

## Shouldn't YOU Be Countering Violent Extremism?

### [SaferWorld](#)

High public fear of terrorism globally has led governments to make counter-terrorism, and its affable cousin, countering violent extremism (CVE), top priorities. On both domestic and international fronts, the idea is that every government department, public servant, NGO, university or media outlet needs to do its part.

On the face of it, this is a reasonable and straightforward requirement: everyone should do what they can to stop violence against innocent people, right? Yet many people who work to tackle poverty, provide relief, promote human rights or build peace will hesitate before answering this question. Ultimately, their answer to this particular question should always be 'yes' – however, they would be wise to pose a follow up question: are CVE approaches really capable of ending the violence in a just and lasting way, or do we actually need to prioritise a different approach?

How CVE could make the problem worse

The primary champion of CVE approaches has been the US, which defines CVE as 'proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence.' As this agenda comes increasingly to dominate Western security and development efforts, its risks have become more and more apparent – not least questions about whether it will overcome or merely repeat the failings of counter-terror approaches.

Cheerleading for the war on terror?

So, what are the risks with CVE? Firstly, a big selling point of CVE to rights, development and peace workers is that it is supposed to represent a shift away from the hard security tactics of the 'war on terror' towards a 'softer' approach. If CVE means development and peacebuilding approaches get more of a chance to solve the problem – and there are less drone attacks and special operations raids – this could be good news.

But this doesn't appear to be happening. In recent years, in spite of damning official assessments like the Chilcot report on the UK's role in Iraq, the failings of the 'war on terror' continue to be made anew. Thus UK military strategies outpace coherent political strategies in contexts like Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, European nations once sceptical of military interventionism have become more willing to use force in response to terror attacks. And though many Americans consider Obama to have been overly restrained, Washington has kept on fighting violent transnational movements through covert killings and proxy wars via partners rather than fully embracing less violent alternatives in recent years. Non-military CVE may be diverting some Department of Defense funding these days, but the US Defense budget is still over nine times that of the State Department. The Trump administration has already made moves to boost military spending while slashing budgets for diplomacy, aid and the environment, all as part of a drive to 'eradicate radical Islam'. So the big picture is that CVE is failing to challenge and shift wider military-security strategy to a significant extent.

This is a big problem. It's far more common to find historical examples where violent action against militant groups fuelled their growth rather than wiping them out. Examples like Guatemala, El

<http://www.gcsp.ch/News-Knowledge/News/Peace-Practitioners-Put-Serious-Gaming-Skills-in-Play>

Salvador, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia are the rule rather than the exception (read more [here](#)). Note also studies like [this](#), in which 65% of the respondents (al-Shabaab recruits in Kenya) said they had joined in response to the heavy-handed counter-terror strategy of the Kenyan government, or Greg Johnsen's observation that arbitrary arrests and torture of terror suspects in Yemeni prisons helped Al Qaeda gain followers.

Such examples show that CVE efforts can't work if they merely go *alongside* problematic military and rule of law approaches. CVE will only work if it actually stands to *change* the tactics used by military and criminal justice actors. Of course security agencies and law enforcement bodies should be firm in protecting human life and the rights of people to live in freedom. However, unless both global powers and their regional partners stop using indiscriminate violence and redouble their respect for human rights in conflict situations, ongoing conflicts – such as in [Afghanistan](#), [Somalia](#) and [Yemen](#) – will keep getting worse, making it impossible for CVE and peacebuilding efforts to achieve their aims. At present, CVE is doing too little to transform the hard security approaches that drive many into the arms of violent groups.

Putting our security first could prove surprisingly dangerous

In many contexts the biggest challenges and conflict risks are posed not by 'violent extremists' but by injustice, discrimination and poor governance. To many development, rights and peace workers, focusing on 'violent extremism' above these other problems may amount to prioritising first-world national security and citizen safety over the rights and priorities of people in poor, conflict-affected countries. Challenging 'donor-driven' agendas that don't really support local needs and local agency has taken years and is still an ongoing process – whereas supporting such local needs is vital for development (and peacebuilding) success.

