Daesh in particular, managed to attract participants in such high numbers, and from such diverse demographic groups, has confounded scholars and practitioners alike. The discussion below sets out how scholars have sought to rationalize or explain these behaviors over time, and how the locus of interest has shifted from individual acts of terrorism, to processes of radicalization, and finally to compounding forces of influence.

1.1 From a terrorist typology to models of radicalisation

Early research experimented with the idea of a terrorist persona — the idea that those who engaged in terrorist activities shared some form of mental fragility, or other social dysfunction. By the early 2000s, such theories had been largely discredited; certainly evidence from the most recent wave of violent extremists suggests that, apart from being disproportionately young and male, there is a strong heterogeneity in fighter profiles. Having rejected the idea that neither ethnicity, social class, religious ideology, family background, nor socio-economic status can explain participation in a violent extremist group, scholars moved towards the idea of violent extremist action being the end-stage of a process that started with an individual’s radicalization. Various explanatory models have been put forward, however none proved to be scientifically robust or able to explain extremist behavior in a reliable way when applied to the rise of Daesh and other Sunni extremist groups.

In the mid-2010’s yet another way of thinking about the relationship between radicalization and extremist behavior surfaced. Radicalization was still understood as a process that culminated in the decision to join a violent extremist group, but one that was driven by certain ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Push factors were largely understood as the negative social, political, economic and cultural drivers of individual decision-making, while pull factors were the positive characteristics or benefits offered by a group in exchange for participation.

But as the Daesh phenomenon entered a fifth year, theories linking radicalization to violent extremist behavior or group membership came under increased scrutiny. A first argument was that the commonly referenced drivers/push-pull factors were too generic to adequately or consistently explain radicalization within individuals. Indeed, while unemployment, political marginalization or religious ideology may have driven individual cases, these phenomena are broad-reaching, leaving models...
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28 Identifying the circumstances and enabling conditions that accompany this step is complicated by simple pragmatics. Recruitment into such groups often takes place rapidly, and in hard-to-access domains such as the Internet and guarded social networks. Once in theatre, radicals’ social networks have a dual function; it is through these networks, their testimony is generally deemed unreliable. Evidence gleaned from friends or family, or available in the form of social media posts or letters, usually relate to end-stage behavior and thus reveal little about tipping points. Moreover, relatively short post-factum explanations often leave to be desired, compounded, either due to self-handicapped guilt or because they wish to see their lived-experience safely. See Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalization in the EU (IPTF PE 505 837/2014).

29 Structural motivators include, inter alia, repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality, discrimination, a history of hostility between identity groups, and/or external state interventions in the affairs of other nations. Individual incentives include a sense of purpose, adventure, belonging, acceptance, status and/or material reward (including in the afterlife). Enabling factors include the presence of extremist mentors, access to social networks with violent extremist associations, access to weaponry and/or a lack of state presence. Generally, J Khalil and M Zouiten, ‘Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation’ Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (2016), 6; 9.


39 The income share held by the poorest 20 percent of the region is a negligible 6.8 percent of the total. Average income inequality is 33.2 percent, which is only slightly higher than East Asia and the Pacific at 35.2 percent. At 34; J. Arnson, and K. Hauke, Inequality, Economic Growth, and Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa, African Development Bank Group (2013). See further, W Zartman, “Need, Creed, and Greed in Irregular Conflict” In C. Armitage and W Zartman eds, Rethinking the economics of war: the cost and control of modern conflict (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2008) 257 and Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalization in the EU (IPTF PE 505 837/2014) 12.


12.2 Individual motivators

Another group of individuals joins an extremist group, not in response to a broader injustice, but for highly personal, individualistic reasons. Some, for example, are motivated by economic gain. A study by Search for Common Ground in Nigeria found that material reward was a far more stringent motivator than religion in their decision for joining Boko Haram, and likewise that those most vulnerable to recruitment were from poorly-re-sourced boarding schools. 46 Similarly, but in the central Asian context, research suggests that the promise of good jobs and financial repatriation 47 may be the single most important factor explaining recruitment into the Syrian conflict. 48 Even in Jordan — the country that largely debunked early theories that extremist group membership was needs-driven — there is evidence that financial incentives play some role. In the WANA Institute’s work with former combatants, each subject drew attention to difficult living conditions, financial constraints, unemployment and/or low salaries and irregular employment as driving their despondency. 49

Another set of recruits — predominately male youths — are attracted by the prospect of adventure; the idea that fighting alongside an insurgent group will bring with it excitement, novelty or thrill. 50 Yet another set of individuals seek self-cleansing. This particularly relates to victims of sexual assault or rape, those who have engaged in pre-marital sex, or those who identify as LGBTI. A lack of social acceptance of these groups, the absence of support networks or rehabilitation services makes for a far more stringent motivator than religion in their decision for joining Boko Haram, and likewise that those most vulnerable to recruitment were from poorly-re-sourced boarding schools.

A final group of individuals seek reward, which might take the form of social significance, wealth or marriage. This is especially meaningful in Arab cultures where ‘provision’ is an expectation associated with adulthood and masculinity, and material wealth begets respect, dignity and honor. Reward as a driver has been particularly associated with those who have little scope for upwards social mobility and who are subsequently marginalized by their families. 51 Propaganda plays an important role in such contexts. Not only do extremist groups promise to deliver the goods that the disenfranchised long to possess (employment, marriage and material possessions), they also construct a narrative of heroism by focusing on their military victories. By appealing to youth to join the ‘winning team’, they draw attention to the paucity of strength exercised by their own governments, as well as the inadequacy of the governments of other countries. 52

1.2.3 Enablers

Networks

The above discussion outlines two groups of motivators that can lead an individual to embrace violent extremist ideology. But these cannot, alone, explain violent extremist behavior. The act of joining a violent extremist group is a complex decision that rarely stands alone, but rather depends on a range of other social, economic and political factors...
members followed with little intellectual interrogation of the circumstances they were entering into. Others lack a group to belong to and find one in the world of violent extremism. Indeed, as adolescents separate from their intra-familial group in search of a broader, independent identity, they are vulnerable to the role models, cues and patterns around them. Usually, several groups — and thus identities — will be on offer — the university student, the worker, the spouse etc. However, if such opportunities are not available, groups peddling open and more inclusive identities, such as Daesh, may prove attractive alternatives. One can imagine several vulnerable typologies: the child of Muslim immigrants living in a cosmopolitan city, the socially awkward non-conformist, or the Jordanian who is unable to marry because they lack the social influence to secure one of the few job opportunities available. Against such complex structural obstacles, Daesh can be seen as offering a simple solution: a clear identity as a pure Muslim in the Caliphate, and membership to a group whose purpose is both meaningful and transformative.

