Background Papers on Violent Extremism and its Prevention

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Introduction to the Dushanbe 2016 Background Papers

The following series of papers were produced to provide a brief background of some of the conditions conducive to violent extremism for participants of the “High-Level Experts Meeting on Finding Development Solutions to Preventing Violent Extremism” in Dushanbe, Tajikistan 13-15 June. They were designed to create for the participants of the meeting a common framework of understanding of current and emerging issues related to violent extremism and its prevention. As such the topics chosen (community resilience, economic inequality, migration, gender and youth) are those that were felt to have the most resonance in the current Central Asian context. The choices are not intended to limit the topics available for discussions, nor are they meant to imply a position on the behalf of UNDP as regards violent extremism.

The background papers are the sole product of the experts. The following series of papers are not official UNDP papers, and do not reflect the views or policies of UNDP. All the following information is provided for informative purposes only. UNDP does not make any representations as to the accuracy, completeness, or reliability of the information included in the series of background papers.
This background paper is part of a series that seeks to understand the root causes of violent extremism, as the processes of understanding violent extremism and preventing violent extremism are mutually constitutive. Unraveling the root causes of violent extremism, in an effort to prevent this process or stop it as early as possible, requires interventions that are embedded in consideration of greater social, economic, political and cultural settings that otherwise can enable the conditions conducive for violent extremism to thrive. The preventive approach attempts at going beyond the security aspect of violent extremism and unfold the development-related causes of this global threat.

Fostering Community Resilience for Preventing and Responding to Violent Extremism

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Key Takeaways
1. A community while subject to interpretations is commonly seen to be a collection of groups and individuals that have a common interest or share a geographic area.
2. Community resilience in Preventing Violent Extremism represents a paradigm shift from an emergency response approach, in which individuals are victims of adversity, to an approach in which people are agents of change.
3. Building community resilience works best when it is a community-oriented approach that gains the trust of the community and allows them to become responsible stakeholders.
4. Community resilience is not only a strategy for preventing violent extremism but can also be a way for communities to combat extremism as it happens.
5. Public support for any initiative depends on the respect for human rights and rule of law that state institutions display.
1. Introduction

In the fight against radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism, it is evident that traditional law-enforcement tactics are insufficient by themselves. They need to be complemented by more proactive approaches, which consist of responding to the threat of radicalization and violent extremism, or, preferably, preventing it. Such responses should concentrate on identifying and targeting individuals and groups prone to violent extremism and terrorism, curbing the financing that sustains their efforts, preventing their travel across borders, data gathering, and sharing analysis for intelligence. Methods for prevention include understanding and tackling the motivations that drive people and groups to radicalization; monitoring the Internet and social media for materials that spread radical narratives and incite violent actions; awareness-raising and the promotion of a culture of peace, dialogue, and tolerance via the mass media and education system.

The most effective long-term solutions address the grievances that those vulnerable to radicalization suffer from. Grievance-targeting could include addressing discrimination in society and job markets, encouraging more representative government, providing socio-economic opportunities, including employment possibilities, and education and social programs for marginalized youth. All these strategies are based on targeting individual motivations: be they economic (poverty, economic insecurity), political (ideological, religious), personal (revenge, grievances, psychological etc.) or communal (marginalization, horizontal inequalities, poverty, and discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity).

While social and communal factors influence motivations, less attention is often paid to the environment in which individuals are either radicalized or deradicalized and the role that families and communities might play in this regard. The question of communities tends to come into the equation of strategies to counter terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization under two different lenses. The first, based on a negative narrative, focuses on how the community creates conditions for its members to become radicalized. This for example can happen among members of a religious community; in prisons which are notorious “hotbeds” of radicalization through exchanges among prisoners; and even within families which help recruit brothers, wives, and other family members into so-called “Jihad”, such is often the case in Central Asia.

The positive narrative, on the other hand, sees the community as the potential vehicle for helping prevent violent extremism (PVE), combatting its manifestations, and coping with its aftermath. Such a proposition is based on the potential of communities as long as they are made resilient. This paper will examine this potential positive narrative to identify under what circumstances community resilience can help prevent, combat and deal with violent extremism and what the pitfalls could be.

It first describes what community resilience entails, before examining the potential role in each of the stages (before, during and after). The paper then raises a number of challenges or risks associated with over-focus on communities on the question of PVE before making some general conclusions on what could be considered for further action.

2. Conceptualizing Community Resilience

Preventing violent extremism (PVE) policies, as opposed to purely counter-terrorism (CT) strategies that have traditionally focused on developing technical resilience through emergency response, protection of infrastructure etc., need to fostering resilience at the level of ideas to counteract the appeal of violent extremism and terrorism. This requires a local approach to PVE, an approach that brings the state closer to communities. While the responsibility for preventing, combating and managing the consequences of terrorist acts lie primarily with the state, communities, much like civil society, the media and private sector, are also stakeholders
interested in the successful outcomes of the efforts of the state. As such, PVE is a shared responsibility based on mutual support between the state and communities.