Asserting the security agenda of wealthy nations ahead of local priorities is likely to end badly, whether your aim is to 'do no harm', build peace or simply eradicate terrorism. CVE usually involves analysing how to disrupt violent groups and lessen their support base. This means the fundamental problems of conflict contexts are only factored in as far as they seem relevant to stopping vulnerable people joining violent groups. However, aside from 'extremist' groups, instability almost always results from a range of other actors using violence in abhorrent ways, or committing other crimes and abuses that are very much part of the problem (think Gaddafi, Assad, Saleh, Mubarak etc). CVE focuses primarily on opposing 'extremist' groups, and does too little to change the behaviour of all the other actors responsible for conflict. Doing this creates blindspots that allow grievances to fester, conflicts to escalate and violent groups to grow.

Consider [Yemen](#). For years, Western governments and media portrayed Yemen as, above all, a dangerous haven for Al Qaeda. But in fact, the biggest threat to stability in Yemen was the abuse and cynicism of its ruling elites. Despite this, counter-terror was the overriding imperative, and Yemen's kleptocratic regime got massive assistance to tackle the threat, which it used instead to ignore and suppress deep grievances across Yemeni society. The fact that external assistance worked against Yemen's people instead of helping them press constructively for reform contributed to the seismic explosion of popular unrest during the Arab spring. Because Western actors saw only the 'violent extremism' issue, they failed to prioritise and nourish social empowerment and constructive reform, and this accelerated Yemen's degeneration into all-out war. It was this war that created an environment in which Al Qaeda and Islamic State have continued to grow and prosper.



*President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen thanks President George W. Bush “for his strong support in this war against extremists and terrorists” in the Oval Office in 2007 © White House Photo Office*

The strategic failure in Yemen is a prime example of the long-standing failure of the international community to prioritise the promotion of better governance and human rights over and above short-term stabilisation and counter-terror agendas in conflict situations. As CVE comes to the fore all over the MENA region, and across Africa and Asia, there is a huge risk of replicating this failure.

CVE narrows the strategic vision to make social empowerment and the need for reforms in abusive states just one factor in counter-radicalisation efforts. Unless promoting social empowerment and reform becomes the central pillar of strategies focused on peace and conflict prevention, the international community will continue to fail countries like Yemen. The consequences of this would be as disastrous for counter-terror strategists as for the humanitarian, development, peace and rights communities.

### Strategic blinkers

Once a conflict problem is rebranded as a ‘violent extremism’ problem, it can be hard to see beyond the assumption that the problem lies exclusively with ‘extremists’. The grievances that may drive violent movements become little more than nefarious narratives used to exploit vulnerable people, who do not understand the true facts and their own interests. This suits the governments involved – who, it is typically claimed, need to ‘own’ the CVE agenda, and who are

never labelled as ‘violent extremists’ themselves (no matter how violent or extreme their politics and behaviour).

Of course, in many contexts, violent groups are *indeed* lying to manipulate vulnerable people into taking their own and others’ lives. Nonetheless, as we were told in Somalia, for all the abhorrence of Al Shabaab’s aims and methods, it is still a problem that ‘No one acknowledges that Al Shabaab represents real concerns of people’. That is, violent groups often form, and gain support, based on the fact that they oppose *real rather than imaginary injustices*. In Al Shabaab’s case, its support is partly a reaction to the behaviour of Somali armed forces and clan militias, and partly based on resistance to the armies of neighbouring countries who have in some cases used violence indiscriminately, cynically exploited illicit commerce and pursued their own geopolitical interests on Somali territory in recent years. Despite the odd brave attempt to study such concerns, the ‘extremism’ label has made it hard to take Somali concerns about these developments seriously and work to address them as a central element of strategy. It will be hard to achieve stability in Somalia without acting directly to address the concerns of those who have backed Al Shabaab’s long and bloody struggle.

The emperor’s new body armour?

A further challenge for those calling for some course correction is the idea that countering violent extremism is a new endeavour. This appears to necessitate the need for fresh learning on what works, and makes it hard for CVE pioneers to absorb highly relevant lessons from **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**, years of learning about what works in peacebuilding, conflict analysis and strategy development techniques, the limits of stabilisation and security assistance, how to approach perplexing capability traps in the governance sphere, ways to support social empowerment, and so on.

