

Violent Extremism: Types, Implications, and Responses



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Definition(s)

Violent extremism (VE) refers to the use, support, or legitimization of violence to achieve social, political, or religious goals. The degree to which these goals are ideologically driven varies, but the cognitive aspect is always present. What differentiates VE from other violent acts is that it is usually done within a broader context of violent extremists' current and future visions of the world – in other words a worldview mostly rejected by mainstream society that encompasses what is wrong with the world, what needs to change, and how the world should look like in the future.

Introduction

This entry explores the highly sensitive and politicized concept of violent extremism. As an essentially contested topic, it has attracted significant

attention and debate in the academic literature. The entry first offers an introduction to the term by way of contextualizing it, historically and etymologically, as well as introducing some of the terminological difficulties, their implications, and potential explanations for these. It then proceeds to a detailed overview of the different types of violent extremism and its devastating implications on humans, heritage, and the environment. The next section engages with so-called “push” and “pull” factors that drive people to support or commit acts of violent extremism. After this, various recruitment strategies adopted by such organizations, with a particular focus on right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist organizations, are discussed. In the context of the “War on Terror” and “the globalization of countering violent extremism policies” (Kundnani and Hayes 2018), it becomes pertinent to go beyond the term itself and offer an overview of the responses to countering and preventing violent extremism (CVE and PVE) by various stakeholders, be it international organizations (IOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or states. Within the context of responses by the international community, violent extremism is discussed in relation to sustainable development goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16 on peaceful, inclusive, and just societies. Finally, the entry presents some criticism and concerns regarding approaches to countering and preventing violent extremism.

Understanding Violent Extremism

Violent extremism (VE) is a relatively new term that gained potency since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the “War on Terror” that followed them. Violent extremism, however, existed prior to that in various manifestations. Some past examples include Nazism in Europe (1933–1945), Apartheid in South Africa (1948–1994), the West German far-left militant Red Army Faction (1970–1998), the paramilitary Irish Republican Army in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and numerous ethno-religious movements, including Chechen Muslim separatism from Russia since 1990s and the militant organization of Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka since 1976. However, it was only after the early 2000s that the term reached prominence in both academic and public discourse. Neither scholars nor states or international organizations have a universally agreed definition of VE, and there are often vested political and ideological interests involved that further complicate the situation. This definitional issue is then transferred to actions aiming to prevent or counter violent extremism; the practices are infused with ambiguities, inconsistencies, and paradoxes. Part of the difficulty lies in the highly sensitive and political nature of the term “violent extremism,” in its changing and varied manifestations, and the different contexts in which it occurs. Another reason for the definitional issue is lack of empirical evidence that could help scholars and policy-makers reach a more clear-cut understanding not only of what this term entails but also how it relates to other terms like radicalization and terrorism that are often used interchangeably, creating further confusion.

The term “violent extremism” incorporates two words: one is a noun that refers to being extreme as a characteristic or state in the sense of having or advocating views or measures that fall outside the accepted mainstream views of society. In today’s world these mainstream views have inadvertently strong links to the values of democracy (and rule by the majority), peace, and non-violence, all within an ordered judicial system. Therefore, the term immediately differentiates between those who hold “moderate” and those

who hold “extreme” views, with the latter having negative connotations that constitute a threat to democracy and its institutions. The second word of the term is “violent.” “Violent” is an adjective that refers to the use of violent methods and tactics in order to pursue those extremist views or agendas, which are usually religious, ethnic, or political in nature. One can be violent without being extremist in their views (e.g., meaningless or criminal violence), and one can be extremist without being violent, so it is pertinent to recognize the dynamics of this phrase when these two words are put together. At the same time, it is important to keep the “extremism” aspect of the term narrow enough so that violent extremism does not become an empty concept that encompasses all forms of violence but rather is seen as a sub-concept of violence, i.e., a particular genre or type of violence.