The term ‘community’, though complex and subject to different interpretations, can be said to generally consist of "individuals, groups and institutions based in the same area and/or having shared interests". As such, a community can be seen as a stakeholder group concerned about common issues, and/or an entity made up of individuals within a specific geography, a town, a region, or a country. It goes without saying that individuals and groups often belong to more than one community. Communities of interest can also transcend borders and have global and transnational dimensions, with new technologies facilitating linkages around common issues of interest.

Community resilience refers to the "capacity of a community to withstand, respond to and recover from a wide range of adverse events, either natural or caused by an individual or a group". Rand Corporation defines it as a measure of the sustained ability of a community to utilize available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations and to learn from past disasters to strengthen future response and recovery efforts. Community resilience is a term often associated with disaster risk reductions, preparedness to mitigate environmental disasters, emergency response and the ability to recover in a way that restores normal functioning in society. Although resilience is a term most often used for development in risky environments (such as a natural disasters), it is increasingly used for a broader set of adverse conditions: economic downturn, a pandemic, crime, conflicts and terrorism.

Emphasis on community resilience represents a paradigm shift from emergency response and infrastructure development, which views people as passive victims of adversity, to transforming them as agents of change, or in other words, people who can make informed decisions about avoiding and reducing risks through human action. As such, community resilience is a very appropriate approach for the field of countering and preventing violent extremism.

Community resilience is part of an equation that includes community cohesion, an equation that leads to community security: not just physical security against assaults, but also human security in the wider sense of the word which covers a range of issues affecting the quality of life of community members (safety, welfare, livelihoods, and dignity). Increasingly, national CT and PVE policies aim to build resilient communities in order to protect them, and the nation subsequently, from violent ideologies and actions. Resilient communities are supposed to then join the efforts of the state in support of PVE and CT efforts. The state therefore has an important role to play in creating, encouraging and sustaining cohesion among and between communities while protecting them against harm.

When it comes to the relationship between the state and communities in PVE and CT efforts a distinction should be made between community-targeted and community-oriented approaches. Community-targeted efforts, the more traditional practice in CT and even PVE (including in Central Asian countries) involves the state, driven by national security priorities, targeting communities for law enforcement and intelligence-gathering efforts. While these efforts, which should be carried out within the framework of law and respect for human rights, may be necessary, they may also alienate the communities under scrutiny. They also don’t take into consideration the needs of the communities as a whole and its members separately (for example men and women). As such, they may run the risk of marginalizing or even stigmatizing some communities and individuals. On the other hand, community-oriented approaches, of which community resilience is a major pillar, are better suited for gaining the trust of local communities, consulting with them, involving them, and ultimately having them take responsibility as
stakeholders in PVE and CT efforts.\textsuperscript{8} They also put community concerns and safety on the same par as the national security concerns of the state, with the understanding that the security of the state depends on the human security of its citizens.

There is a growing recognition worldwide that involving communities and building their resilience turns them from passive objects of law enforcement activities to active stakeholders. Such initiatives can also contribute to an increased accountability of decision makers to citizens while strengthening public confidence in the states’ security policies, measures and institutions of law and order.

Community resilience can be both the goal/vision/objective to achieve and as a strategy/methodology/tool to get toward the desired goals. In practice, resilience becomes a strategy and a vision for three stages: prevention, combating and dealing with the aftermath of violent extremism and terrorism.

3. Community Resilience for Prevention

A resilient community is one that can detect and prevent radicalization that can lead to violent extremism. Resilience through community-oriented approaches requires community engagement, strong social networks and ties, communication, and multi-sector partnerships between the government and communities. It can also be built through engagement with a variety of credible community actors, each requiring a specific kind of approach and strategy.

Families: In traditional societies such as those in Central Asia, where extended family ties are important vehicles for identity and support, there have been many cases of husbands influencing their wives and children to join them in fighting zones such as in Iraq and Syria, or even cases where women have agitated the youth for war in the name of “jihad”. However, families can also be key stakeholders who can help identify and respond early to manifestations of violent extremism, and can dissuade their members from joining extremist groups. Mothers, fathers, siblings and close family circles can be crucial conduits of positive values, traditions and worldviews.\textsuperscript{9} They can also help detect early signs of engagement with violent ideas or activities. Building resilience for families would entail raising awareness of its members, building trust with authorities, bringing them out of isolation, and especially empowering women whose great potential as moral authority is often downplayed by the patriarchy or a lack of economic empowerment. The role of fathers should also not be neglected, given how an absent father figure can lead to feelings of resentment and isolation, something very worrying in the Central Asian context of massive labor migration and the disruption of family bonds.

