
As a coalition of U.S. non-governmental organizations that serve the world’s most vulnerable communities and work to prevent atrocities and violent conflict, we appreciate the increase in political commitments to address the drivers and enablers of violent extremism. The emphasis on community-led prevention at the February 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and in the post-Summit 9-Point Action Agenda is a welcome shift in U.S. efforts to balance proactive and reactive responses to the instability and violence that take human lives, reverse development and disrupt societies.

We are concerned, however, that this CVE strategy risks repeating the same mistakes as other post-9/11 stabilization initiatives: prioritizing securitized responses over investments to address the structural causes of instability, and coupling the two lines of effort creating confusion and working at cross-purposes. In sum, we are concerned that:

1. Civilian-led development, prevention and peacebuilding that support locally-led solutions to the root causes of insecurity are chronically underfunded, especially in relation to military efforts.

2. Subordinating development assistance under a CVE approach risks undermining the effectiveness of U.S. foreign assistance. There is already too much linkage between development and security operations, damaging crucial trust and buy-in from local stakeholders. U.S. security interests and foreign aid effectiveness are better served when the boundaries between development assistance and security assistance and operations are clear.

3. Efforts to reduce extremism within communities are not being accompanied by sufficient progress or coordination on governance reforms, social inclusion and accountability by governments and institutions.

4. The over-reliance on military or aggressive security responses to threats when social and political solutions are needed can fuel grievances, encourage violence and undermine CVE objectives.

While the drivers of violent extremism are context-specific and diverse, there are significant correlations across the studies of political violence, terrorism, and gang violence that should inform CVE policy. Broadly, the most consistent drivers to these forms of violence include perceptions of marginalization and injustice, exposure to violence, feelings of isolation, and the belief that joining a violent movement, gang, etc. holds the best prospects of achieving justice or purpose. Aggression towards or systemic exclusion of specific communities often fuels grievances and increases propensity towards violence as a means for problem solving.

We recognize that explanations only framed in terms of root causes underestimate the role of human agency in stimulating violent extremist tendencies. The grievances and opportunities in question may not actually lead to violence in the absence of political entrepreneurs, ideologues, and/or organizations that can frame the narrative and channel the relevant grievances in violent directions.
Military capacities are ill-suited to address either the drivers or entrepreneurs of violence. Eighty-three percent of terrorist movements that ended between 1968 and 2006 were done so through political settlements or improvements in policing. An emerging body of evidence argues that domestic governance capacities are more effective than increased military capacities in sustainably addressing community grievance. USAID in 2011 called for more investment in targeted development and peacebuilding work that incorporates local media support, community policing, and good governance principles such as transparency and accountability in order to provide authentic counter balances to those exploiting grievances.

Despite this evidence, a “military plus -- ” U.S. foreign policy prevails. Billions spent on security operations are coupled with relatively minor investments in development, governance or humanitarian activities. Of these civilian funds, short-term job creation and employment programs have been supported with the goal of improving stability despite little evidence that job creation alone decreases propensity to violence. Very few civilian funds are explicitly tailored to address conflict, violence or grievances. Civilian agencies are seeing their mandates rhetorically expanding to include efforts to address sources of instability and violence before crises erupt, but are unable to meet basic operating costs necessary to address soaring humanitarian needs, let alone development and governance needs. Indeed, USAID has suffered a thirteen percent real drop in funding since 2009.

This imbalance between problem identification and policy response is worrying. We urge the Obama administration to:

1. Announce robust financial commitments to civilian-led prevention and development at the UN General Assembly side meeting on CVE and reinforce these commitments in the FY17 Budget Request to Congress. Investments should be multi-year and include research & learning budgets and adaptive management structures to advance the evidence base for effective approaches. Sustained commitments should also be made to increase USAID’s resources, both staffing and programmatic, to give prevention strategies a chance for success.

2. Ensure that security operations do not work at cross-purposes with development and peacebuilding efforts. The draft Action Agenda should be amended to include the CVE objectives of all relevant USG agencies, including the Departments of Defense, State (in its entirety, including DRL and the Pol/Mil Bureau), Treasury, Justice, and Homeland Security and USAID. The GAO recommendation for an evaluation to be conducted on CVE efforts by the Department of State’s Counter-Terrorism Bureau should be implemented immediately.