International and regional organizations like the UN, the European Union, or the African Union do not have a consistent official definition. Organizations like USAID, on the other hand, define VE as “advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic and political objectives” (2011, p. 2). UNESCO does not have an official definition either but uses certain definitions depending on its publications (whereas the UN intentionally refrained from offering a definition arguing that is the responsibility of the Member States; see UN 2015b). For example, in its 2017 *Preventing Violent Extremism through Education: Guide for Policy-makers*, it adopts the Australian Government’s definition, arguing it is the most commonly used one: violent extremism “refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals” (UNESCO 2017a, p. 19).

Policy-makers have been criticized for inconsistent definitions of VE, for leaving them intentionally vague so as to avoid tackling sensitive issues head on or for keeping them so broad that they could well encompass large parts of the population as being violent extremists (yet in practice the definitions are sometimes applied selectively stigmatizing particular populations).

For example, the 2011 US White House strategy on PVE which defines violent extremists as “individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals” is strongly criticized by Kundnani and Hayes (2018). They argue that if we apply this broad definition, then “the millions who support US military violence carried out for political purposes, such as regime change or humanitarian intervention, and who do so as a result of an ideology, such as American exceptionalism, are violent extremists. Yet no CVE programme exists to prevent teenagers from being indoctrinated into American exceptionalism” (p. 10). Definitions are crucial as they are adopted to justify or legitimize strategies that are used to prevent or counter violent extremism. So the broader the definition, the more potentially encompassing the security measures utilized to tackle violent extremism can be, allowing security government agencies to evade accountability and justification of their actions.

Some academics argue that more attention should be given to the cognitive aspects of violent extremism, including an individual’s “quest for personal significance” (Kruglanski et al. 2018, p. 3). There are also those who argue VE only refers to the ideology and not to the act of violence itself (Striegher 2015). However, others argue that these approaches are problematic. For example, in the analyses of Islamist extremism, it has been claimed that the emphasis has been placed on “religio-cultural ideology” at the expense of understanding the “political conflict over western foreign policy” and that violent extremists’ engagement with ideology often remains at a very superficial level (Kundnani 2009, p. 40).

To add to the terminological complexity, as there are no commonly accepted definitions of either violent extremism, terrorism, or radicalization, the terms are often used interchangeably. Despite connections between them, clear distinctions are critical to the development of effective strategies to counter and prevent violent extremism. Terrorism can be seen as one form or tactic of VE whose main aim is to spread fear, panic, anxiety, and chaos at random time-spaces by using “violence or force, or the threat directed

upon innocents, civilians, or noncombatants, in order to achieve political objectives” (Kapitan and Schulte 2002, p. 173). The effects of terrorism go beyond physical damage and have “long-term psychological repercussions” that “cause people to exaggerate the strengths of the terrorist and the importance of the cause, to provoke governmental overreaction, to discourage dissent, or simply to intimidate and thereby enforce compliance with their demands” (Croissant 2005, p. 5). While terrorism is an *act* of extreme violence, radicalization is typically referred to as the specific path or process by which individuals are drawn to adopt “radical” ideas that condone and actively pursue the use of violence to pursue ideological goals (Striegher 2015, p. 75) to effect “far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose direct threat to, the existing order” (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, p. 798). Warnes and Hannah (2008, p. 403) suggest that even though radicalization may not lead to violence, “the growth of a large number of radicalized individuals” is a security concern as these “alienated and ‘excluded’ individuals may provide a ‘stepping stone’ for individual recruitment.”

Another difficulty with defining the term violent extremism is related to its evolving and varied manifestations and the different contexts within which it occurs. It is therefore useful to have a more nuanced understanding by looking in more detail at the different types of violent extremism.

Types of Violent Extremism

Islamist VE refers to groups that guided by extremist interpretations of Islam, utilize harsh militant measures to dramatically change society by creating a caliphate for themselves. Some of these groups pledge allegiance to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that positions itself as the one true state ruled by sharia law that all Muslims should live under (Prinsloo 2018). They include Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and Abu Sayyaf. The measures used by ISIS and other Islamist VE groups include beheadings, mass executions, abductions, crucifixions, bombings, and other violent attacks

and abuses of human rights and international humanitarian law (Prinsloo 2018). Most vulnerable to Islamist VE continue to be Muslim populations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria (Institute for Economics and Peace 2018).