Cultural and religious leaders: Much has been written and said about radicalization that is supposed to stem from the sermons and teachings of some clergies’ narrow interpretations of Islam in madrasas and mosques of the region. At the same time, however, cultural and religious leaders/Imams who are close to communities and trusted by its members can also play a positive role by raising awareness about true religious principles and counter extremist narratives. Building resilience among religious communities would require building trust among leaders both with state authorities and community members. It would also require legitimacy, religious proficiency that can provide authority, and a generally supportive environment. In the Central Asian region, the state has increasingly interfered in the affairs of religious leaders, specifying for example the topic of Friday sermons, registering and controlling madrassas, banning public servants from attending mosques and providing certification of Imam Khatibs. Balance is needed between undermining the role of religious leader through cooption and control and giving free hand to those preaching intolerance and violence.

Educational institutions: Educational institutions can help build resilience to prevent violent extremism at the community level. As the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair observed
in his speech at the UN Security Council in November 2013, “The root causes of extremism will never be defeated by security measures, only the education of young people can achieve their demise.”10 Especially in Central Asia where the budget for, and quality of, educational institutions have taken a heavy toll during times of crisis and transition, formal and non-formal education and life-skills need to be on top of the agenda of local authorities. Educational institutions are an important point of interaction for families and communities when values and lessons imparted in the classroom can be reinforced at home. Teachers can also play a role as a moral authority if they are trusted.

**Youth groups:** Youth can also be important community actors to build resilience for the preventive approach. When they are ostracized, marginalized, excluded, unemployed in great numbers and frustrated, they are the most vulnerable group to recruitment and radicalization. But not all angry young people are voicing their grievances through radicalization. When their resilience is high, they can become engaged in civic action, local politics, and cultural and education avenues to lobby for their needs. Tajikistan for example has the youth group “Avanguard”, set up in August 2015 in order to combat the spread of radical ideas among Tajik youth. They have collaborated with the authorities to travel among young migrants in Russia in order to hold discussions on respect for the foundations of the state and national values, all in order to dissuade potential recruitment. What can tip a potentially disgruntled group of young people from victims or recruiters of extremist groups to advocates for peace and unity within the community is the trust that the state can incite in its relationships with them. In this process of trust and confidence building, the importance of providing jobs, avenues for political participation, hope and dignity for a better alternative future is essential for success. Attention should therefore not only be paid to youth leaders but also to marginalized youths who may be most vulnerable to recruitment by extremists.

**4. Resilience for Responding to Violent Extremism**

Community resilience is not only a strategy for preventing violent extremism but can also be a way for communities to combat extremism as it happens. Communities can be made responsible for establishing their own secure environments. One way to do that is to engage them in a more community-centric and collaborative approach to policing.

Where trust is built, communities can help the police in keeping vigilance, intelligence gathering and in making arrests, while the police, when seen as a resourceful and efficient institution, can be a point of referral and contact for communities in need for protection. Community policing does not mean citizen's arrest practices or the rendering of justice by communities directly. It means proper and effective interaction between the police with families and communities.

Community policing is “a philosophy and organizational strategy that promotes a partnership-based collaborative effort between the police and the community to more efficiently identify, prevent and solve problems at the local level. It shifts the focus of police by placing equal emphasis on crime control, order maintenance, and service provision.”11

The principle idea behind this concept is that a partnership based on mutual need and trust is necessary between the community and the police. The legitimacy of the policy can increase in the eyes of the community when consent is sought in matters of local law and order, and public service delivery is tangibly improved.12 The public can in turn be encouraged to share with the police its concerns, new information, and to report any suspicious activity. The police however should not be seen as meddling between community members or taking sides in local disputes in biased ways that would then endanger its credibility, legitimacy, and neutrality.
The role of the state in building resilience for communities to combat violent extremism would be to provide adequate information, improve communication with communities on its CT activities and policies, make information about protective measures available and accessible, and to provide credible assessments of terrorist threats. Public support also very much depends on the respect for human rights and rule of law that state institutions display.

5. Resilience to Deal with the Aftermath of Traumatic Events

Resilience building for communities that have undergone a traumatic event, such as terrorism, or who have in their midst ex-combatant and foreign fighter returnees requires particular types of initiatives.

**Resilience for rehabilitation and reintegration:** When a former radicalized person (assuming one who has not been imprisoned) is reintegrated into his/her family and community, he/she needs special support for de-radicalization and disengagement. While the provision of skills, employment, education, and healthcare are the primary responsibilities of the state in order to prevent radicalization in the first place, they also become services needed in the process of sustainable rehabilitation afterwards. Hope and dignity for a better alternative future are vital for success. Once disengaged and rehabilitated, former extremists and radicals can also become a great voice of experience for countering radicalization among their communities and peers.