The purported ‘newness’ of CVE, and the idea that ‘violent extremism’ should be categorised separately from other forms of violence, implicitly marginalises the huge amount we already know about conflict prevention, peacebuilding, counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency (COIN), stabilisation, psy-ops (or ‘Hearts and Minds’ strategies). This risks condemning the international community to ‘doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results’.

Failing to heed the lessons of past security assistance programmes?

For example, Security Sector Reform practitioners have learnt painful lessons from repeated mistakes rooted in flawed assumptions about what ‘partners’ want over the last two decades. Whether we look at the recent history of efforts to establish or reform the police, army or CT forces in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Libya, Yemen or Somalia, it is clear that local factors and motives have confounded assumptions of outsiders in profound ways, and this has led to perverse outcomes, from wasted resources and time through to reinforcing abusive, exclusive or corrupt governance and placing large quantities of money and arms into the hands of rebel militants.

Unfortunately, CVE is failing to learn these lessons and continues to rely on demonstrably flawed assumptions about the ability of ‘capacity building’ (AKA ‘train and equip’) support to transform the behaviours of security actors to the extent required to end the violence.

Consider the case of Gulmurod Khalimov in Tajikistan. In a context where the US ‘turned a blind eye’ to abuses by its ‘partner’ in counter-terrorism, Mr Khalimov commanded a police unit that

continued to receive US counter-terror training despite its reputation for suppressing political opposition and brutal policing – including an operation that killed 20 civilians in 2012. Mr Khalimov later defected – apparently in frustration over corruption – to put his skills at the disposal of Islamic State.

Despite the lessons from such experiences, many CVE programmes continue in hopes that security forces will change their behaviour with increased volumes of capacity support and mentoring. More credible strategies to improve the flawed security provision that feeds grievance and rebellion will in fact depend on empowering societies to help transform the behaviour and accountability of security actors – and the power structures that keep them in place. By failing (with some exceptions) to turn these clear lessons into credible strategies, CVE is doing too little to improve military and criminal justice behaviours – and may even be making them worse.

Kenya is a good example of this. Allegations continue about extra-judicial killings connected to counter terror efforts, and civil society still has little opportunity to input meaningfully into the overall counter-terror and CVE strategy. But on the other hand, most international donors in Kenya are keen to support counter terror and CVE efforts that acquiesce with the government's approach rather than attempting to transform it. Meanwhile, as it welcomes counter-terror assistance with one hand, the government is shutting down social empowerment programmes with the other, and using the discourse on terror to attack opponents and close down civil society space. As CVE becomes the soft option, international support is dwindling for wider conflict prevention, police and governance reform efforts that were once understood as vital in Kenya. Given the unaddressed tensions and grievances bubbling away across Kenyan society, many expect Kenya to have a difficult and unstable 2017. If they are right, this is when violent groups could really have an opportunity to take advantage, and we will once again need to ask whether CVE helped address the situation, or made people lose focus on the structural change that was most needed.

#### Empowering or instrumentalising society?

In such examples, CVE is breaking its promise. Instead of being a way to change the violent, repressive and ultimately failed approach taken under the 'War on Terror' following 9/11, CVE seems a mere fig-leaf that has helped keep the same macro-strategy in place. Worse still, CVE may be also co-opting the energies of those who were trying to work for the interests of conflict-affected societies.

Many in the development, rights and peace communities are finding this dynamic problematic: for example, programmes that empower women and address violent masculinities can be crucial to challenging the violent approaches and poor governance present in conflict contexts. Some women's rights organisations are ready to help with CVE. Many quite rightly wish to do everything they can to oppose the abhorrent misogyny and gender-based violence of most violent movements – and deserve unflinching support in these efforts. But, as the landmark Global Study on women, peace and security recently noted,

*To enmesh [women's empowerment] programs in counterterrorism strategies, sanctioned by the Security Council, is to deeply compromise the role of women's organizations and women leaders associated with the programs.*



The international community is rhetorically committed to empowering women's voices in politics and peace processes. But sadly women's rights organisations are very poorly funded. Many, however, would rightly object to being supported only to fight against 'extremist' groups – and accept the risks this involves – rather than genuinely empowered to challenge the problematic approach of all actors responsible for conflict and violence. State forces and militias have been guilty of horrendous sexual and gender-based violence in conflicts involving 'terrorist/violent extremist' groups, and women should be helped to counter this too if these conflicts are to be resolved. Doing so requires strong backing for gender equality in its own right rather than piecemeal support to women as a mere tactic for countering terrorism.