Christian violent extremism includes actions represented by extremist interpretations of Christianity. One example of this type of VE is Eric Rudolph in the United States who was a follower of a racist, anti-Semitic, white supremacist religious group. He conducted bombings at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and in 1998 at an abortion clinic, quoting the Bible in his defense during court proceedings. Attacks on abortion clinics by Christians referring to their acts as the “work of God” have been conducted over years in Australia, Spain, Canada, and many cities across the United States. Another example is the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) that originated in Uganda and was led by Joseph Kony who proclaimed himself the messenger of Christian God and based the Army’s constitution on the Ten Commandments. During 1986–2006 the LRA committed atrocious acts of violence against people in Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The years 2013–2014 saw the rise of another Christian army in the Central African Republic that waged a violent war against the country’s Muslim population.

Buddhist violent extremism has occurred in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. They are both two primarily Buddhist countries with religious minority populations. For decades the Myanmar government refused to recognize the Muslim minority Rohingya group. As a result, a conflict between the Buddhists and the Rohingyas started in 1982 with the government declaring all Rohingyas illegal immigrants. The conflict re-emerged in 2012 with hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people being displaced and cases of rape and torture being reported (Amnesty International 2018). In Sri Lanka, the 1983–2009 civil war between Buddhists and Tamils (mainly Hindu) began as a result of the government’s moves to embrace religious (Buddhist) nationalism through, for example, giving the Buddhist

citizens “the foremost place” in the constitution (Johansson 2018). In 2012, the Buddhist VE group, Bodu Bala Sena, that has connections with Myanmar’s VE “969 movement” (whose leader is the self-dubbed “Burmese bin Laden”), entered politics using Buddhist nationalist ideology and agenda against the country’s Muslim population for “taking over the country” and funding international terrorism (Johansson 2018).

Hindu extremism started developing as a religious-nationalist ideology in the 1920s as a reaction to European colonialism, rejecting secularism and partly influenced by fascist ideas (Marshall 2004). These include cultural and religious chauvinism and racism and attempt to eradicate or drive out Indian citizens and foreigners of other religions based on the belief that Indians should practice only Hinduism. Hindu extremists have committed violence against Muslims and Christians resulting in thousands of deaths, tens of thousands of displaced people, forced conversion, sexual assaults on nuns, and destruction of Christian cemeteries and other religious property (Human Rights Watch 1999; Marshall 2004).

Ethno-nationalist VE emerges as a response to a real or perceived oppression of an ethnic group by another powerful actor such as a state or another ethnic group and leads to a fight for self-determination and autonomy. Rwandan and Cambodian genocides are two examples of ethno-nationalist VE. In Rwanda, the former Belgian colonial authorities expressed favoritism toward the Tutsi ethnic group, and after granting independence, they left control over state affairs, administration, and resources to representatives of that group. Tensions between the Tutsis and another ethnic group, the Hutus, culminated in the 1994 genocide committed by the Hutus. The Hutus used indoctrination and incitement of their people to exterminate the Tutsis, killing an estimated 937,000 people. In Cambodia, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge committed mass genocide against 1.7 million people representing ethnic and religious minorities, including the Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai Muslims, and Buddhists.

Right-wing VE groups are divided into extremist right, ethnocentric right, populist right, or religious-fundamentalist right and include,

among others, neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, Christian Identity adherents, and white supremacist prison gangs. They advocate for taking action against nonwhites, Muslims, Jews, migrants, and LGBTQ who are believed to control and manipulate white people and drive them and their civilization to extinction. The movement has seen a dramatic resurgence since 2000 and has led to a significant increase in violence in North America and continental Europe as a response to “the refugee crisis and religiously inspired extremism” (Capano and van de Donk 2017). It culminated in Guillaume Faye’s 2011 European white supremacist manifesto *Why We Fight: Manifesto of European Resistance* aimed to unite white people, the right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik’s 2011 attacks in Norway that murdered over 70 people, the rise of right-wing parties across Europe, and other violent incidents. In certain European countries, such as Italy, Germany, and Greece, far-right parties whose members have been accused of violent extremism have gained seats in their respective parliaments. In the United States, among domestic extremist movements, far-right represents the most violent group with 83% of all extremist-related murders between 2005 and 2015 (ADL 2015).