The community and family also need to be supported in order to accept and reintegrate the former extremist in their midst. This support should be in terms of resources, but also moral, psychological and social. Typically government-led, donor supported programs on DDR (Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration) or on the reintegration of former combatants, put aside small grants for communities willing to host (back) ex-combatants in their midst. These grants, geared towards small infrastructure or social projects, are supposed to act as incentives for the cooperation of the communities with returnees. The UNDP supported Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) is an example in the region with a host of lessons for the future as Central Asian countries prepare for the return of former ISIS members from Iraq and Syria. Below, we shall return to the pitfalls of distributing aid on the basis of not needs but of cooperation with security institutions.

Whether former violent extremists are in prison or not, families can play a particularly critical role in the psycho-social rehabilitation process by reengaging with them, and helping the deradicalization process through support or pressure.

6. Risks of Over-focus on Communities

While community resilience seems to be an optimal tool and a vision for the prevention of, response to, and recovery from, violent extremism, over-reliance on it by the state and international organizations is not without challenges. Resilience building can deliver tangible benefits but there are also inherent risks that should be highlighted. These include:

**Ostracizing and stigmatizing particular communities by putting them under scrutiny:** When a community is singled out by the state as being home to extremists, not only is resilience undermined but isolation and even confrontation ensues. Stigmatization gives the false impression that there are problem communities that are more vulnerable to extremism than others, while in reality it would be a damning sentence on an entire community based on the actions of a few individuals. Over-focus on some communities has already undermined the reputation, often underserved, of particular town/entities (for example villages from which a large number of young men who have been recruited into ISIS) or religious communities (notably, the community of Muslims in European cities for example, especially those that hail from neighborhoods where Jihadist have been living, such as the notorious Molenbeek in Belgium for example).
Cooptation of communities by the state for security purposes: This paper has made the case that the resilience of communities depends on how much their needs have been taken into consideration and trust is built with state authorities. If communities become mere peons in the security interests of the state, then mistrust, misperceptions and tensions can actually grow, especially if there have already been cases of police misconduct. Engagement of law enforcement authorities with communities could be perceived as a cover for special operations aimed at gathering intelligence, monitoring and surveillance of particular communities. It is for this reason that community-oriented as opposed to community-targeted approaches are infinitely more important for long-term resilience building.

Interference from the outside: An effective community is primarily based on trust and confidence among its members. Change from outside can inevitably impact that trust, often for the better one would hope, but sometimes also for the worse. As the question of violent extremism and terrorism is extremely sensitive, overt and aggressive interference from outside of communities could unleash negative dynamics and backlash. It would be better if the communities evolved organically towards their resilience, supported by external actors, but given the space for autonomous action and digestion of new ideas and methods.

Politicization of aid to communities: As discussed above, support to communities on the basis of their cooperation with security imperatives of the state creates a distortion of the logic and rationale of humanitarian and development assistance. The politicization of aid based on security conditionality can create negative precedence and inappropriate incentives.

7. Conclusions
Obviously, preventing and responding to violent extremism and terrorism is not solely the task of the police, of the security services, or of the government. Local stakeholders, i.e. communities who are directly affected, should also be involved. Burden sharing is the only effective long-term strategy to adopt. While top down approaches are needed by the state to protect its citizens, create positive conditions and build confidence in the institutions of the state, bottom up initiatives are also necessary. That is where communities and people come in. Bottom up initiatives require the activation of communities, families, religious leaders, youth and women’s groups, private sector, and neighborhood watches. Communities have an organic responsibility to protect their interests, claim their rights and contribute to local and national solutions. Their degree of resilience is the measure of success for the nation.

The state has an important role to play in creating, encouraging and sustaining cohesion, trust and confidence among all communities in society. It can do so by promoting a sense of identity that is both credible and enduring, and conditions for the security of communities. Cohesion and security are reinforced by and reinforce in turn the notion of resilience.

What would be the role of international organizations in this? The answer is finding a fine balance between supporting top down and bottom up initiatives and helping them meet to form a comprehensive, sustainable, and nationally owned approach to violent extremism and terrorism. Too often the work of international organizations is in isolation of one or the other pillar. Many build capacities of state security institutions without facilitating dialogue with communities and civil society organizations. Others over-focus on community development and resilience projects without emphasizing linkages to national policies and plans. They should ensure that local initiatives are better aligned with government strategies and vice versa.
In the final analysis, resilience building requires long-term sustained solutions, patience and space for local autonomy. It is fundamentally based on the empowerment of people and communities so that they understand – and take action – that benefits the common good.
END NOTES


See also Bill Durodié, “Terrorism and Community Resilience – A UK perspective”, Chatham House, ISP/NSC Briefing Paper No. 05/01, July 2005, pp. 4-5.