Youth easily “self-mobilize to the tune of a simple, superficial, but broadly appealing ‘takfiri’ message of withdrawal from impure mainstream society and of a need for violent action to cleanse it.”

Religious ideology

Certainly, some violent extremists are motivated solely by the sense of religious obligation Daesh instills. The WANA Institute’s mapping of returnee fighters identified some individuals as acting upon their religious duty to take part in jihad. Likewise, Heggemgar, al-Harby and Abu Rumman’s work on European, Saudi and Salafi jiha-dists respectively, found that religious ideology played a major role in shaping behaviors and commitment.

For most, however, religious ideology serves the role of an enabler. Whether they are reacting to a grievance, seeking social significance, or pursuing reward, individuals need a platform or framework within which to act on their frustrations. Daesh’s religious ideology provides just this; jihad is a modality to right wrongs committed against Sunnis, or reject the marginalization created by one’s own state. It likewise presents an appealing and righteouse narrative for those seeking reward, salvation or adventure. Thus, even when individual motivations are context-specific, collective and institutionally legitimate concepts such as ‘martyrdom’ and ‘jihad’ can present themselves as a solution.

This complements Jonathan Russell and Haras Rafaj’s observation that the Daesh narrative has been so effective because it is “sufficiently malleable to apply to recruits from the West, local populations, and members of existing terrorist groups”. It also explains the increasing evidence that violent radicals are not usually very pious and know little about Islam, as well as emerging studies on former fighters who return when better opportunities are presented and/or renounce violent extremism (something that is unlikely to happen in the religiously indoctrinated). In short, while religion and religious actors play a role in some cases of radicalization, it is not a truth that their influence is a cause of need for violent action to cleanse it.

Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman’s research found that religion and theological understanding may factor prominently into only a subset of cases. In the process of becoming radicalized, one in five were known to have a spiritual mentor. One in four claimed to have a spiritual sanctioner for their planned attack, but less than 40 percent claimed explicitly that their illegal actions were religiously motivated. Bakker’s examination of more than 200 militant jihadists found that less than a quarter were raised in religious families, and another quarter were converts to Islam. Research by Klausen on 350 jihadists in western states found that fewer than 10 percent were Muslim converts, but around 80 percent of the militants were connected to social networks that traced back to just four prominent Islamist leaders in London.

1.3 Conclusion

As complicated as it might be, it is most likely that structural deficits within specific cultural and political contexts, coupled with exposure to an extremist group, its ideology, and social group support, is behind the making of a violent extremist.

A further realization is that radicalization — the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs — needs to be distinguished from action pathways — the processes of engaging in violent extremist behaviors. Radical ideology may not be something that can nor should be prevented. Instead, it is when someone with radical ideology decides to join a violent extremist group, that needs to be understood and interrupted.

The absence of a set of characteristics that can identify those vulnerable to violent extremism, nor a linear pathway, is problematic from a security and programmatic perspective. The structural factors and individual motivators referred to above have no quick or easy solutions. Moreover, the pervasiveness of lack of opportunity, fragmented social identity, and exposure to social injustice, typcast the vast majority of youth in the region as vulnerable to extremism.

It is against these insights that responses to countering and preventing violent extremism must be judged for efficacy. The next section examines these approaches respectively.
2.1 Securitization and legal measures for countering violent extremism

The emergent threat of violent extremism, and in particular the global reach of terrorist recruiters, has impelled comprehensive changes in security arrangements both within and between states. This trend has strongly favoured governments expanding the powers and reach of anti-terror laws to facilitate more in-depth investigation. As at May 2007, more than 500 locations had been inspected and more than 2,000 persons controlled. ‘Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IPOL PE 509.977(2014) 21; C Angus ‘Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: Causes and Responses’ Children and Young People in Britain, 3. 'Extreme Measures, Abuses against Children Detained as National Security Threats', Human Rights Watch (2016); Children and Counter-Terrorism. (2016) 14-15. In the UK, the Terrorism Act classifies non-disclosure (as it relates to terrorism) as an offence. In France, ‘Children and Counter-Terrorism’ UNICRI (2016) 36-37.

In Belgium, for example, a 2013 Royal Decree criminalized public incitement to commit a terrorist crime, providing a basis for the detention of suspects. ‘Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IPOL PE 509.977(2014) 20-21. In the UK, the dissemination of material deemed to ‘glorify’ terrorism is criminalised. In Germany, it is an offence to plan to leave the country to go to an area where a terrorist training camp is located. If the trip is aimed at committing serious seditious acts of violence. Likewise in France, planning to join a terrorist organization is an offence under law. ‘Children and Counter-Terrorism’ UNICRI (2016) 51-52. ‘Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IPOL PE 509.977(2014) 20-21.

V Coppock and M McGovern ‘Dangerous Minds? Deconstructing Counter-Terrorism Discourse, Radicalisation and the ‘Psychological Vulnerability’ of Muslim Children and Young People in Britain’. In France, foreign nationals suspected of being serious threats to the public order can be deprived of their nationality. ‘Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IPOL PE 509.977(2014) 21; 26. Stop and search protocols have been the most controversial form of intelligence gathering, including through surveillance, compulsory disclosure and searches, as well as controlling communications and online content; and the deportation or revocation of citizenship of persons – including minors – who have engaged in terrorism activity. ‘Extreme Measures, Abuses against Children Detained as National Security Threats’, Human Rights Watch (2016).

Such ‘zero-tolerance’ responses have been heavily criticized by practitioners, scholars and civil society groups. A first argument is that vague and overly broad definitions of terrorism and terrorist offences can compromise the rights to life, to freedom of opinion, freedom of movement, freedom of expression and a fair trial. ‘Extreme Measures, Abuses against Children Detained as National Security Threats’, Human Rights Watch (2016).

A further observation is that pre-emptive judicial powers, such as pre-charge detention, challenge fundamental due process rights. This has compounded implications for children, who are entitled to specific protections that take into account their age-specific vulnerability.
vulnerabilities. Similar objections are levelled against the reliance on new laws on ‘terrorism’ (which cannot be scrutinized and may be collected in abrogation of other basic rights) as opposed to evidence (which can and may not), to surveil, arrest and lay charges.71 In the UK, for example, an organisation can be banned,72 and in France foreigners can be deported, on the basis of classified intelligence reports.73 Reforms that make it an offence to post certain content on the Internet or be a ‘sympathizer, member or terrorist group’,74 have been similarly criticized as comprising freedom of speech and belief.75

The 2014 criminal prosecution and imprisonment of a French website moderator after partially translating and publishing two issue copies of the Al Qaeda magazine ‘Inspire’, on the grounds of condoning acts of terrorism and incitement of terrorism, drew worldwide attention.76 As the principal consumers and generators of online content, these trends disproportionately impact and expose young people.