Left-wing VE groups use violence to overthrow capitalist systems which are perceived as exploiting the poor and weak members of society to establish a Marxist-Leninist, anarchist, anti-globalist, and anti-fascist society. A prominent example is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (1964–2017) that recruited, sometimes through force, men, women, and children to their ranks and funded itself through illegal mining, drug trade, and kidnappings to carry out terrorist attacks (e.g., using gas cylinder bombs) and traditional warfare against the Colombian government and civilians (Human Rights Watch 2005). A number of small left-wing organizations were active across European cities in 1970s and 1980s although the German far-left Red Army Faction was active until 1998, while the Spanish Maoist group First of October Antifascist Resistance Groups re-emerged in 2006 by killing 86 people through bombings and shootings. Currently, left-wing radicalization and

violence are on the rise partly as a response to the rise of right-wing VE and ethnic movements (Lenos and Wouterse 2018).

The perpetrators of violent extremism can also be state actors. State VE refers to violent extremism perpetrated by a state that violates the rights and liberties of and commits ideologically driven atrocities against its own or other states’ citizens, for example, Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR. States may also support non-state violent extremist actors by providing them with financial and technical resources, weapons, training, safe havens, and diplomatic support.

Effects of Violent Extremism

VE has a detrimental effect on all sectors and, as such, undermines sustainable development, human rights, the rule of law, security, and peace (UN 2015b). VE groups target, abduct, torture, and murder members of religious communities, political and human rights activists, members of LGBTQ communities, women, and children and commit other atrocities including genocides, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Such atrocities have immense detrimental impacts on mental and physical well-being of those who experience torture, rape, injury, physical and sexual abuse, shooting, or witness killings. In occupied territories, for example, where ISIS ruled by instilling fear through torture, executions, gang rapes, killings, and sale of women (Torok 2015), survivors were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (Hoffman et al. 2018).

VE has a damaging impact on economic activity and growth due to the costs inflicted by deaths, injuries, property destruction (Institute for Economics and Peace 2018), the loss of revenues when tourism, investment, consumption, and trade decrease (Frey et al. 2004) and disruption of modern education that can provide young people with better opportunities (UN 2015b). Some VE groups are also involved in kidnapping, human trafficking, slave trade, trafficking in antiquities, and other illicit and illegal trade to increase their revenues (UN 2015b). To deal with organized

movement of arms, drugs, money, and people, governments need to divert already limited economic resources from basic services to state security which may cause alienation of the population and contribute to increase of violence (Australian Government 2017).

As the basic structure and work of state, non-governmental, and development actors are disrupted, the ability of people to enjoy and exercise their human rights, such as the right to life, liberty, as well as freedom of expression, association, thought, and religion, is diminished. Humanitarian assistance to civilians living in areas controlled by VE groups is interfered with or seized by violent extremists, while humanitarian aid workers are killed, injured, and kidnapped (UN 2015b).

Environment and wildlife experience an adverse long-lasting impact (Mannion 2003). Environmental impacts include defoliation and ecosystem destruction, deforestation, air and water pollution, and impairment of soil and vegetation from training grounds, camps, weapons testing, bombs and blasts that develop craters and collapse buildings, and abandonment of agricultural land. Loss of wildlife is another feature as animals are hunted for meat in places and for income ensured by selling ivory and animal skins in conflict zones where food and economic opportunities are scarce.

Systematic and deliberate destruction of invaluable tangible heritage is another effect (but also tactic) of violent extremists who destroy archaeological treasures, museums, religious, and historic buildings. These include, among others, the destruction of shrines in Timbuktu in Mali by Al-Qaeda affiliates and of historic monuments in Raqqa, Palmyra, and Aleppo in Syria as well as Hatra, Mosul, Nimrud, and Nineveh in Iraq in recent years by ISIS. Brosché et al. (2017) outline four reasons for targeting cultural heritage. They include attacks on sites that represent a religious belief or cultural identity contested in the conflict; that are perceived to have military importance; that can signal their strength and commitment; and that can be exploited to finance warfare. In other words, the rationale (and its effects) is not simply physical destruction.