3 OSCE, 2014, page 65

4 http://www.rand.org/multi/resilience-in-action.html


6 Weine, Stevan, and Schuyler Henderson, Stephen Shanfield, Rupinder Legha, Jerrold Post.


8 Basia Spalek (ed.), Counter-Terrorism: Community-Based Approaches to Preventing Terrorism Crime (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

9 Hedayah Center and Global Center on Cooperative Security, «The Roles of Families and Communities in Strengthening Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism» Meeting Note May 2014


12 OSCE, 2014
This background paper is part of a series that seeks to understand the root causes of violent extremism, as the processes of understanding violent extremism and preventing violent extremism are mutually constitutive. Unraveling the root causes of violent extremism, in an effort to prevent this process or stop it as early as possible, requires interventions that are embedded in consideration of greater social, economic, political and cultural settings that constitute a breeding ground for violent extremism. The preventive approach attempts at going beyond the security aspect of violent extremism and unfold the development-related causes of this global threat.

Violent Extremism and Economic Inequality

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Key Takeaways

1. Violent extremism is not a condition that is limited to a particular sociodemographic (i.e. disadvantaged members).
2. Economic inequality may appear as driving individuals into violent extremism, available literature indicates no direct causal relationship between the two.
3. It is not absolute poverty, but relative levels of deprivation and lack of choice that render individuals more susceptible to violent extremism.
4. The link between economic inequality and violent extremism needs to be based on the framework of unmet expectations, lack of hope, restricted economic mobility and enhanced discrimination.
5. Lack of economic opportunity may be a better predictor of violent extremism than economic conditions.
1. Introduction

Disparities in income within a society, that is economic inequality, as the root cause of violent extremism has been hotly debated and poorly understood, owing to the challenges evident in the collection of primary data, lack of research and lack of consensus on conceptual definitions. Poor economic conditions, such as poverty, unemployment and lack of education have long been assumed to render individuals more susceptible to being radicalized and recruited by violent extremist groups. Although these factors may appear central in causing individual grievances, there is limited empirical evidence in favor of this relationship. That said, the hypothesis that the poor in a country is more likely to join violent extremist groups than the non-poor remains inconclusive. Violent extremism challenges wealthy as well as poorer segments. Similarly, the argument that unemployment itself is strongly correlated with violent extremism has not been substantiated on empirical grounds. Whilst economic inequality may appear as luring individuals and groups into violent extremism at face value, evidence demonstrates that economic inequality is better understood not as a sufficient cause alone for violent extremism, but rather as a contributor to other underlying factors and grievances, which create an environment conducive to violent extremism.

2. Addressing Ambiguities: Measures of Economic Inequality and Violent Extremism

According to a recent article published by the Pew Research Center, the most widely cited indicator of economic inequality is income, often measured via the Gini coefficient. The Gini Coefficient is a measurement that indicates economic differences within a country. A country with a score of 0 would be completely equal economically, and a country with 100 would be completely unequal economically. Although critics of the income-based approach exist (income can vary considerably over time; income is not indicative of all available economic resources), the Gini coefficient has been acclaimed for enabling a direct and intuitive comparison between populations that vary in size.

At its root, economic inequality is “a reflection of persistent disadvantage for particular segments of the society.” Economic inequality harbors multiple dimensions, one of them seeming to be the correlation with crime rate. The possible explanations for this correlation include: the tendency of disadvantaged members to experience the feelings of resentment and hostility; disadvantaged segments’ greater incentives to engage in illegitimate means (as opposed to legal means) to acquire assets and resources. Furthermore, a wide rich-poor gap may be burdensome on the economy, which may raise food prices, reduce support for pro-government policies and deepen polarization. Wealthy citizens may maintain disproportionate political power and representation, promoting inefficient tax structures skewed in favor of the small advantaged group. Economic inequality may fuel political exclusion and instability, threaten property rights and concentrate capital accumulation in the hands of a few. “A widening rich-poor gap increases the rate of rent-seeking and predatory market behaviors that hinder economic growth.” Economic inequality makes resolving conflicts more difficult, further eroding social cohesion. That said, entrenched economic inequality significantly undermines life choices available to an individual. The mentioning of choice is key for illustrating that economic inequality involves a broader conceptual terrain beyond poverty, particularly expanding the emphasis on income and expenditure to include a multi-dimensional disadvantage.
This paper defines violent extremism as the situation when radical behavior starts making use of indiscriminate violence as the means of expression. Extremism is a relational concept, which requires the weighing of the normal against the extreme. It may even be the case that those whom some view as being extremists may perceive others as “extremist”, as seen in the case with Al-Qaeda’s leader disavowing ISIS for being “too extreme”. Adding to conceptual ambiguities, the definition of violence contains a multitude of nuances, particularly when accommodated by certain words, such as political, structural, cultural, direct or indirect. Available literature points to the inability to speak in terms of specific profiles that fit all violent extremists or a single and direct pathway to violent extremism. For example, in Central Asia, radicals have been recruited from comparatively wealthy populations as well as among poorer segments.