Finally, laws enabling the revocation of citizenship have created backlash, with some arguing that they place countries in breach of their obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which provides protection and guarantees fair trial standards, and the UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, which prohibits governments from revoking a person’s nationality if it leaves them stateless. In such cases, children can be impacted both directly and also when a parent is affected.

But it is less legalism that has most concerned scholars as much as the tensions and hostilities that such measures can have and have provoked.77 It is now broadly accepted that extremism, at least in part or for some, is a reaction to phenomena taking place within the state, such as marginalization, inequality and/or elite capture.

Where security measures encroach on rights to privacy, impact freedom of speech or belief, deny fair trial protections, or are perceived as targeting a religious or ethnic group, such perceptions can be exacerbated, narratives confirmed and/or new grievances created. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute’s 2015 publication ‘Gen Y Jihadists’, explains how government security measures, coupled with media reporting on home grown terrorists simultaneously reinforced perceptions of Muslims as ‘a threat’, as well feelings among Muslims that there is deeply-entrenched hostility against them.78

A prime example is ‘stop and search’ powers, which disproportionately impact young people, and young Muslims in particular, thus eroding trust and confidence in police-community relations.79 Even in Germany where racial profiling is strictly prohibited, exceptions can be granted.80 Against such concerns, the European Parliament concluded that such policies “have in several instances been found to generate a feeling of suspicion that is unhelpful to the relations between the state and Muslim communities across Europe.”81 Similar conclusions were drawn in the UK,82 an investigation found that ‘stop and search’ powers were “much used and much criticized”, but that of limited practical assistance in the fight against terrorism. They were subsequently repealed and replaced.

Other measures — such as French authorities’ invocation of standard controls to surveil and then sanction, predominately Muslim-run, businesses — have attracted similar scrutiny. Indeed, the closure of halal butcher shops for breaches of public health laws, places of worship for violating security regulations, and streetwear businesses for tax evasion, have been widely publicized as the outcome of discriminatory targeting.83 Certainly, those whose livelihoods are compromised, citizenship is revoked or persons who are deported or denied entry into a country, have the potential to become potent icons for propaganda purposes.84

Finally, compulsory disclosure laws have operated to de-legitimize key actors within their communities, by creating fears that they could be pressured into reporting information on individuals, or suspicions that they have become covert gatherers of intelligence for the state.85 Not only has this eroded the potential reach of these figures in the fight against violent extremism, it has also perpetuated militarization in the form of ‘us and them’ identity politics. Likewise, limiting public access to mosques and engagement with imams has had a similar impact by cutting off a main source of guidance and clarification.86 In some locations, religious secularization means that imams no longer feel comfortable discussing radicalisation issues with youth, or seeking guidance from their superiors, as such interactions leave them vulnerable to questioning from intelligence authorities.87

2.2 ‘Soft’ measures for preventing violent extremism

The limits, and in some cases the unintended consequences, of the security-centric approaches described above have given rise to complementary ‘soft’ approaches, often labelled ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ (PVE), or ‘Transforming Violent Extremism’.88 Such approaches sit more comfortably with the emerging scholar- larship, that discredit or subjugate extremist messaging. This can be highly effective. Youth are less likely to be swayed by content they feel is not authentic, or by leading figures who they see as lacking in humility or authority.

Like security-centric approaches, PVE responses have had mixed results and been the subject of wide criticism. A first area of criticism relates to messaging. Media, the ‘other’, as well feelings among Muslims that there is a main source of guidance and clarification.86

In Jordan, the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowment) and Religious Affairs has closed mosques to the public except during prayer times.87

Implied in such approaches is an assumption that imams are key to recruitment, whereas most evidence suggests that they are not.88 The importance of this transition was articulated in the USN’s call for a ‘more comprehensive approach which encompasses not only engaging essential communities and leaders, but also the systematic practice of engaging the stories of young people who have given rise to the emergence of these new and more virulent groups.” See generally L Ris and A Ernstorfer ‘Borrowing a Wheel: Applying Existing Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation Strategies to Emerging Programming Approaches to Prevent and Counter Violent Extremism’ Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (2017).


Others believe that the Internet influence is exaggerated, and that violent action is unlikely to originate from purely virtual links. Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalization in the EU (PGC) PES5 977 (2014) 7-11; see also In and Out of Extremism, Quilliam (2015). 86

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Contemporary theorisations of the psychology of the ‘would-be-terrorist’ collide powerfully with institutionalised discourses of childhood vulnerability.93 The consequences, and implications for children and youth, scarcely need spelling out. Basing preventative interventions, not on actual actions, but on markers of future behaviors as well as laden stereotypes, can drive existing perceptions of marginalization and exclusion, as well as exacerbate suspicion and polarization within certain ethnic, religious and socio-economic groups. This was the conclusion drawn following an evaluation of the UK’s PREVENT I and II community cohesion—early detection programs; specifically, the program was found to have contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion, alienation and stigmatization, and a worsening relationship between the state and Muslim communities. Moreover, to the extent that programs targeting those classified as vulnerable have been executed by religious leaders, community-based organizations and civic action groups, their legitimacy has been compromised, potentially cutting off a vital source of information and support to those at risk of engaging in violent extremism and their families.94

Other interventions, such as awareness raising and skills building, have been perceived as inappropriately targeting youth and/or Muslims. Indeed, normal adolescent behavior closely mimics what policy-makers (and to an extent scholars) have identified as the signs or characteristics of a budding extremist. Examples include searching for role models, introspective behavior and detachment, feelings of grievance, emergent political engagement, or the exercising of self-expression or dissent.95 Additional characteristics listed in governments’ ‘vulnerability assessment frameworks’ include feeling under threat, feeling discriminated against, regularly visiting mosques, and engaging in regular prayer and other religious rites. The result is that Muslim youth are often doubly typecast.16

Others argue that counter-messages simply cannot compete with the narratives produced by extremist groups such as Daesh,32 which are complex, rooted in culture and history, and create a compelling context for believability and inspiration. This is consistent with scholars who argue that while the West has been very good at articulating what it is against, it has been unable to develop a compelling and attractive narrative around what it stands for. Underlying this is an assumption that the non-extremist position is superior, and that counter messages have an implicit logic that does not require explanation—an assumption that actually feeds the Daesh narrative of elitism, marginalization and exclusion.96

If the implicit message of a jobs programme shifts from ‘we are supporting your livelihood because your well-being matters’ to ‘we are supporting your livelihood to stop you becoming a terrorist’ this carries risks.102

But approaching vulnerability from a broader perspective has been equally criticized. As discussed above, the commonly presented drivers—lack of opportunity, inequality and political grievance—are broad and capture, in some cases, the majority of a population group. PVE interventions geared towards enhancing political agency or expanding employment are often scarcely distinguishable from the development programs that came before them, and hence have limited potential to prevent extremism.