Instead, heritage destruction by VE groups can be viewed as part of a wider ideological struggle and an attempt to psychologically and emotionally hurt others.

Root Causes of Violent Extremism

There is no one trajectory toward VE, but rather it is a combination of *push* and *pull* factors that increases an individual's vulnerability or attraction toward VE. Hassan (2012, p. 18) identifies push factors as "negative social, cultural, and political features" in one's context that "push vulnerable individuals into the path of VE," while pull factors are appealing characteristics and benefits provided by VE organizations to lure or "pull" them to join. These factors and their combination change depending on contexts in which people live and their biographical backgrounds.

The most widespread notion suggests that people are pushed to engage with VE ideologies, activities, and groups when they have nothing or little to lose. Weak and fragile states, therefore, are believed to present a fertile ground for the emergence and spread of VE. Croissant's (2005) work shows a high correlation between violence and absence of democracy, low degree of trust in political authorities, low accountability, state weakness, and shallow political representation. Vergani et al. (2018) add state repressions to this list. Krueger and Maleckova (2003, p. 119) conclude that unfavorable political conditions create "feelings of indignity and frustration [perceived or real]."

Additionally, Goodhand (2003) suggests violent conflicts are fueled "from below" by people who do not have access to quality social services and live in poverty. Unfavorable economic conditions, socioeconomic injustices, and lack of decent or any employment have shown to push individuals in different contexts to join VE that offer escape from poverty. For example, many women joined Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to attain financial stability as FARC offered them a high salary (Graham 2008). Hassan (2012) reported on Somali youth

in a poverty-stricken country joining al-Shabaab for “employment” with a decent pay.

However, poverty is not always a factor: background studies of 9/11 hijackers (Krueger and Maleckova 2003) and interviews with nearly 250 terrorists and associates (Hassan 2001) show that they come from educated middle-class backgrounds. As such, they also dispute the belief that absence of quality education, which would equip people with skills and critical thinking to fight ignorance and hate, is a critical factor as is emphasized in policies, rhetoric, and research (see Hanley 2001). In this, Krueger and Maleckova and Hassan are supported by Berrebi (2007) who discovered that people with higher education levels and higher living standards are more likely to participate in VE activities. The situation may, of course, differ in conflict and post-conflict zones where access to and quality of education might be disrupted and lack of education pushes people toward VE. However, as UNESCO MGIEP (2017) reports, a bigger concern is lack of context-relevant, culturally sensitive, and critical education that represents the diversity and complexity of contexts, histories, and views.

Some scholars explain the phenomenon from the ideological perspective arguing for the primacy of religious factors. Aly and Striegher (2012, p. 849), however, found that religious beliefs play “a far lesser role” in pulling people toward VE than some experts suggest, while Zhirkov et al. (2014) discovered that the more religious individuals are and the more knowledge of Islam they have, the less chance of radicalization to VE there is. Nevertheless, there are problematic issues within religions as religious messages may be misused by different groups (Tarlow 2017) and/or radically interpreted (Venkatraman 2007). For example, Islam is misused by VE groups in cases when they need to convince youth of their religious duty to fight Islam’s “enemies” and/or to die as a martyr to obtain paradise (Hassan 2012).

Atran (2010) provides an example of young Muslim women and men who, being increasingly more marginalized economically, socially, and politically, become more vulnerable to Islamist VE that abuses Islam for its own purposes. This

can be the case for Muslim youth living in western countries who experience an identity crisis, a heightened sense of non-belonging to either their parents’ home or host countries, discrimination, and disadvantage (see Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Sageman 2004). Their search for identity and community can bring them to Islamist VE groups that provide a fixed system of values, belonging to a community, and a sense of understanding of their experiences with racism and discrimination in non-Muslim countries (Nasser-Eddine et al. 2011). Another example is the Islamist al-Shabaab group that attracts members of Somali ethnicity and Muslim faith who have historically been marginalized in the neighboring Kenya (Hassan 2012). This suggests that it is not religion per se but other factors that may lead individuals to VE. Marginalization and discrimination or the “aggressive policies of Western states in Muslim majority countries” have been cited as factors (Vergani et al. 2018, p. 8). The study of Vergani et al. (2018) further divided it into the Global War on Terror, the War in Afghanistan, Western attacks against the Ummah, and the perception of Western dominance in world politics.