3. Unfolding the Intersections of Economic Inequality and Violent Extremism

Literature demonstrates how the root causes of violent extremism are not fixed. This section serves a two-fold purpose: to offer an alternative approach to why individuals may embrace certain views and behaviors that draw them into subversive activities; and to illustrate how violent extremism is not a condition that is limited to a particular sociodemographic, but rather a process of underlying incentives and grievances.

Perhaps the most relevant framework is Gurr’s Relative Deprivation Theory, which seeks to offer a potential answer to why individuals from poorer socio-economic conditions in comparison to their peers or equals are at risk of turning to violent extremism. According to this theory, an individual who is deprived economically, politically or socially in comparison to others – in comparison to a desired point of reference – experiences relative deprivation, which fuels frustration. As a result of this frustration individuals gravitate towards violent extremism and radicalization. In other words, it is not absolute deprivation that induces individuals to commit acts of violence but rather their perception of their position relative to others. The introduction of relativity dismantles the understanding of radicalization as an absolute concept, but rather views it from the lens of individual expectation and perception.

Merton’s Strain Theory bears similarities to the Relative Deprivation Theory. Strain Theory is grounded on the assumption that although individuals possess the same desires and needs, not all can equally satisfy these. When individuals expect their desires and expectations to be fulfilled, but societies are rife with systemic inequalities and are unable to provide adequate means through which they can be achieved, then such “goal blockage” leads individuals to experience strain (an unpleasant emotional condition), paving the way for criminal and delinquent behavior. The strain that Merton refers to is not a direct cause of impaired income expectations, but rather of “… expectations regarding all manner of positive stimuli”. In other words, it is not the actual means of living such as income, but other underlying vulnerabilities, such as the inability to take part in communal life and community decision making that render certain individuals more susceptible to violence. Even though Sen’s Capability Approach has not been directly applied to the context of violent extremism, his argument that it is “what people are able to do and be, as opposed to what they have” that constitute the relevant terrain of comparison, may be an integral part of understanding the extent of inequality (i.e. lack of access) that the study of violent extremism and economic inequality engenders.
Perhaps the most pressing challenge in the field of violent extremism is that there can be no single and general checklist to determine who becomes a violent extremist as the answer varies from case to case. Based on the available literature, whilst some scholars, such as Khan\textsuperscript{23}, suggest that economic disparity and illiteracy could be the driving forces behind violent extremism, majority of the scholars do not see a direct mono-causal relationship between economic inequality and violent extremism. Coolsaet\textsuperscript{24} asserts: “For long, terrorism research has indicated that neither poverty nor socio-economic deprivation are direct root causes of terrorism. It is not just the most disadvantaged who embark on the path to terrorism”. Benmelech and Klor’s\textsuperscript{25} study on ISIS suggests that economic inequality is associated with fewer, not more, foreign fighters. The authors also point out that a large number of foreign fighters come from wealthy countries, with low-income inequality, providing examples of Belgium and France. Chen\textsuperscript{26}, Paxson\textsuperscript{27} and Li and Schaub\textsuperscript{28} state that economic inequality matters for violent extremism by affecting levels of deprivation and feelings of injustice. Economic inequality may in fact be a driver of violent extremism, albeit in certain conditions, e.g. where countries are ethnically and exclusively homogenous\textsuperscript{29}. Borum\textsuperscript{30} argues that an individual gravitates towards violent extremism for the purpose of improving his/her social status quo.

In light of available literature, this paper argues that sheer economic inequality is not a direct root of violent extremism. Rather, it is the social dimension of economic inequality - the sense of inequity, discrimination, exclusion, deprivation and real or perceived marginalization deriving from economic inequality, particularly where these factors are compounded by ethnic, sectarian, religious or other divisions, which feed into the separation of individuals from society and into the terrain of violent extremism. That said, it is those who no longer believe in equal opportunities, those who do not have the impression that they are granted freedom of choice and those that live in precarious conditions in neglected regions with little prospects of and limited access to decent work that are ripe for exploitation by violent extremist groups. It is this environment that economic inequality engenders, and not the mere presence of a rich-poor income gap, that is conducive for the wide array of motivations that draw individuals into joining violent extremist groups. Reiterating Coolsaet’s specific study on ISIS, “Syria provides them with an escape from this, and an instant opportunity to go from zero to hero ... It ... offers material wealth: a salary and a villa with a pool. It offers, for those who join in, power over others”\textsuperscript{31}.