Responding to other categories of drivers pose programming dilemmas. The ruling bargains that have kept Arab states stable rely upon limited political freedoms and space for dissent. Thus, even if there is a causal link between such freedoms and extremism, power holders have strong vested interests in maintaining the status quo. There is also a valid argument that any interventions likely to weaken existing power distributions, risks a diminution in stability, which might prove more costly in the overall fight against extremist violence. Other dilemmas are more structural; there is no clear guidance or experience on how to program effectively to ‘build identity’ or address dependency, for example.101

2.3 The challenge of evidence-based approaches

The above examination provides insight into how we reached the status quo, and highlights that clear and evidence-based direction on how to design and execute PVE programs is in short supply. Quite the contrary, lack of understanding around what makes a violent extremist has made way for programming that has either been overly broad or inappropriately targeted, resulting in ineffectiveness, or an exacerbation of existing tensions. Fear, both of large scale terror attacks as well as the ‘boy next door’ nature of the Daesh threat, and concerns around diminutions in stability, have driven hyper-vigilant security responses. There is no doubt that these have yielded a level of effectiveness, although in the absence of a counter-factual, it is impossible to speculate on the scale. Over time, however, we have learned that while people may be safer, this is at the cost of other freedoms. Moreover, as causal drivers are not being ameliorated, a larger threat is arguably evolving.

The challenge is that such drivers are structural developmental, governance and geopolitical issues that—if solvable—will involve decades-long, resource-heavy interventions. Livelihoods and employment opportunity provides a clear example of the difficulties, risks and vested interests that belie solutions. While it is clear that boosting employment is not a direct or complete solution to preventing violent extremism (those departing for Syria are mostly often employed, even if not satisfactorily), livelihoods do seem to play a role in the community. Moreover, if violent extremism is driven by direct financial need; for others lack of opportunity feeds into an overall sense of despondency, despondency, humiliation and lack of hope for the future. It follows that opportunity—whether this be in the form of paid employment or other forms of entrepreneurialism—may offer some protection against extremist group involvement. Most simply, employment leaves less time for youth to engage in dangerous online activity, meet with recruiters or lament their situation to sympathetic listeners. There is also evidence that the employed generally have fewer incentives to engage in unsocial behavior, and violent activities, including participation in violent groups. This is because employment raises the costs of violence, especially if the latter is meant to achieve economic or financial benefits; more generally because access to a steady income incentivizes individuals to maintain the status quo.102 More broadly, employment can help to mitigate inequality, lack of access to essential services and social exclusion. It is...
also considered essential for growth and poverty reduction, and can foster state effectiveness by extending the tax base and allowing for greater social service provision.

But raising opportunity — particularly in Middle East contributing states — is easier said than done. Across the region, rentierism, proximity to conflict, bureaucracy, corruption and topography, have worked together to dissuade investment, prevent new market emergence and complicate steady economic growth. This has left economies unable to generate sufficient internal productive capacity to keep those able and willing to work — particularly youth — employed. To reverse these trends and create a leaner economic framework, governments need to nationalize employment, roll back subsidies, and reduce the size of the informal economy and public sector. But relief will not come quickly nor painlessly. Market competitiveness and productivity will take time to build and during this period living standards are unlikely to improve markedly. In the interim period, the factors driving youth involvement in violent extremism, thus remain virulent.

Another example of “restructuring pains” is the spillover effects that have followed Jordan’s efforts in education reform. To improve the competitiveness of the workforce, and reduce reliance on migrant workers, the Tawjihi (leaving certificate) standards and requirements were tightened. The short-term result however, was that hundreds of students failed the Tawjihi, leaving them unable to move on to university studies. Humiliated and without gainful employment options, scores committed suicide in both 2016 and 2017; there is also evidence that others joined violent extremist groups.

The states producing the highest numbers of violent extremists thus sit at a crossroads. While reforms pose a risk, the non-sustainability of the governance model means that, as long as the status quo remains in play, new risks evolve. Against the urgent need for better frameworks for identifying and responding to persons — especially children and youth — vulnerable to violent extremism, the following sections set out emergent good practices and new ideas in the areas of prevention, legal prosecution and de-radicalisation-reintegration.
Part 3.
A better framework for prevention: Towards a more integrated and resilience youth society

This paper has described the transformations that the PVE sector has undergone in recent years, both in terms of how the problem of violent extremism is conceptualized, and how it might be responded to. It has also offered a new way of understanding violent extremism — as a phenomenon resulting from structural drivers, individual motivations and enabling factors, that work together in a non-linear and reactive process. It has also set out the deficits within current response strategies and highlighted the unintended consequences that can result.

A key difficulty is that the drivers, motivations and enabling factors identified are largely rooted in chronic, political-development challenges that have no easy or quick solutions. Even if these challenges could be overcome, it does not necessarily follow that the problem of violent extremism would be extinguished.

It is likely that strategists and policy-makers will need to look beyond such deficits, to find new ways to interrupt the pathways that lead an individual to engage in violence for political or ideological ends. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that many, if not most, violent extremists are not brainwashed or coerced, but are exercising agency in rejection of injustice, religious marginalization, despondency, exclusion and other grievances. Preventing people from exercising such agency is fraught with difficulty; the lesson learned from the past five years is that modern recruitment networks are very difficult to quash and to the extent that people want to join the fight, groups will find ways to engage them. In cases where individuals are unable to or prevented from travelling to a conflict theatre, they may perpetrate acts of violence in their domestic locales.

If the decision to join a violent extremist group is the result of a cost-benefit analysis, a more effective approach may be to adjust the risk-return assessment in favour of non-extremist options. More simply, if the causal drivers cannot be eliminated, and agency can/should not be revoked, then the only way to compete with extremist groups is to offer more attractive alternatives.

The question then becomes what kind of environment do youth need in order to reject violent extremist groups?

In answering this, the literature on youth development may prove instructive. It highlights that youth life satisfaction strongly correlates with adaptation, can mitigate the negative effects of stressful life events, and counters the development of psychological and behavioral problems. What translates into life satisfaction is the more challenging question. The literature identifies supportive parenting, challenging activities, positive life milestones, and high-quality interactions with significant others, as all contributing to life satisfaction and other subjective notions of wellbeing.