Attaining reputation and power in the community or a sense of belonging can be regarded as *pull* factors. In Hassan’s study (2012), young people who joined violent extremists became viewed as “defenders of country and religion” which gave them authority and respect in the context where due to traditional structures that value age, they tend to have none. Atran (2010) shows that for many individuals, moral causes play a more critical role than economic incentives, and young people tend to take on causes that build upon and/or represent their core values even though resources are provided by VE groups. Other pull factors may include the desire of adventure and excitement offered by violence (Vergani et al. 2018).

Recruitment

While injustices, inequalities, racism, and various forms of marginalization and vulnerability exist,

the majority of people that experience push factors and are exposed to radical ideas do not become violent extremists (Nasser-Eddine et al. 2011). This suggests that importance should be given to personal biographical factors but also to the various recruitment strategies of VE.

As engagement with VE requires strong relationships with like-minded people and a sense of identity and belonging, key recruiters are usually representatives of a close social network and include family members, peers, and religious leaders (Hassan 2012; Vergani et al. 2018). Boko Haram, for example, recruits primarily through friends and at religious meetings although madrassas (Islamic religious schools) play a significant role in introducing youth to the organization (Botha et al. 2017). Atran (2010) points out, however, that most people become engaged by their peers who form small groups in their neighborhoods or social network or through online communities on the Internet.

Unlike Boko Haram and other VE organizations that primarily use social networks for recruitment, ISIS mostly relies on direct engagement with people through its sophisticated online recruitment system that also spreads VE propaganda and undermines rivals (Alfifi et al. 2018). Such propaganda promotes a black and white worldview and “us” versus “them” rhetoric to motivate people to join ISIS. Extremist propaganda follows a general pattern that consists of a diagnosis of a problem (Islam is under attack), prognosis of what should be done (fight and create the Caliphate), and a rationale of who should do it and why (help however you can) with a carefully crafted, clear-cut, and relevant narrative and message for each target group of potential followers (Ritzmann 2017). Successful recruitment strategies have shown to include propaganda that presents ISIS as a utopian land with effective governance, flourishing economic and social systems and religious order (Winter 2015) through audiovisual material, images, and hashtags promoted on social media website (e.g., Twitter, YouTube, Facebook) (Awan 2017). ISIS also uses individual targeting through its “head-hunters” who approach “vulnerable” youth as

young as 12 on social media and instant messaging (Shalal 2017).

Similarly, right-wing groups use online platforms for initial recruitment. Video games’ chats are avenues to recruit young people by providing them with a sense of structure, identity, and belonging to a group that cares for them and supports their interest (Kamenetz 2018). Offline avenues for recruitment may include mixed martial arts clubs (Zidan 2018), football fan clubs (Parkin 2018), and spreading information on flyers and posters on college campuses (Shugerman 2018). Miller-Idriss (2018), in her study on German far-right youth subculture, demonstrates how the commercialization of fashion products and clothes covered with extremist right-wing political (e.g., anti-Semitic and racist) symbols plays an instrumental role in attracting and recruiting young people to extremism. In terms of left-wing VE, less research has been conducted, but there are some indications that personal contacts such as family and friends may play a more critical role in recruitment than the online space (Lenos and Wouterse 2018, p. 7).

Responses to Violent Extremism

Countering (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) have been key approaches adopted to address the ideologies and activities (e.g., recruitment, radicalization, mobilization, attacks) of violent extremist groups and individuals that associate or may associate with them. Although often used interchangeably, CVE and PVE are two distinct approaches. CVE combines “soft” and “hard” strategies, while PVE relies primarily on “soft” approaches. “Hard” strategies are “a means to achieve desired outcomes through the ostensible use of force” (Coronado 2005, p. 322) and include military intervention, coercive diplomacy, policing, legislation, and defensive measures such as intelligence, infrastructure protection, and border security. In contrast, the “soft” approach aims not to coerce people but to co-opt them through “intangible assets” such as “political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority”

(Nye Jr 2008, p. 95). The “soft” strategies rely on formal and informal education, counter-ideological interpretations and counter-narratives to VE ideologies and interpretations, censorship and monitoring of media and social media, conflict resolution through state building and peace talks, provision of alternative pathways, and work with civil society, among others.