4. Violent Extremism as a Prospect for Economic Gain

Although this paper has argued so far that economic inequality is not a direct root of violent extremism, it would be erroneous to undermine the prospect of economic gain as a credible reason and justification for joining violent extremist groups. According to a recent article, which includes an interview with a defector from ISIS, individuals join ISIS not out of piousness or ideological conviction but out of desperation for money. In addition to being paid in dollars, ISIS recruits are granted other monetary incentives. As the defector claimed: “I rented a house, which was paid for by ISIS ... it cost $50 per month. They paid for the house, the electricity. Plus, I was married, so I got an additional $50 per month for my wife. If you have kids, you get $35 for each. If you have parents, they pay $50 for each parent. This is a welfare state”\textsuperscript{32}. Although it has been reported that ISIS’ funds are decreasing, the group continues to pay its foreign fighters comparatively high compensation rates, allowing them to live in comfortable standards\textsuperscript{33}. In a recent report by the Foreign Affairs, Syrian fighters have begun to quit ISIS because the organization pays its foreign fighters considerably higher salaries than their
Syrian counterparts. These illustrate that economic vulnerabilities are too significant to be overlooked when analyzing the root causes of violent extremism. Governance solutions that deliver an inclusive development approach anchored in economic empowerment are necessary to prevent individuals from turning to violent extremism in the first place. As US Secretary of State John Kerry has said: “We have to do a better job of creating alternatives to violent extremism, alternatives that are as credible, as visible, as empowering and broadly available as we can make them”.

5. Moving Forward: Avenues for Future Research

Looking at existing evidence, the link between economic inequality and violent extremism needs to be based on the framework of unmet expectations, lack of hope, restricted economic mobility and enhanced discrimination. The recognition of capabilities, and lack of, in addressing which type of environment is conducive to violent extremism marks a promising start. “Evidence shows that economic opportunity is a better predictor of violent extremism than economic conditions, where educated individuals with no access to opportunities are more likely to be angry and frustrated at economic inequalities.” According to Graff, from the Brookings Institute: “In Yemen, for example, one official recently observed that most young people have no prospects in life and fanatics offer them the illusion that they can take power”.

Secondly, given that relative deprivation offers a rich framework with which to approach the relationship between violent extremism and economic inequality, it is important to understand that each case of radicalization unfolds in a unique path. Each individual’s background, grievances, motivations and expectations should be delved into separately to be able to develop a tailored and suitable intervention, adapted to local circumstances.

Finally, given that economic inequality induces a multi-dimensional disadvantage, and that the prospect for economic gain constitutes a fundamental push towards violent extremism, “only when hope in the future is offered will the breeding ground dry up.”
END NOTES


http://www.peacebuilding.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/e60a8a679f48427d592a1906daf569d4.pdf


21 Ibid. p. 52.


This background paper is part of a series that seeks to understand the root causes of violent extremism, as the processes of understanding violent extremism and preventing violent extremism are mutually constitutive. Unraveling the root causes of violent extremism, in an effort to prevent this process or stop it as early as possible, requires interventions that are embedded in consideration of greater social, economic, political and cultural settings that constitute a breeding ground for violent extremism. The preventive approach attempts at going beyond the security aspect of violent extremism and unfold the development-related causes of this global threat.

Violent Extremism and Migration

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Key Takeaways

1. The limited evidence available suggests that violent extremism may be a cause for, and consequence of, migration.
2. While not possible to speak in terms of a specific profile to fit all foreign fighters or a single root to violent extremism abroad, past foreign fighters may be used to discern a general model.
3. Estimations of Central Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq varies from source to source, partly because most travel to the region occurs from other countries.
4. Some countries have taken punitive measures to deter foreign fighters. However, this may be counter-productive in contexts.
5. Countries should acknowledge the threat emanating from returning foreign fighters and demonstrate a willingness to minimize the risk at hand, via non-punitive, preventive and community-based integrative measures.
1. Introduction

Violent extremism arises from the complex interaction of various political, socio-economic, ideological and personal vulnerabilities. While there is no blueprint for explaining why individuals join violent extremist groups, there are shared denominators. Individuals feeling alienated, excluded, disenfranchised, ill-treated and yearning for a sense of belonging or community are at risk of being radicalized, indoctrinated by extremist propaganda and recruited by terrorist groups. The violent extremism that is currently most well-known involves individuals who leave their country to become foreign fighters or to work for extremist networks. Although the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not new, the involvement of migrants in recent terrorist attacks has fueled the discourse on the link between immigration and violent extremism. Two specific risks have arisen as a result: the non-integration of migrants creating ground for individuals becoming prone to radicalization, and recruiters abusing the migration phenomenon to further perpetuate violent extremism. These have prioritized the need for integration and cohesion mechanisms through which newly arrived migrants can adapt to life in their host communities.

