STATE OF THE ART

Something Old, Something New: The Emergence and Evolution of CVE Effort
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O ver a decade after the attacks of September 11, 2001, terrorism continues to factor heavily in national security concerns. Its association with other transnational security challenges, including drug trafficking, organized crime, and armed conflict, has underscored the need for a more preventive and multidimensional response. Moreover, the ability of extremist groups to continue generating support and sympathy has prompted awareness among governments that law enforcement approaches alone are insufficient to counter terrorism and violent extremism in the medium to long term, despite some of the short-term successes afforded by decapitation strikes that have targeted al-Qaeda leaders and affiliates. The phenomenon of radicalized "self-starter" groups or individuals—"lone wolves"—also prompted greater

focus by governments and counterterrorism practitioners on the need to challenge extremist narratives and ideologies to reduce their appeal and recruiting potential early on.

In recent years, this evolution of the threat has prompted efforts to counter violent extremism or "CVE" allowing practitioners to complement counterterrorism strategies in a number of countries and regions. The unpredictability of terrorism today, characterized by increasingly diffused transnational networks and the phenomenon of "self-starters" that no longer need extensive training or contact with identifiable terrorist organizations, further underscores the need for a preventive approach that addresses the conditions and ideologies that may create an enabling environment for terrorism. While the terminology and the policy framework of CVE is relatively new, it builds on long-standing bodies of work to counter radicalization and prevent violence and draws on a number of related areas of practice,

including public diplomacy, strategic communications, development, and conflict prevention or mitigation. Today, CVE is an articulated interest of numerous international organizations and associations, including the United Nations, European Union, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF).

An assessment of contemporary CVE
The preventive focus of CVE reflects the importance attached to addressing what the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy calls the "conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism." While no definitive causal relationship has been established, given that violent radicalization appears to be a highly individualized and complex process, there is widespread agreement among policymakers, experts, and grassroots practitioners that prolonged conflict, underdevelopment, weak governance, and human rights infractions make for powerful drivers of violence and extremism. While these "push factors" are often

generalized at a global level, they create a particular set of environmental enablers in different contexts, allowing extremist groups and recruiters to exploit local grievances and offer alternative narratives and mechanisms for addressing them. The range of personalities and backgrounds of extremists underscores the highly individualized nature of the process by which individuals support violent extremist ideas or groups; it may be just one or all of the factors mentioned above that provides the necessary conditions. In addition to the right combination of structural drivers, "pull factors" such as charismatic recruiters, appealing communications, and material benefits may also prompt recruitment and support for extremist groups.

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

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

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

and the threat scenario, and opportunities to intervene, may well be found in such relationships.

From Ideas to Action

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

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Do any of these work? Evaluating any preventive measure remains an enormous challenge as it necessitates "measuring the negative" and attributing causality where none can be fully determined. However, that does not mean it cannot be done at all. Where particular structural conditions have been directly linked to violent extremism, projects addressing those conditions can be evaluated for their impact in mitigating the threat. Moreover, where projects have a clearly defined objective,

target audience, and articulated theory of change, developing a set of benchmarks or indicators becomes more feasible. Most CVE projects that have been evaluated in a thoughtful manner have taken this latter approach. Like development work, CVE is a long-term strategy with a more uncertain outcome than kinetic measures but is an important instrument in the prevention toolkit since the narratives and activities that fuel recruitment and support for violent extremism cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Going Forward

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

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

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

grassroots actors furthering CVE efforts in the field.

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

Going forward, CVE efforts will need to continue engaging a broad range of practitioners in the various fields in which core CVE activities are undertaken—development, education, conflict prevention, and media. Rather than rush

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

CVE in Pakistan cont.

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

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

While CVE is an attractive political concept, most missions and their civil society partners struggle to operationalize it. "Extremism" is an awkward way to describe conflict in a country where it takes

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so many shapes: political, ethnic, sectarian, separatist, and criminal. And using ideology as a point of departure neglects the many other explanations for how conflict has emerged in the course of the country's political development. Finally, in the local context, the term can be offensive and end up exacerbating conflict between secular and religious communities.

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