SAFERWORLD
PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

Lessons on counter-terror and countering violent extremism

Introduction

Saferworld's research analyses current counter-terrorism, countering violent extremism (CVE) and stabilisation approaches, and examines strategic and practical options for improving them. We aim to promote informed debate on these issues. Our research – drawing on evidence from a range of countries including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Pakistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and elsewhere – identifies several common challenges. Reflecting on them suggests that the solution to these challenges lies in new, more effective and sustainable strategies focused on peace and justice.

In 2016-2017, Saferworld published new analysis[1] on counter-terror and CVE, drawing on primary research and our in-country programmes. Our analysis identifies a number of risks with the agenda, and sets out suggestions for change and reform.

Latest case studies

Lamu County, Kenya

- Security forces and Kenyan leaders' responses were heavy handed and divisive, playing into al-Shabaab's strategy. Increasing international security assistance has sent Kenya the wrong signal.

- CVE programmes have at times made welcome efforts to address causal factors and community perspectives, but they also risk imposing outside priorities and misallocating resources.

- Lamu needs a peace strategy, which could easily be developed by focusing on local people's priorities: security provision that treats all groups equally and respects rights and due process; and equal access to land titles, jobs, education and political representation.

Garissa County, Kenya

- Heavy-handed, inefficient security response to divisive al-Shabaab attacks played a role in escalating divisions.

- New security leadership commanded local trust and respect across social divides, clamped down on corruption and arbitrary arrest, worked with communities to restore trust and break up al-Shabaab cells. Attacks fell sharply.

- Local communities and religious leaders came together to reject violence.

- This is not 'CVE job done'. Peace efforts must focus on marginalisation, intense clan rivalries, political tension and ending the conflict in neighbouring Somalia to prevent renewed escalation of conflict.

Tunisia

- Visibility of terror challenges has led to a primary focus on strengthening the security capacities of the state – at times at the expense of advancing the democratic transition.

- A focus on security has led to the delay of structural reforms – this is leading to increased feelings of marginalisation and disempowerment among large sections of Tunisian society.

- Tunisia needs support – but short-term interventions are reinforcing an unreformed and unaccountable state and putting at risk the democratic transition needed to stave off long term instability.

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[1] Attree L (2017), 'Shouldn't YOU be countering violent extremism?', https://saferworld-indepth.squarespace.com/shouldnt-you-be-countering-violent-extremism

Overall findings of our research programme

A focus on Terrorism and Violent Extremism (T/VE) has diminished the focus on other major drivers of conflict. In many contexts (Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, for example) militarism reigns and conflicts persist even as members of violent groups are killed or captured. Fighting T/VE often appears to require overlooking significant abuse, corruption and bad governance by partners within local governments and security services. Yet these are often the central causes of armed rebellion and conflict. The resulting tendency is to reinforce rather than address major conflict drivers. Over-reliance on elite, state-level CT/VE partners, has been matched by a failure to empower society and non-violent constituencies or leaders to defend and promote democracy and human rights. Although CVE programmes do work with local partners, focusing primarily on challenging T/VE rather than on addressing conflict drivers more broadly can often be a missed opportunity and in worse cases, can feed rather than diminish the very problem it set out to solve.

Our research as a whole suggests a new approach to terrorism and security threats that is:

1. **Less reliant on military approaches and more strategic about peace**. Force may at times be needed to defend human life and prevent violent, abusive actors from succeeding, but only as part of a wider peace strategy with political, economic and development components.

2. **Tougher on abuse, corruption and bad governance**. It is vital to be more discerning about partners and to look for smart ways to challenge or change the behaviour of corrupt, abusive actors – for example by making support conditional, and prioritising behaviour change within military assistance.

3. **More focused on working with societies to achieve just and lasting peace**. Peaceful states are crafted by strong societies, and this means consistent support for human rights defenders, moderate political, religious or tribal actors, civil society groups, community voices and local development initiatives. Protecting civil space for this must be a priority of military as well as diplomatic planners.

Lessons on the CVE agenda

1. **Don't over-simplify conflicts**. Groups who carry out terror attacks and their ideologies are often not the biggest strategic threat within unstable contexts. Strengthened conflict analysis can help us: (1) understand violent movements in depth (why are people fighting? Could dialogue and negotiation with some elements be possible at some point?); (2) understand other actors (who *else* is responsible for violence, injustice and other conflict drivers? How to change *their* behaviour rather than just helping them supress the extremists'?); (3) understand ourselves – (what can *we* do differently (including changing our security, economic or diplomatic behaviour) to solve the problem?).

2. Focus strategies on **achieving or protecting people's rights** as a critical prerequisite and pillar of national and international security agendas. Rights are the primary protection against the appeal of violent groups, not an impediment to dealing with it, and local militaries and security services behaviour is critical to making progress on human rights.

3. **Improve the behaviour of governments**. Poor and repressive governance is almost always at the heart of why conflicts and violent movements begin and persist. It is normally crucial for national governments to change such behaviour and restore trust to solve the problem, and for international governments to support (or push) them to do so. Repressive governance is most visibly mobilised through the military and police, which are thus a primary lever for change upwards as well as down.

4. **Don't reinvent the wheel.** Peacebuilding, rights, governance and development efforts should not be viewed as subordinate tools to advance military or CVE goals – they are the most strategic tools we have for addressing conflicts involving violent groups and instability.

5. **Focus on empowering society**. Don't allow CVE efforts to co-opt women's and youth organisations in the service of top-down, state-driven counter-terrorism strategies. To end conflicts and build peace it is vital to empower society to encourage *all* conflict actors to change their behaviour.

6. **Protect civil society space**. It is important that actions to stop incitement to violence don't creep into becoming broad clampdowns on dissent.

7. **Focus less on changing ideology and more on improving people's lives**. Counter-narratives often have little traction with local communities. A video on Twitter is not going to change someone's mind; changing their experience might.