CVE and PVE “soft” approaches also differ as PVE’s objective is to “prevent the violent actor from emerging in the first place,” while CVE is a responsive strategy to “respond to specific threats, violent actors or organizations, and known quantities” (UNESCO MGIEP 2017, pp. 45–46). Thus, as PVE’s work revolves around addressing broad social issues and risks by designing an environment (in, e.g., schools, communities, media) that redresses injustices, strengthens identities, builds cohesion between groups, and develops a strong sense of belonging, CVE, on the other hand, employs strategies to help de-radicalize and/or counter-recruit individuals through targeted counter and alternative narratives, community-based programs, youth engagement, and other methods. Nonetheless, both rely on the same spectrum of stakeholders to design and implement their strategies. These stakeholders include formal and informal education institutions, media and social media, families and guardians, peers and friends, community, and religious leaders, among others.

International and regional organizations such as the UN, the OSCE, and the European Union, several countries, and a variety of NGOs and think tanks have responded by creating or becoming members in networks that specialize on PVE/CVE and often collaborate with each other on various multiagency projects (e.g., Radicalisation Awareness Network; European Forum on Urban Security; Violence Prevention Network; African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism). Impetus to the creation of these structures at local, national, and international levels was arguably given by former Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, presented to the General Assembly on 15 January 2016, which despite its weaknesses “it represented a fundamental step in institutionalising

and internationalising PVE. It embedded PVE both within UN discourses and practices, its principal organs and specialised agencies (such as UNESCO) and its member states, as well as outside of the UN, among donors, policy-makers, researchers and practitioners” (Christodoulou and Szakács 2018, p. 25).

Violent Extremism and the SDGs

When developing the SDGs of Agenda 2030, Member States gave particular attention to violent extremism which they argued threatened “to reverse much of the development progress made in recent decades” (UN 2015b, p. 5). As a result, several of the goals are directly or indirectly related to promoting sustainable development by preventing violence and promoting peace. According to the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, national development policies should be aligned with the SDGs to target and address the drivers of violent extremism. The Plan makes specific reference to seven SDGs:

- Goal 1: “ending poverty in all its forms everywhere”
- Goal 4: “ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all”
- Goal 5: “achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls”
- Goal 8: “promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”
- Goal 10: “reducing inequality within and among countries”
- Goal 11: “making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”
- Goal 16: “promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (UN 2015b, p. 12)

Arguably, the SDG 16 is most directly related with tackling VE as it aims to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build

effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (UN 2015a). There is on the one hand an emphasis on peace which would entail the cessation of violence caused by extremism and on the other hand an acknowledgement of the importance of addressing push factors of VE such as ineffective, unaccountable, discriminatory, and inequitable societies and institutions. Support for various extremist ideologies increases particularly after people lose faith in the democratic institutions and decide to take “power in their hands” or are agitated with the prevalent economic system and its exploitation of humans and the environment. Therefore, the rationale is that a world free of hate speech and religious discrimination and one where there would be effective and accountable institutions including access to justice means that people would be less likely to be driven to extremist ideologies. However, interestingly enough, despite the aforementioned UN discourse on PVE, in the targets and indicators for SDG 16, there is no explicit mention of the term at all. There is a single and very general reference to the need to “combat terrorism” as a target (16.A) though even here the indicator seems largely limited to the need to develop independent institutions for the protection of human rights under the Paris Principles. Another noteworthy point is that in the SDG Reports which review progress of implementation of Agenda 2030, there is, so far, no mention at all of the progress made in combating terrorism or violent extremism.

