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Religion and the Prevention of Violent Extremism

Five tips for Western governments on a religion-sensitive approach to PVE.

By Owen Frazer and Anaël Jambers

The international policy excitement around preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) has faded since the latter days of the Obama presidency. However, the fundamental challenges P/CVE seeks to address have not gone away and P/CVE programs and policies continue to be developed and implemented. After more than a decade of experiences and reflection, and the growth of a veritable P/CVE industry, a number of lessons have been learned and insights gained. One of the more sensitive topics in P/CVE discussions has been the relationship between violent extremism and religion and the implications for P/CVE. In this short piece, we summarize five key insights about this topic that we think governments and policy-makers would do well to remember.

Do Not Ignore Religion

Although the term “violent extremism” has no agreed definition, it is generally applied to the phenomenon of groups engaged in violent activities in pursuit of a political ideology that is outside of the mainstream, often because it excludes certain groups, cultures or identities. P/CVE emerged in a post-September 11 policy context largely due to concerns about the threat posed by violent groups who grounded their ideology in Islam. However, with some exceptions, policy-makers and commentators are generally careful to emphasize that extremism is not something specific to Islam, nor indeed to religion in general. The term has

been used to describe groups as diverse as Islamic State, the Buddhist nationalist group MaBaTha in Myanmar, right-wing groups in the US and the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. Yet, recognizing that not all extremism is religious should not lead to us ignoring when it is. Religion is a complicated topic and we need to pay special attention to handling the intersection between religion and violent extremism.

The presence of a strong secular culture in Western policy circles leads to discomfort with discussing the links between religion and violent extremism. In some cases, this

Key Points

- ▮ The secular culture of Western policy makers must not prevent dialogue with religious viewpoints being part of PVE strategies.
- ▮ Context-specific social, economic and political drivers often influence violent extremist groups more than religiously-inspired ideas, so locally grounded analyses are vital.
- ▮ Policies should not target groups based on their religious identity, but should focus on their actions.
- ▮ Radical religious groups should not be excluded from social and political life as long as they avoid violence and respect the law.
- ▮ Credible experts, not governments, should lead efforts to challenge the religious bases of extremist narratives.

is for fear of causing offence by implying a causal link between religion and violent extremism. In others, it is based on the conviction that religion has no explanatory value, and only distracts from standard social, political and economic explanations for violent acts. A common opinion is that religion is only being instrumentalized and that violent groups' use of religious language is simply a mobilizing tool. While fears about mishandling the relationship between religion and violent extremism are well founded, ignoring religion is not the answer. Understanding the appeal, motivations and logic of violent extremist groups that adhere to a religious ideology requires genuine engagement with the religious discourses they use. Tackling violent extremism requires a serious analysis of political and social demands expressed in religious language or inspired by religious ideas. This implies a sincere effort to understand and to enter into dialogue with groups using religious language. Only by demonstrating a willingness to engage with religiously-inspired agendas, and to negotiate living together in a democratic space, can the use of violence in the name of religion be delegitimized.

Get the Balance Right

The danger of labels like "violent extremism" is that they serve to unite often very diverse phenomena into one homogenous category. This encourages a tendency to search for a single cause or explanation. The reality is of course significantly more complex. The constellation of drivers of violent extremism vary from context to context, from group to group, and indeed, from individual to individual. For example, singling out jihadist ideology as the common denominator linking attacks from France to Mali to Syria, and treating them as all part of the same phenomenon, risks over-emphasizing the role of Islamist ideas and downplaying the role of context-specific social, political and economic drivers.

Religions, just like other belief systems, provide a framework for understanding the world and for acting in it. They can be a source of identity, of language in which grievances can be expressed and actions legitimized, and of social and political ideas about how things should be. However, we must beware of using religion as a shortcut to understanding a particular group's ideology. Religions are open to multiple interpretations. These interpretations vary depending on place and time (the diversity of Christian denominations is telling in this regard – consider the variation in beliefs and practices between the American Amish, the Greek Orthodox, and the Nigerian Pentecostal communities). While understanding these ideologies requires understanding the religion in

which they are grounded, these interpretations are invariably contested from within the same religion. So, yes, religions do provide groups with a common framework within which they can develop their political agendas. Yes, they may advocate religiously-inspired "extreme" ideas whose realization is one of their motivations. And, yes, these ideas may need to be challenged. However, over-emphasizing the role of religiously-inspired ideas risks obscuring the important role of other drivers. Most groups also include within their agenda the addressing of grievances such as injustice, corruption, economic inequality and political discrimination. This explains why many recruits to such groups are not religious zealots, but often people who are simply looking for a way to address their marginalization by the political mainstream.¹ Violent extremism therefore needs to be analysed within the specific social and political contexts where it manifests itself, so that PVE programs achieve the correct balance between responding to ideological and structural drivers.

Avoid Linking Religious Identities and Violence

P/CVE policies and programs have regularly run into problems when they have directly connected religious identities with violence. The UK's PREVENT program and US CVE policies were heavily criticized for stigmatizing and marginalizing Muslim citizens. President Trump's travel ban on nationals from a number of Muslim-majority countries and the continued channelling of US domestic CVE funding towards programs targeting the Muslim community suggest this false association between Islam and violence continues to influence some policy makers.² Not only is targeting individuals or communities on the basis of their religion a violation of the democratic principle of freedom of religion and belief, such policies play into the hands of groups like the Islamic State. It gives credence to their claims that the West is at war with Islam, and that

Further Reading

Engaging Religion and Religious Actors in Countering Violent Extremism

Peter Mandaville and Melissa Nozell, United States Institute of Peace, August 30, 2017

An excellent report on the same topic that has more to say about working with religious actors.