Young people also need to be equipped with a range of experiences, skills, and assets in order to transition to adulthood positively.

Building upon this, the following sets out areas of youth engagement with high potential for bolstering youth life satisfaction, and thus an enabling framework for preventing violent extremism at the individual level: sports and extracurricular activities; alternative pathways for ‘would-be’ fighters and ideological radicals to constructively, but non-violently, address their concerns; and creative messaging that bolsters youth critical thinking skills and respects their agency. We also discuss the importance of mechanisms and facilities to provide information, guidance and support to those at risk of or wishing to disengage from a violent group, and the need to align legal frameworks with minimum rights standards and elaborate diversionary and rehabilitative structures for children and youth in the specific context of violent extremism.

3.1 Beyond employment: Sports and extra-curricular activities

Precisely because employment is neither an easy fix, nor a complete solution, complements need to be set in place. Indeed, employment is not solely about income, just as education is not only about future employability — these venues also provide connectedness, direction, social and bridging capital, and relief from boredom. Pursuits that deliver such opportunities, including sports and extra-curricular activities, have been largely unexplored and often discounted as too peripheral to contribute to preventing violent extremism. The
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Beyond individual ends, sport can bestow broader social benefits. Because teams have a ‘role for everyone’, sport is a socializing agent where youth can forge relationships and experience integration within a community. Sport also offers youth an opportunity to diversify their social networks, facilitating connections and social mobility.

Sports’ greatest potential, however, is perhaps how social bonding can permeate groups marked by differences in socio-economic, ethnicities and viewpoints. At its core, sport is equalizing and democratic, overlooking variances in race, wealth or group membership. Indeed, some research has found correlations between youth sport participation and notions of inter- and intra-group responsibility, belonging and active community membership. These include studies of young refugees and immigrants participating in sports with members of other cultural groups.

As in the case of sport, extra-curricular activities geared towards youth tend to yield positive outcomes both at the individual and interpersonal levels. Out-of-school pursuits support adolescent maturation, including behavior control, and provide a context for identity exploration and development. Particularly when enframed towards measurable goals, youth engagement in activities can promote initiative, as well as give young people skills in developing plans, time management, contingency thinking and problem solving.

At the interpersonal level, activities facilitate social connections and relationships beyond existing peer networks, including with people from different ethnic, social and economic groups, adults and the broader community. These relationships provide a source of social capital, which can unlock information pathways and opportunities pertaining to higher education and employment.

In short, beyond giving youth something to do, sports and extracurricular activities provide a context for young people to acquire valuable social capital and bonding social capital. Extra-familial networks allow youth to understand themselves relative to others, and experiment with social relations in safe surroundings, including by resolving conflict, engaging in debate and raising ideas for validation. These relationships are closely related to ‘bridging social capital’ in social-science literature — the notion that forging relationships with people in alternate social networks, who possess different resources, knowledge and experiences, can help unlock opportunities and promote diversity in thinking. Equally important is the confidence that these networks will become operative in situations of adversity, stress and/or uncertainty. Where strong social assets structures are in play, they can somewhat compensate for, or offset deficits in, socio-economic enablers such as livelihoods opportunity, participatory governance and civic services.

3.2 A safe space for dissent and radical ideology

A key observation from the more recent literature is that radical ideology is more widespread than initially understood;123 indeed, it could be argued that the wave of popular observance in Western societies today constitutes a form of radicalism. A further observation is that even if radical thinking could be prevented or ‘programmed away’ (which is highly unlikely), this may not be effective in curtailing violent extremism — the connection between radical ideology and violent extremism is too tenuous. (Although steps such as removing educational content that glorifies or idealizes violent conflict, or gives religious support to violence, is essential).

The more tangible connection might be between radical ideology and notions of exclusion and marginalization. As illustrated above, those who hold radical beliefs can have their perceptions reinforced if they are targeted, through ‘prevention’ programs, or discriminated against, for example by ‘stop and search’ protocols or immigration screening. This can drive existing victimization narratives and lead individuals to an extremist group, either as an act of dissent, to rebut perceived injustice, to secure protection, or to find group inclusion. In short, most radicals do not become violent extremists, but they are more likely to if they feel scapegoated or isolated because of their ideology. The lesson to be drawn is the importance of not inadvertently pushing radicals into extremism. Societies need to be sufficiently inclusive that those harbouring radical views feel that they have a safe space to exist, albeit with clear red lines.

Another recent observation is that to join a violent extremist group is more often the result of a cost-benefit analysis than brainwashing or coercion. In many cases individuals leave their family, jobs and other commitments and/or outlay significant personal resources to join an extremist group.120 That the ‘pull of the fight’ outweighs these responsibilities and emotional commitments suggests that for individuals who are determined to ‘do something’, neither opposition nor the employment of tools to diminish the appeal of extremism could be effective.121

114 ‘Thinking Outside the Box: Exploring the Critical Roles of Sports, Arts, and Culture in Preventing Violent Extremists’ Global Center on Cooperative Security, July 2015, 4-5.
117 See e.g. J Fraser-Thomas, J Coté and J Deakin ‘Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy’ Vol. 10, No. 1, February 2005, 19–40, 24-5; A Smith, ‘Peer relationships in sport — particularly organized and competitive team sports — proffer individual skills such as cooperation, responsibility, self-control and commitment.111,112 Reciprocal bonding can permeate groups marked by differences in socio-economic, ethnicities and viewpoints. At its core, sport is equalizing and democratic,293 overlooking variances in race, wealth or group membership. Indeed, some research has found correlations between youth sport participation and notions of inter- and intra-group responsibility, belonging and active community membership.294 These include studies of young refugees and immigrants participating in sports with members of other cultural groups.

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130 UNAWE’s work with referees combatants, such as the fighters had committed; the subjects were married, parents to young children and/or won their family’s principal breadwinners. See N Bondioli and E Seaver ‘Journey Mapping on Selected Foreign Fighters in Jordan’ WANA Institute (2017).
enhanced securitization, is likely to be persuasive. Indeed, the right assessment they make needs to be adjusted in favour of non-extremist options. A clear entry point is thus to enhance the availability of alternative pathways for ‘would-be’ fighters and ideological radicals to constructively, but not-violently, address their concerns.