While CVE often involves women as local partners, and leaders have readily cited women's suffering to justify international responses, women are seldom understood as more than mothers or victims, let alone offered a voice in peace negotiations or the development of international stabilisation strategies. Strategy and peace deals continue to be developed almost exclusively by men behind closed doors.

Similar points can be made about the efforts to co-opt youth organisations for CVE rather than support their work in its own right.

What happens when you align aid with a war strategy?

Meanwhile, although CVE may at least offer resources to sustain women and young people's rights, peace and development initiatives, rebranding these initiatives as CVE has the potential to undermine their effectiveness. If the implicit message of a jobs programme shifts from 'we are supporting your livelihood because your well-being matters' to 'we are supporting your livelihood to stop you becoming a terrorist', this carries risks: help for ex-combatants rather than the wider population can be necessary, but it can also prompt parents to enlist their children with violent groups (as was found during disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration efforts in Liberia among other places). Such programmes also look more like part of a war effort than altruistic assistance.

An extreme example of the dangers of merging aid with counter-terrorism came in 2012 when international staff working for Save the Children were ordered to leave Pakistan based on the disputed allegation that a doctor used the aid agency as cover for a CIA counter-terror operation to track down Osama Bin Laden. Using aid programmes to counter terrorists and support a war effort can not only alienate the local population, but also make aid agencies a target for attack. This is in part why Afghanistan has consistently been the most dangerous country for aid workers over the last 15 years (with other key war on terror battlegrounds such as Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Pakistan often prominent on the list).

Leveraging aid for CVE purposes could also mean continuing to throw resources and moral support at problematic local 'allies' of international counter-terror efforts – while failing to back agents of change across wider society to the extent needed. This pattern – as seen in the Vietnam war, as well as more recently in Yemen, Somalia and Afghanistan – usually serves to enrich and reinforce flawed allies, alienate and disempower local people and render assistance ineffective.

Seeking to change people's minds without changing their lives?

Another concern with the CVE agenda – already touched on above – is its concern to tackle the 'evil' ideologies of angry and desperate people without sufficient attention to changing their lived

reality. A central concern of CVE is to ask how governments and international actors can identify and ban the dangerous narratives that are pulling recruits into violent groups. Notably, the EU is stepping up the pressure on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Microsoft and others to remove 'extremist' content from web searches and social media.

Despite the concerns this raises around freedom of expression and the need for careful scrutiny over who defines the 'extreme' in future years, this seems reasonable, in that it is reserved for content that actively incites violence or hatred rather than suppressing 'extreme' views per se. However, of more immediate concern is the number of governments who, by pinning the blame for conflicts wholly on 'extremist ideology', are effectively burying any prospect of addressing relevant grievances – which would require some genuine introspection about their own roles, and consideration of foreign policy alternatives.

One example of this is the concept of 'entryism' – the danger of NGOs, academia and the media being infiltrated by 'extremist' elements – as advanced under the UK's Counter-Extremism Strategy. Critics fear this will intimidate people who are targeted for having 'extreme' views from free expression and vigorous debate – including the kind of debate that could challenge poor counter-terror policies and improve the UK's conflict policies. Indeed, while the UK establishment is occasionally willing to blame previous administrations or rival politicians for creating instability 5-10 years after the fact, it is unclear whether critical views and lessons are being factored into the UK's strategies for dealing with today's conflicts.



One of the problems underpinning the present spike in global conflict is the tendency for states to label their opponents as unlawful combatants whose views are too extreme to be thoughtfully examined. Examples include the narrative of the Syrian Government regarding its opponents, or Saudi Arabia in relation to Yemen's Houthis. According to a UN Special Rapporteur, one risk here is how 'legislation relating to extremism' is being 'used against the activities of non-violent groups[...] and against journalists and political activists critical of State policy.' This is a disaster

in the wider context of the great civil society choke out, in which more than 63 countries have recently passed restrictive laws to curtail, criminalise or discriminate against civil society.