Addressing Extremism and Violence: The Importance of Terminology

Abbas Aroua, Cordoba Foundation of Geneva, January 2018

A clear dissection of the terminology used in the P/CVE discussions.

Who Are the New Jihadis? Olivier Roy, *The Guardian*, April 13, 2017

An article addressing the background and motivations of European jihadi extremists.



Protesters gather in response to President Donald Trump's travel ban targeting people from Muslim-majority countries on April 25, 2018. Yuri Gripas / Reuters

Western governments hypocritically preach liberal values while discriminating against Muslims in their own countries.

Even if many policy-makers do reject a causal link between Islam and violence, some remain sympathetic to more nuanced versions of the same argument. They point the finger, not at Islam, but at Salafism, arguing that the texts and doctrines of this particular current within Sunni Islam make its followers particularly prone to violence. This argument ignores the diversity of violent, non-violent, and apolitical Salafi groups across the world. Similarly, those who condemn Salafism while promoting Sufism as a desirable alternative are ignoring that some of the strongest critics of groups such as Islamic State are Salafi and that there are many cases of armed groups who have justified their struggle with reference to Sufism.³

Policy-makers should disabuse themselves of the notion that it is possible to predict violent behaviour based on religious affiliation. Suggestions that certain currents of a religion are necessarily more violent or more peaceful than others ignore that history is full of examples from across all religious traditions of both violent and non-violent movements for social change. The possibility for multiple interpretations of the same religious doctrines means they are not a reliable guide to behaviour. Judgements about social and political groups should be based on what they say and do, not on who they are.

Engage Religious Viewpoints

Part of the P/CVE policy-making debate is not about “violent religious extremism,” but about religious extremism more generally – religious extremism being understood as religiously-inspired ideologies that advocate for policies far from the mainstream or in radical contradiction with the status quo. This debate is founded on three concerns. The

first is a security concern that non-violent extremist groups can act as a “conveyor belt,” or stepping stone, with some members moving on to join violent groups with similar ideologies. The second is a concern that religious extremist groups threaten the social fabric by promoting ideas that are perceived as contradicting societal values. In Western societies this is often articulated as a fear that non-violent extremist groups pose a threat to liberal, democratic and secular values. A third concern is that groups may be able to use religious arguments to popularize opposition against the status quo, thus posing a threat to the government in power. Authoritarian regimes in particular that feel threatened by certain religious or political opposition groups have used the “extremist” label, and P/CVE and counter-terrorism discourses more generally, as a means to suppress such groups.⁴

All three of the above concerns can in fact lend support to policies that aim to marginalize or restrict the activities of groups viewed as extreme. Yet, for countries that espouse liberal democratic values, such an approach is not justifiable. The “conveyor belt” theory is disputed, and without proof that groups are engaged in violent activities, restricting their activities on security grounds violates the rights to freedom of association, belief and expression. This year the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief felt the need to remind states that “national security” may not be invoked as a ground for limiting the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief.⁵ Of course, concerns about threats to the social fabric must be addressed and fears that groups aim to destabilize governments in power may be well-founded. However, these concerns must be met, not with attempts to exclude, but with attempts to engage and debate. Liberal, democratic societies must remain true to their values and uphold democratic principles at home and abroad. At its heart, democracy is a system for managing differing views in society. It is not about changing people’s fundamental beliefs but, through dialogue, finding ways for groups with differing views to live together, while avoiding the development of parallel societies. Irrespective of the religion to which they belong, or how “radical” their ideas are, everyone should have the possibility to participate in social and political life. This is not to say that anything goes. Laws put in place to ensure that all groups in society can participate equally must be upheld, and groups inciting or perpetrating acts of violence, or engaging in other illegal behaviours that diminish the freedoms of others, should be held accountable. Governments and societies need to resist the urge to restrict the religious “other” – instead, they should seek to engage it.

Leave Theological Interpretation to the Experts

In dealing with groups that incite or perpetrate acts of violence, legal sanctions have their limits. Therefore, considerable efforts have also been invested in contesting the religious narratives used by violent extremist groups. These activities are important, but such programs get it wrong when they make governments and political leaders the messengers. Governments should challenge narratives they find extreme, not by taking theological positions, but by arguing from the core values on which their societies are founded and about which they have legitimacy to speak. For liberal democratic states core values, including principles of non-discrimination, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and belief, respect for international law and inclusive political participation of all groups, are inscribed in laws and should provide the basis of any argumentation.

Governments do not have the credibility to counter the religious narratives of extremist groups on religious grounds. Apart from their policies often being perceived as part of the problem, they lack religious legitimacy. President Obama's condemnation of Islamic State as "un-Islamic" undoubtedly did not carry much weight amongst potential sympathisers of the group. The debates of interpretation are intra-religious, and not ones where a secular state has the competence or credibility to weigh in.⁶ Challenging the religious narrative of violent extremists should be left to those with the appropriate religious expertise, who are influential with the people at whom the message is aimed. They should be given the space to do this in their way, including being critical of government actions. Perceptions that they are mouthpieces of governments will only delegitimise them in the eyes of those individuals most at-risk of joining violent extremist groups.

Conclusion

The topic of religion's relationship to violent extremism is a sensitive one. However, governments cannot afford to ignore it. They must continue to analyse why, and in what way, it is important. Failure to do so risks enabling discriminatory policies that only fuel the problem. Western governments' most effective tools for preventing violent extremism are the liberal democratic principles on which they are founded. Consistently applying these at home and

abroad, and calling out others who do not, is the basis for an effective and principled approach to preventing violent extremism. This must include a nuanced approach to promoting an inclusive politics that gives space to religious voices, avoids the development of parallel societies, and reflects on how national identities can be constructed so as to leave space to integrate non-mainstream actors and cultures in a constructive manner.

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