The idea that frustration and radical thought are positive impulses that can be constructively rechanneled away from violent ends, is a novel one, and one that has certain logical appeal. Few would deny that chronic social injustice in Arab states, Sunni geopolitical marginalization and the Syrian war are all valid sources of angst that have largely been ignored in PVE response strategies to date. It is also clear that some of those who venture into violent extremism do have altruistic intentions, perceive their actions to be utilitarian, or are looking for to attach themselves to structures that allow them to feel politically empowered.130 This all suggests that entry points such as public discussion and debate, opportunities to engage in protest, civic action and community service, may prove cathartic and/or constructive.

Indeed, the scholarship on civic action suggests that youth don’t just need something to do, they need something meaningful to do — action geared towards the structures, processes and practices that have relevance to them.131 Studies have positively correlated civic action with confidence, responsibility and agency, such as a shared identity, expanded networks, participatory confidence i.e. the ability to work successfully with others through cooperation and compromise.132 A particularly relevant outcome is the insight into processes of community development that participants gain. Because they are able to “see and understand firsthand” the linkages between public interest deficits and their implications, as well as the modalities for closing or ameliorating such deficits,133 youth acquire a confidence that they have the agency to make tangible and impactful changes both locally and in governance structures. But for civic action to be effective and not counterproductive, the space provided needs to be genuine. Authorities would be well advised to acknowledge the validity of certain widely-held perceptions and, where possible and appropriate, take remedial action. Examples include efforts to eliminate corruption and nepotism, communicating (even if this falls short of endorsing) popularly-held viewpoints at global platforms, or facilitating opportunities to directly assist victims of the Syria crisis.

3.3 Promoting effective use of agency

As discussed above, messaging and propaganda has been pivotal in ‘pulling’ young people into violence, but counter messaging has been criticized as being insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive. Following on from the idea that young people who join extremist groups are acting with intent and agency, a clear deficit is the absence of tools to make better, non-violent, choices. The evidence suggests that youth do not want to be persuaded; they need to be informed, and to be provided with tools to make better, and non-violent, decisions.134 Currently, marginalised youth (both in the Middle East and the West) lack practical skills needed for living in and contributing to a cohesive and context-informed society. These include critical thinking, constructive debate and analysis, along with values such as tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Building such skills will require curricula reforms as well as improved pedagogical techniques, both of which are discussed extensively in the extant literature. In Arab states, authoritarianism in the classroom and doctrinal approaches, which tend to inculcate obedience and rote learning, need to be replaced with teaching environments that promote creative thinking, safe idea experimentation, and mutually respectful dialogue. A best practice might be drawn from Tunisia, where the youth-led association

Tunisians Against Terrorism worked with the Ministries of Education and Interior, as well as members of the National Assembly, to develop a curriculum that includes critical thinking skills, analysis and peaceful interpretations of Islam.135 Another good practice from Germany is the Live Democracy program, which aims at reinforcing tolerant attitudes, antiviolence and all forms of right-wing extremism.136

The complement to critical thinking is having safe spaces to discuss issues of radicalism, extremism, political dissent and active recruitment.137 A final complement may be making available credible and evidence-based information on the actions of violent extremist groups, thereby setting in place the conditions by which extremist groups delegitimize themselves. In-theatre realities such as internal corruption; brutality against minorities, children and women; and that the vast majority of the conflict’s victims are Sunni Muslims, may be equally effective at pulling away, provided that the recipients of such information have the skills to interpret, weigh and contextualize it. A key asset in this regard may be returnees themselves, whose experiences might be harnessed to refute propaganda and deter would-be fighters from travelling to Syria.

3.4 De-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration

Even before the military defeat of Daesh, the attention of countries of origin had shifted from how to identify violent extremists, to how they should be dealt with. As at the end of 2017, between 100-500 Jordanians are said to have returned from Syria, suggesting that more than 1,000 others may still attempt repatriation. In the UK and Germany, at least 1,200 people had travelled to Syria, while only around 350 have returned.138 There is also the issue of children, taken or born in Daesh-held territory,139 who may seek to return with their parents. Before its fall, there were at least 50 children from the UK growing up in Islamic State, and around 31,000 products women.140 Such children who had prolonged exposure to violence, may never have attended mainstream school and have been indoctrinated in extremist ideology with no competition or alternate influences. The key concern is the risks posed by weapons trained, violence-indoctrinated individuals, and even the potential of an ‘internationalist Islamic movement’.141 Experience from the Afghanis “that returnees can bring with them schools of violent ideology that can be difficult to neutralize.” Indeed, for those exposed to conflict and brutality and heavily indoctrinated into takfiri ideology, it is difficult to know if rehabilitation has occurred, especially where the challenges that motivated their departure are still present. And certainly, the risks of releasing unsuccessfully rehabilitated individuals into society are severe. There are anecdotal accounts of rehabilitation programs in Saudi Arabia where extremists quickly returned to violence; Jordan’s al-Zargawi is often named as the poster child of failed rehabilitation. Moreover, there is mounting evidence that staged deflection is a tool used by Daesh. Others argue that such risks are overblown. One study highlights that similar concerns were raised in relation to the conflicts in Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Gaza, Libya and Mali, but never came to fruition. Others cite the literature on militant trajectories which suggests that “continuities in the commitment after direct involvement in violent conflicts are the exception rather than the norm.” Some may continue their struggle, but in a non-violent way, but most will abandon it. In the WANA’s Institute’s work with returnee fighters, none appeared to remain radicalized or pose a risk in terms of group reattachment. All self-described as traditional Salafis, but not Jihadi Salafis (the school practiced by the groups like al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and Daesh), and only one remained in touch with the sheikhs that influenced his decision to go to Syria.142

Whichever theory holds true, strategies for managing

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132 ‘Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IPOL PE 509.977(2014) 7; Skoutelsky 1998
135 “Volunteering and Social Activism : Pathways for Participation in Human Development” Joint publication of CIVICUS : World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) and UNV, 2008, executive summary.
140 ‘Children and Counter-Terrorism’ UNDP (2016) 7.141
144 ‘Transforming and Preventing Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IFCT PD 509 372(2014) 15.
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149 ‘Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU’ IFCT PD 509 372(2014) 15.
Even if they could, most countries of origin do not have the capacity, nor the extraordinary legal mechanisms, required to detain, investigate and prosecute large numbers of returnees. Most likely a screening process will need to be set in place followed by supervision, re habilitation and — when individuals are deemed to not pose a threat in terms of violence, recruitment, or group reattachment — community reintegration. Even those who do serve prison sentences, most will eventually be released. Rehabilitation strategies thus need to be at the fore of strategy development, both to prevent people languishing in prison in contravention of their rights, or being released without proper support.