CVE programmes tend to pander to this understanding. They go along with the redefinition of conflicts as problems caused by actors uncritically labelled as 'violent extremists'. They then typically push for non-sensitive, depoliticised local factors to be addressed, while amplifying and supporting official government narratives. CVE thus focuses primarily on factors such as unemployment, lack of access to services and lack of fulfilling recreational activities for youth at local level. They likewise focus on attacking the ideology of violent groups, with the result that they fail to explore dialogue and resolution of political grievances where there is a genuine problem and scope for addressing it.

In fact, transnational violent movements have proved adept at tapping into local grievances (as Al Shabaab has done in relation to the grievances of Muslims in Kenya). So it is certainly part of the solution for CVE-style efforts to address relevant local level factors rather than treating anyone fighting under the Al Qaeda or IS banner as part of an entirely homogeneous global fundamentalist movement. Depending on what is driving the conflict in question, addressing local level factors is often important and valid. It is just that comprehensive strategies require political injustices to be addressed at the same time.

The focus of CVE on local, apolitical issues tends to leave a gaping hole when it comes to the higher-level national and international injustices that can drive people to fight for violent movements. Governments may not want these issues on the table as part of their response to violent situations, but unfortunately today's networked transnational insurrections are going to persist unless governments grasp the nettle of addressing their own considerable roles in driving and perpetuating conflict.

Consider Kyrgyzstan. On my visit two months back, communities told me about Kyrgyz and Tajik migrant workers who had joined IS in Syria. In many cases they were pushed to do so by the loss of gainful employment, income and status. In response, providing decent livelihoods could well change the calculus for such individuals. But they also joined to oppose the appalling suffering of fellow Muslims in Syria and Iraq. Saferworld has come across several cases in its local work of individuals who are connecting the suffering of Syrians to their own marginalisation as Muslim minorities where they live. In Tunisia last month, we were told of people becoming fighters in outrage about the suffering of Palestinians.

At present, CVE efforts in Kyrgyzstan involve some great initiatives on practical local matters – for instance, centres where police and communities come together to solve security problems. These are being accompanied by efforts to suppress 'extremist' narratives and counter-messaging. However, what such contexts seem to need is more space for dialogue. Given the repugnance of Islamic State, the idea of listening to disaffected young people who are tempted to support them, and pursuing reforms in cases where there are often legitimate concerns to address at local, national and international levels, has often seemed a bridge too far for CVE strategists. When some conflict actors and their supporters are designated as 'extremists', the task becomes effectively to change their wrong-thinking – which is seen as a kind of sickness.

However, Islamic State expert Scott Atran, among others, has dismissed most counter-messaging efforts as 'unappealing and unsuccessful'. For example, in Tunisia last month, interviewees explained to us that the public had found an official counter-messaging campaign on Facebook both ridiculous and alienating.



The preoccupation of the CVE community with finding an appealing counter-narrative is understandable in the wake of the adeptness of IS messaging, and the perplexing appeal that its gruesome communications strategy and recruitment networks have attained. Likewise, it is hard to disagree with the idea that apocalyptic-fundamentalist theology is *in part* a driver of some conflicts in its own right. Clearly ideology is playing a role: these are conflicts which cannot be fully understood by analysing the behaviour of violent groups as rational actors using political economy techniques. But we should not forget that research has questioned the link between religious ideology and participation in violent groups – and pointed at real grievances (marginalisation, oppression, lack of resources) as worthy of more attention than they are getting.

When people join violent movements, they face a high probability of dying for the cause. Some recruits clearly have a history of mental disturbance and a confused conception of theology and history, but the power of 'extremist' ideology also rests on palpable anger about real events – about atrocities and lives lived under the jackboot of repression and marginalisation with little right of reply. Transforming these conditions – and ideally turning people's anger into momentum for positive change – is a necessary step for moving forward. Because of this, while it is right to challenge the promotion of violence in the immediate term, CVE needs to focus less on ideology and counter-narrative, and much more on ensuring meaningful dialogue on the political factors underlying contemporary conflicts.