3. Reverse cuts to democracy and governance programming and advance new monitoring & evaluation frameworks for measuring governance improvements across bilateral and multilateral assistance programs. To successfully address grievances, including those that may lead to violent extremism, community-level programming must connect to meaningful reforms around the particular motivating grievance, which often lie with a state.

4. Uphold commitments to rights-based governance in all bilateral assistance. U.S. security assistance to other states to counter or prevent violent extremism must emphasize and ensure the protection of human rights, citizen security, and equal justice under law.

5. Reform counterterrorism laws and regulations that prevent humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organizations from working to reduce the propensity of communities to support
violent extremism. For American non-governmental organizations, this includes the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and related Executive Orders, the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, Export Administration Regulations, and partner vetting systems (PVS and RAM).

6. Commit to establishing voluntary USG-NGO Guidelines for implementing the CVE Agenda through joint USG and NGO dialogues that include local community stakeholders. Parallel to existing Civil Military Guidelines, the CVE Guidelines would include a clear delineation of expectations and standards for USG engagement with non-governmental actors, consistent with local priorities.

We appreciate the important efforts made in the draft Action Agenda to re-orient CVE strategies away from response and toward prevention. We urge that any strategy to address today’s complex threats focus on supporting communities and states to build safe, just, and resilient societies and addressing the core grievances fueling global radicalization. Achieving these goals is the best way to prevent and reduce violent extremism and ensure sustainable security for the United States and global community.

Action for Community Development  
Alliance for Peacebuilding  
Association Femmes Sans Limites (Women Without Limits)  
American Friends Service Committee  
CARE USA  
The Carter Center  
CDA Collaborative Learning Projects  
Charity & Security Network  
Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness  
Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM)  
Cure Violence  
Facilitating Peace  
Franciscan Action Network  
Friends Committee on National Legislation  
Humanity United  
International Center for Religion and Diplomacy  
International Rescue Committee  
Islamic Relief USA  
Jewish World Watch  
KinderUSA  
Life for Relief and Development  
Mercy Corps  
NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby  
Nonviolence International  
Nonviolent Peaceforce  
Oxfam America  
Partners for Democratic Change  
Pax Christi International  
Peace Alliance  
Peace Direct  
Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)  
Relief International  
Saferworld  
Salam Institute for Peace and Justice  
Save the Children USA  
Search for Common Ground  
The Shift Network  
Student Peace Alliance  
Syria Relief and Development  
United to End Genocide  
World Vision

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1 USAID (2009) Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism, pg. iii
2 Institute for Economics and Peace (2014), 2014 Global Terrorism Index
3 The RAND Corporation (2015), A New Approach to Security and Justice Sector Assistance.
4 USAID (2011) The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency
5 The Administration’s 2014 Counter-terrorism Partnership Fund is a notable example. Created to “support a sustainable and effective approach for combating terrorism, with a focus on enabling and empowering partners facing terrorist threats.” 85% of requested funds were to be allocated to the DoD, with 15% allocated for civilian authorities. Of this 15%, 100% went to the Department of State, roughly 90% of which went to NADR, a bureau that does not generally sub-grant to civil society. More broadly, for the FY16 fiscal year, the U.S. development budget will be roughly $22 billion compared to roughly $585 billion for

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Institute for Economics and Peace (2014), 2014 Global Terrorism Index
USAID (2011) The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency
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vii FY15 appropriated USAID Operating Expenses is 13% lower than FY10 enacted. As OE is sensitive to inflation, a 13% reduction in nominal terms is closer to 25% reduction in real terms.

viii On 16 March 2015, the EU adopted Council Conclusions on the EU Regional Strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL/Da’esh threat under which it is specified that ‘Humanitarian aid and longer term assistance must remain distinct from military operations and reach all people in need. It will remain strictly separate from and not subordinated to other strands of EU actions.’ We see this as best practice for replication.