Problematic Practices and Effects of CVE/PVE

Some P/CVE approaches employed over years have caused criticism for contributing to the spread of VE ideology. One concern is the approach taken by some national security agencies that prioritize security measures over observance of human rights and democratic principles of pluralism (Ngari and Reva 2017). Response to VE extremism with violence, abuse, and military intervention is argued to have fueled the spread of VE among Muslim populations. Inhumane

treatment and torture of prisoners charged with terrorism at US-run prisons “Guantanamo Bay” and “Abu Ghraib” have been used by Al-Qaeda as propaganda to recruit followers by exposing the West’s treatment of human rights (Postel 2013) and have also been linked to radicalization of prisoners who later created ISIS (Chulov 2014). Studies have also shown that targeting of Boko Haram’s leaders and networks with excessive use of force by military and special forces increases the likelihood of follow-up attacks by violent extremists (Botha et al. 2017).

Another concern is the focus on Islamist violent extremism overlooking other manifestations of VE such as, for example, ethno-nationalist and right-wing. Apart from failing to address these other types of VE, their strategies identify whole communities of Arab and Muslim populations as being at risk of radicalization to Islamist VE (Shirazi 2017). Stereotyping and stigmatization of whole groups lead to Islamophobia, racism (Jones 2018), discrimination against Muslims, and unequal treatment before the law which damages and alienates Muslim communities (Ragazzi 2016). One example that is highly criticized is the UK’s multiagency CVE program *Prevent* that aims to identify individuals at risk of radicalization and refer them to experts to address their vulnerabilities and build resilience. It has been argued that the strategy had a negative impact on Muslim communities and wider democratic principles as it has created a strong association between Islam and extremism, terrorism, and jihadism and a fear in Muslim female students to voice their opinions or participate in activism (Ngari and Reva 2017).

Despite the widespread awareness of problems related to CVE terminology, concepts, damage inflicted on Muslim youth and communities, and other aspects of CVE programs, many researchers and experts still seek CVE-focused funding thus “feeding problematic government narratives” (Jones 2018). *Problematic* narratives and approaches include the use of Muslim communities as “subject of scrutiny,” lack of “relevance in real-life settings” (Jones 2018), and absence of empirical data on CVE/PVE that would help design, implement, and evaluate evidence-based and context-specific programming (Abu-Nimer

2018). Policies and practices are based on untested information and culturally and religiously insensitive interventions not on communities' more pressing and realistic needs that could be determined if governments and researchers built trusted partnerships and in-depth engagement with them (Jones 2018).

As CVE/PVE work is increasingly becoming a key international funding and policy priority, organizations that are more adept to the language of funding institutions can take advantage of the availability of funds to end up conducting ineffective and unimpactful projects as their work is not evidence-driven or empowering to local actors and communities (Harling et al. 2018). Scholars have also criticized the education responses to PVE, arguing that neoliberal and simplistic assumptions are dominant in such policy discourses and that they are leading to the instrumentalization of youth which "has moral and political implications as well as the danger of a 'PVE-E fatigue' on account of youth feeling 'bombarded' with these discourses by various actors of both formal and nonformal education" (Christodoulou and Szakács 2018, p. 43; Sukarieh and Tannock 2018).

Concerns have also been voiced regarding the role of responsible journalism that acknowledges the sensitive nature of VE and avoids sensationalism that can exacerbate an already difficult situation causing further panic but also reproducing stereotypes and fostering hatred of certain groups. UNESCO and the OSCE have been particularly active in this area organizing media training workshops, conferences, as well as producing a handbook for journalists with the goal of improving media reporting on violent extremism (UNESCO 2017b).

Conclusion

Lack of conclusive empirical evidence and the methodological difficulties associated with researching violent extremists suggest that the definitional issues are not likely to go away anytime soon. Nevertheless, given the rise and constant evolution of far-right, far-left, and

religious violence associated with extremist ideas, policy-makers and researchers alike have an onerous yet urgent task ahead.

Cross-References

- Communal Conflict
- Ethnic Conflict
- New Technologies Impact on Conflicts
- Peace Funding
- Post-Conflict Risk
- Protection of Civilians
- Psychological Repression
- Social Media Impact on Conflicts

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