Rehabilitation structures and mechanisms are equally important for those who have not been in theatre but who are at risk of joining a violent extremist group.146 Anecdotal studies of fighter trajectories suggest that individuals usually show outward signs. Parents, spouses and friends can sometimes be oblivious to them, or act in non-constructive ways. In some cases, they lack the skills or tools needed; at other times, they fear the consequences involving authorities.147 One survey conducted by the Jordanian NGO, NAMA, found that only one-third of respondents would take action in a situation where an acquaintance was leaning towards joining an extremist/terrorist organization, either by offering advice, informing the situation to authorities.148 A second study of 62 families of men who had left, or attempted to leave, for Syria, revealed that in all cases parents were unaware of their son’s radicalization nor of the risk posed by extremism in their community. Critically, however, even had they known, they would not have contacted authorities due to fear and mistrust.149

Early intervention services should sensitize key actors on the ideologies and extremist recruitment techniques that children and youth may be exposed to, educate on how to detect the early signs and stages of radicalization, and provide tools to be able to speak out against violent extremism. Safe channels, by which individuals can seek advice on questions pertaining to religious ideology or report cases where an individual is showing signs of radicalization, are also needed. These might include networks of trained imams, teachers, health care professionals and community leaders, or telephone or SMS help lines staffed by trained personnel.150 Such channels must be clearly differentiated from ‘de radicalized’ modalities of countering violent extremism. Unless it is clear that discussion of violent extremism and early intervention will be dealt with in a proportionate and assistance-guided manner, the requisite relationship between individuals and authorities will not evolve and interference may even prove counter-productive.

Despite the need for mechanisms to assist returnee and non-returning violent extremists, as well as UNSCR 2178 which calls on countries to develop and implement rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returning foreign terrorist fighters, few have been developed.151 For those structures that are operational, the details, procedures and protocols are rarely disclosed.152

There is likewise little scholarship on de-radicalization processes, techniques or theories. Given that scholars are still struggling to understand the process that makes a violent extremist, perhaps this is not surprising. What is clear, however, is that disengagement, de-radicalization and reintegration are different processes that are still struggling to understand the process that makes a violent extremist ideology — can be ‘de-radicalised’. This is problematic for governments whose laws or resource capacities may not be able to sustain a large population of high-risk detainees for many years. Where such individuals are children, the case is even more complex.

For those who do disengage — leave the group and its purpose — the environment that they return to is fundamental to the risks they pose over the long-term. In most cases the drivers of their departure will remain unchanged. This is coupled with securitization, isolation and economic marginalization, returnees will be particularly susceptible to group reattachment as they look elsewhere for community, recognition and meaning.153 For children and young people, priorities need to centre around social reintegration, filling education gaps, skills and vocational training, reconnecting with communities and restorative action. Much can be drawn from the scholarship on diversionary measures for children in conflict with the law, and the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. Such guidance should prove instructional, for example the practices of housing children away from adults, and ensuring access to educational and vocational activities. However, as the UK-based organisation Quilliam highlights, there are nuances specific to children and young people returning from violent extremist groups that need to be taken into account, as highlighted in the best practices below.

145 The Quilliam Foundation reports that Daesh requires child students to carry out an act of (often barbaric) violence prior to becoming a fully indoctrinated and accepted member of a fighting group. N Benotman and N Malik ‘The Children of the Islamic State’ Quilliam (2016) 78.


147 In and Out of Exile, Quilliam (2015) 44.

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149 In and Out of Exile, Quilliam (2015) 44.

150 E Rosand ‘Communities First A Blueprint for Organizing and Sustaining a Global Movement Against Violent Extremism’ The Prevention Project: Organizing Against Violent Extremism (2018) II.

151 R Barrett ‘Foreign Fighters in Syria; The Soufan Group (2014) 26; As at the end of April 2014, French authorities were reportedly overwhelmed; the counter terrorist prosecution service in Paris was handling 50 cases and a further 26 individuals were in pre-trial detention.


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Recalibrating life direction and purpose

Because members of violent extremist groups receive heavy political indoctrination, they can develop a polarized worldview and their place in it. Some may see that they see no alternatives than war and participating in it. As such, it is important to build a new sense of purpose and meaning in these people’s lives. The engagement of those who have already disengaged and been through the de-radicalisation process may prove useful during such periods.

Religious reeducation

In many cases members of extremist groups have been exposed to content manipulated scriptures and false narratives. Religious education should be taken seriously, with proper contextualization and scholarly interpretation. Critical thinking and contextualization skills help returnees understand the manipulation process and to pull back from it.

Social reintegration

Returnees will often need to build skills for social reintegration and living in society, including anti-violence, problem-solving, respect for diversity and tolerance. Sport, which is role-based and promotes trust and camaraderie, can be excellent tools in this regard.

Livelihoods opportunities

Particularly in the case of children who have lived in Daesh controlled territory, education gaps need to be addressed, as well as livelihoods and vocational skills training to equip them to enter the workforce.

Networks

Social networks to replace the bonds of brotherhood found in violent groups is critical. WANA’s journey mapping, returnees were largely confined to family relations, as friends and neighbors fear increased scrutiny from security forces, enhancing their isolation and perceptions of marginalization.

Psychosocial

The trauma and psychological impact associated with the violence of war, including the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder, must be addressed.

Family engagement

Families should be involved in reintegration wherever possible and appropriate.

Case management approach

A case management approach involves health and mental health practitioners, community workers, correctional officers, educators, religious officials and local leaders is essential.

Community engagement

Local authorities, who often enjoy more trust than the central government, and civil society organizations, who often enjoy more trust than the local authorities, should also be involved in rehabilitation efforts, and be given a lead role where they are best placed to do so.

Community outreach

Because stigmatization is a barrier to reintegration, efforts to communicate the government’s policy on returns, safeguards and protocols, should be prioritized.