This tallies with what we know about the drivers of conflict, and the conditions in which societies become more peaceful. When you analyse global data, it is clear that there are few conflicts in contexts where people can trust security forces, access justice and participate in decision making, and where their only prospects for a decent life are not stolen by corrupt elites. In 2015, just 0.5% of terror attacks occurred outside countries suffering conflict or political terror. Indeed, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon articulated in his Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) that:

*...rebuild[ing] the social compact between the governing and governed [and] the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the full respect of human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism.*

Yet CVE efforts routinely exaggerate the power of religion and ideology, prioritise counter messaging, and fail to make *changing people's lived reality* the fundamental focus of strategy in the way that rights, peace and development programmes typically do. There are CVE programmes that work to improve state-society relations – empowering communities to press authorities for better policing, service provision and equality – but they are very much part of a wider context in which not enough transformation is being considered or attempted.



*Secretary General Ban Ki Moon had a clear vision of how to prevent violent extremism – but how clear-sighted will the UN be on the issue in practice? Credit: UN*

Could CVE narratives foment division and cement repression?

Finally, strategies focused on suppressing dangerous ideologies and messaging to counter 'extremists' could be dangerous. Apart from driving dissenting views underground, they could fuel hatred and suspicion in mainstream society towards those with dissenting views. There is a particular risk when 'violent extremism' is casually associated exclusively with particular religious, ethnic or tribal minorities. This has in many countries led to a culture of rising Islamophobia. Such careless narratives have the potential to create an enabling context for mob violence against minority groups, such as that seen in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, in 2010, or during Sri Lanka's nationwide anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983, which were a key moment in the country's downward slide into long and bloody civil war.

Careless campaigns can also bolster public demand for repressive and counter-productive counter-terror methods. Despite this, even the UN – an institution whose neutrality ought to remain a crucial resource for the resolution of international conflict – is currently signed up to campaign against 'extremists' hand in hand with a number of authoritarian African governments. At the very least, CVE awareness campaigns need to analyse, be aware of and monitor conflict sensitivity risks very carefully.

How best to engage with CVE if you want to promote peace, justice and development

The above risks are real. Worse still, CVE could well morph into something deeply tainted with Islamophobia and military aggression under the new US administration. Nonetheless conflicts involving violent groups and their opponents do require analysis, strategy and action. So here are ten constructive ways to engage.

1. Stop over-simplifying conflicts – and face up to the real problems driving them

To move beyond one-sided strategies that see ‘extremist’ groups and ideologies as the world’s biggest problem, we need to get rid of the blinkers. These problems must be understood as *conflicts*. Framing the problem as conflict can help us: (1) understand violent movements in more depth – including why people are fighting, and whether dialogue and negotiation with some elements might be possible at some point; (2) understand other actors – seeing who else is responsible for violence, injustice and other factors that may be driving the violence and focus on changing their behaviour rather than just helping them suppress the ‘extremists’; (3) understand ourselves – factoring in what we, in the international community, need to do differently (including changing our security, economic or diplomatic behaviour) to solve the problem. Refusing to see conflicts as CVE problems will help us to understand that many actors need to change what they are doing to bring about a just and lasting solution.

2. Focus strategies on achieving people’s rights ahead of national and international security agendas

For lasting and just peace to be achieved, it needs to be accepted by people living in conflict-affected societies, whose grievances need to be taken seriously and addressed if the rising tide of instability is to be stemmed. Policymakers need to move away from programmes that focus on disrupting groups considered dangerous by the outside world and instead focus strategy on peace and people’s rights in conflict-affected contexts. International efforts must re-prioritise people’s well-being – working harder to change the power structures that actively deny these rights to some people.

3. Improve the behaviour of governments

The behaviour of governments is almost always at the heart of why conflicts begin and persist. Consider alleged abuses by Nigerian forces in the conflict with Boko Haram, or the consequences of the Maliki regime’s authoritarianism in Iraq. It is crucial for national and international governments to change such behaviour and restore trust if one is to have any hope of solving the problem. Strategies must focus on these drivers of conflict first and not as an afterthought. Although the influence of international actors can be limited, it is always possible to challenge repressive behaviour, cancel assistance that incentivises or rewards such behaviour, and assiduously support local constituencies pushing for constructive change. If security assistance packages make governance reforms impossible, they need to be redesigned or cancelled.