3.5 Protecting children in conflict with the law

The preceding sections have set out good practices for engaging children and youth with a view to preventing violent extremism. But equally as important what authorities and programming do to support this group, is what they do not do. As described in part 2 above, children and young people are at risk from joining violent groups through: As such, they may not be missed by the rights and protections guaranteed under the CRC and other international standards and norms of juvenile justice. The legislation review167 makes clear that laws rarely set special provisions for children in conflict in the law for violent extremist activities, nor norms, such as children being tried in juvenile courts, decision-makers being primarily guided by the best interests of the child, the importance of diversionary mechanisms that program children outside of formal courts168 and retaining


168 The legal framework relevant to children exposed to or participating in armed conflict, as well as in conflict with the law outside of theatre, is detailed in several treaties and international customary law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (I and II, 1949), theOptional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC (2000) 13), as well as to the Non-Article Convention such as the Paris Principles on Children In Armed Conflict(2005). An analysis of such frameworks is beyond the scope of this work, however, key principles include that children should be treated principally as victims, that they should be detained only as a last resort and that they should be accorded special measures with respect to rehabilitation and reintegration, as well as the importance of restorative justice. ‘Extreme Measures, Abuses against Children Detained as National Security Threats, Human Rights Watch (2018). In terms of protective interventions, these groups face the greatest risks in theatre, where they are exposed to forced recruitment, armed combat, other forms of violence associated with war. Children who have been brought in from Daesh face additional vulnerabilities, as carefully detailed in the Children of the Islamic State, written by the Quilliam Foundation: N Benotman and M Malik ‘The Children of the Islamic State’ Quilliam (2016) 11, 56. ‘Children and Counter Terrorism’ UNICRI (2015) 22-27. Both the CRC and the two Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 15 in armed conflict, both as part of State forces and non-State armed groups, while the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2007) provides that armed groups should not, under any circumstances, recruit or use in hostiles persons under the age of 18. Article 28 of the CRC prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of 15 years into armed forces, and requires States to ‘take all feasible measures to ensure that persons of that age are not recruited into armed forces’.

169 Recalibrating life direction

Family engagement

Recall the role of family involvement in reintegration. Families should be involved in reintegration wherever possible and appropriate.

Case management approach

A case management approach involves health and mental health practitioners, community workers, correctional officers, educators, religious officials and local leaders is essential.

Community engagement

Local authorities, who often enjoy more trust than the central government, and civil society organizations, who often enjoy more trust than the local authorities, should also be involved in rehabilitation efforts, and be given a lead role where they are best placed to do so.

Community outreach

Because stigmatization is a barrier to reintegration, efforts to communicate the government’s policy on returns, safeguards and protocols, should be prioritized.

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children as a last resort and for the shortest possible time period.173

This is not only a rights-based argument, it is also a functional one. Alternate mechanisms for children and juveniles hold much appeal. The scholarship makes clear that children who have been detained with lower educational achievement, lower rates of employment, higher suicide rates, and higher re-arrest rates, when compared to peers who have been placed in community-based alternative programs.174 Moreover, safe and transparent diversionary measures may encourage family, peers and other members of the community to cooperate with law enforcement in situations where they are aware of someone who is vulnerable to extremist influence or a risk in terms of violent behavior, but do not want to see that person imprisoned.175 In determining whether an individual should be eligible for diversionary measures, a careful balance must be struck between the rights and best interests of child offenders, the interests of public safety and the likelihood of re-offense.176 Indeed, the scholarship on juvenile justice strongly argues that children should not be incarcerated at all, even if prosecuted for terror offences.177
Reconceptualizing the drivers of violent extremism: an agenda for child & youth resilience

Conclusion

This report has set out how the emergent threats posed by violent radicalization and extremism render disproportionate and negative impacts upon children and young people. In part, this is a product of the fear these threats have instilled and the stereotypes associated with these phenomena. This has facilitated the evolution of security and legal frameworks that, in some cases, threaten fundamental rights, such as freedom of movement, expression and due process. While these rights apply to all, they are especially important to children and youth because of their age-specific vulnerabilities and unique developmental trajectories. These frameworks can also impact children and youth indirectly. When the subject of the law or security imperative is a parent or caregiver, laws that allow the targeting and interruption of livelihoods for security purposes, revocation of citizenship or that restrict movement, fundamental impact younger and more dependent family members.

Another important nuance is how strategies and interventions have been crafted from a deficit-ridden interpretation of how violent radicalization evolves into extremist behavior. As unhelpful as it may be from a policy-programming perspective, it appears that there is no single set of motivations driving individuals — radicalized or otherwise — to join a violent extremist group; it is a complex, dynamic process, the steps within which take no linear form and are difficult to predict.179 Once we accept this, and understand violent radicalization and extremism as either a response to a state of affairs deemed to be unjust, or one driven by highly personal factors, which is then enabled by social networks and/or religious ideology, it is easy to understand how current approaches are falling short. In some cases, responses target the wrong object, as in the case of counter-messaging. Some approaches actually exacerbate the feelings of discrimination and marginalization that fuel the violent radicalization process. This includes, for example, stop and search protocols and the tailoring of programs around ‘at risk’ youth. At the same time, response strategies fail to target actual drivers. Herein lies the key challenge. Lack of opportunity, geopolitical hostility and systematic marginalization as a tool of governance, have no simple, fast or cheap solutions. Moreover, the strategies that might be effective are imbued with risk. Economic and educational reform, for example, risks a deterioration in socio-economic wellbeing in the interim term, thereby bolstering the context in which violent radicalization thrives.

This report suggests a new way of conceptualizing the fight against violent radicalization and extremism. Those at risk of recruitment cannot be perceived as malleable or passive participants in radicalization processes. They need to be approached as active agents who are responding to, often very legitimate, sources of angst and social injustice. In this light, the effectiveness of strategies aimed at preventing violent extremism come down to a battle of wills. We put forward that neither securitization nor persuasion will prevent those determined and motivated from joining a violent group. Instead, they need to be incentivized to route their dissatisfaction and feelings of marginalization towards different, more peaceful and constructive, ends. Adjust the risk-return assessment in favor of non-extremist options means presenting young people with attractive alternatives and tools of resilience. Such alternate pathways include sport and meaningful extracurricular activities; cathartic facilities including public debate, civic action and opportunities to engage in non-violent protest;178 opportunities – including through educational curricula reform - to build skills in critical thinking, creativity thinking, safe idea experimentation, and mutually respectful dialogue; and facilities to provide information, guidance and support to those at risk of or wishing to disengage from a violent group.

Surprisingly, the practical challenges are few. These initiatives are low cost and easy to roll out at scale. A larger obstacle is winning the support of policy makers to elaborate more space for children and youth to realize alternate pathways. Indeed, there are risks in elaborating youth freedoms and operating space; the potential wins need to be evaluated against threats of diminutions in social cohesion and conflict spillovers. But such a risk analysis needs to be contextualized. Daesh was militarily defeated in late 2017. This should imply that the group is gone. It has been pushed underground, and because the causal drivers remain, it will return strong and more resilient. And even if it doesn’t, a new form of extremism will grow, as has taken place throughout history. We thus need to use this time wisely, to building understanding and consensus, devise impactful solutions, engage in experiential learning, and to forge new compacts between the children and young people at risk of violent extremism, and the stakeholders they rely upon to protect them.

174 Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalization in the EU (FIDU FE 590 R71[2016]) 6, 11, 31.