4. Stop reinventing the wheel – the peace, rights and governance approaches we need already exist

Aid can contribute hugely to international security if it is allowed to get on with the difficult but essential work of tackling inequality and injustice. Sadly the reallocation of development resources to crisis management and CVE are undermining peacemaking resources when they are most needed. Rather than trying (and largely failing) to ensure that CVE programmes understand conflicts and address their causes, the strategic move would be to redouble investment in peace, rights and governance efforts not labelled as CVE, strengthening their existing, impartial dedication to advancing human rights, human security, protection and public well-being. There is room for some CVE work within wider peace strategies – to dissuade people from targeting innocents with violence and working against the rights of others. But peacebuilding, rights,

governance and development efforts are the most strategic tools we have for addressing conflict. They should in fact shape the overall strategy rather than being viewed as subordinate tools of military thinking.

#### 5. Stop instrumentalising – and start empowering – society

For example, rather than trying to co-opt women's and youth organisations to serve top-down, state-driven counter-terror strategies, it would be more valuable to support them to set their own agenda for its own sake, with full freedom to challenge all problem behaviours, and have a say in shaping wider stabilisation strategies and peace processes.

#### 6. Use historical lessons to inform more holistic peace strategies

We need to dismantle the idea that CVE is something new that has never been done before. Much of the evidence needed to acquire strategic clarity about the weakness of what is being attempted under CVE approaches and the basis for doing better is already available. Achieving this clarity requires recognising the relevance of the track record of past counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, COIN and stabilisation operations, state-building efforts and colonial wars. We only need to make active connections to the lessons from these highly relevant experiences (largely of very sobering failure) to grasp the necessity of adopting holistic strategies that prioritise peace, development, good governance and human rights.

#### 7. Embrace vigorous debate on foreign policy

It is important that actions to stop incitement to violence don't creep into becoming broad clampdowns on dissent. Instead, we need more diverse and vigorous debate – in which decision makers adopt a listening rather than a hubristic stance. Governments of countries with significant disaffected Muslim populations would do well to show that they are listening to minorities' views on foreign policy, championing lasting and just solutions to today's conflicts, and lessening their support for the repressive regimes whose behaviours have engendered and perpetuated the tragic violence engulfing the Middle East in recent years. It is vital – through deeds more than words – to counteract IS and Al Qaeda's claim to be the primary international actors standing against the suffering of Muslims in conflict-affected and repressive countries.

#### 8. Avoid the 'extremism' label: turn dissent into better policy

One helpful step would be to abandon the unhelpful and subjective 'extremism' label: it is the use of violence in politics that is problematic; and it is our democracy that we need to defend. If governments expect young, marginalised people to believe in what the open society has to offer (and avoid choosing more violent and vengeful paths), they should keep dissent in the political space and show that grievances and challenges will be heard, factored in and, where justified, acted on in the struggle to form better policies. The UK government hotly denies that 'extremism' has roots in war and repression, yet the Chilcot Inquiry illustrates the importance of realising that the risk of terrorism at home does have a connection to aggressive foreign policies that inflict suffering abroad. A degree of humility and willingness to atone for past aggression on the international stage might well help boost the security of the UK.

9. Turn anger into support for relief and peacemaking efforts

Likewise in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, if young people are becoming foreign fighters because they are enraged about the plight of Muslims in Syria – whose situation is genuinely unconscionable – instead of merely trying to stop such people joining IS, would there not be enormous value in trying to set up legitimate ways for concerned Muslims to help those suffering in other countries? Options could include schemes in which young people can help raise funds for humanitarian relief to refugees. Efforts to support young people to learn about and engage with international affairs and to feed views into diplomatic discussions or security council deliberations could also be important to show young disaffected people that their concerns about the conduct of wars and international interventions are taken seriously.

10. Focus less on changing ideology and more on improving people's lives

Another direction for relevant programmes would be to invest less in changing people's ideologies and more in changing their lived reality. Even in contexts where effective police and courts, service delivery, job creation and other benefits are distant goals, it is possible to send signals that offer grounds for hope. Whether it be the transfer of a notorious military division away from a traumatised area, or the opening of a crime prevention centre, or the establishment of committees where police representatives meet communities on a regular basis, more trust can be gained through practical action than propaganda.