2. Theoretical Intersections of Violent Extremism and Migration

The sensitive nature of the topic renders it difficult to undertake research in a systematic manner. The limited evidence available suggests that violent extremism may be a cause for, and consequence of, migration. The intersection of the two global crises, violent extremism and migration, may be studied across different pillars.

The first areas involves violent extremism as a direct cause of forced migration and a complicating factor of voluntary returns both within the country and beyond its borders. Alternatively, the greater social and economic circumstances (i.e. brewing political conflict, instability, corruption and chaos) of which violent extremism is endemic may push individuals into migration, driving them to seek safety elsewhere.

Another area concerns individuals in refugee/internally displaced people (IDP) camps (referred to as “refugee camps” hereafter). Sagean’s Network Theory argues that migrant inflows, particularly from ‘terror-prone countries’, provide the necessary social bonds, dense framework and common background of prior trusted relationships that may be exploited by terrorist groups. In such an environment, individuals in refugee camps may gravitate towards radicalization. This is frequently thought to be caused by the existence or pervasiveness of religious education, the ability (or rather the lack thereof) to find gainful employment and constrictions on freedom of movement (encampment vs. open-camp policies). “Radicalization is especially relevant in crisis situations because it can create space for terrorist networks to operate”. However, host government restrictions to provide access or information on the matter continue to cloud research on this field.

Another area of study at the nexus of violent extremism and migration includes the risk of failing to integrate the vast majority of refugees into host communities, which may result in further marginalization and disenfranchisement. Receiving countries may naturally be concerned about the risk that a large influx of migrants could increase crime and insecurity. As a result, “hosts often want to place refugee encampments as far away from major population centers as possible—even if that means further stretching of what limited law enforcement capabilities they have”. A recent article claimed that “Danish MPs have forced the government into looking at ways of resettling refugees in camps outside cities”. Whether this type of accommodation fuels integration is yet to be answered. Furthermore, “the increasing number [of refugees] now living outside camps may be prohibited from
legal employment and education services. Some host countries will not acknowledge or register refugees—or, in some cases, children born in the host country”. Recent measures, such as Germany’s Integration Bill, have been introduced (and criticized by some for offering a carrot-and-stick approach) to spur the integration of refugees. Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) researchers determined that, “countries with ‘inclusive integration policies’ tend to provide the best conditions for social cohesion, to the benefit of both newcomers and general society. Similarly, restrictive policies can lead to xenophobic attitudes and the inability to see the benefits of diversity”. It is important to mention that effective integration policies do not offer absolute guarantees against violent extremism (i.e. Norway’s Anders Breivik case). While there is no single formula for “right” integration, it does seem that “policies that require people to shed fundamental aspects of their identity are unlikely to succeed”.

Another complicating factor are the returning foreign fighters. According to Taub’s recent article: “Terrorism experts say it’s Europeans who’ve traveled to fight with ISIS and are now coming home, not refugees or migrants, who pose the real threat”. The problem deepens when returning foreign fighters and radicalized refugees are able to tap into already existing organized crime networks. “Returned foreign fighters have gained in status—obtained a sort of ‘street cred’—that makes them able to recruit and radicalize others”. Although punitive measures and harsh steps may appear as a “quick fix”, the incentives may backfire (i.e. prisons as incubators of radicalization), escalating the very behavior they are meant to diminish. Increasing community engagement efforts in promoting a counter-narrative and improving de-radicalization and re-integration programs may prove longer-term solutions to preventing violent extremism.

Finally, involving migrants into PVE efforts may promise solutions. “The link to displacement can illustrate that countering violent extremism is as much about human rights, development, and empowerment, as it is about military, intelligence, and security interventions”. Additional efforts to engage refugees who are at risk of being radicalized and a focus on solutions through viewing them not as victims, or perpetrators of violence, but as vectors of change may open up new avenues for research. The next section expands upon some of the issues raised above and offers new insight in an attempt to unravel the underlying vulnerabilities and grievances that would cause someone to migrate to another country for the purposes of engaging in violent extremism.

3. A Schematic Model for Engaging in Violent Extremism Abroad

The starkest misconception regarding violent extremism is the assumption that terrorists are underprivileged and uneducated individuals on the fringe of society. “... governments often fail to recognize that IS appeals to a cross-section of citizens. There are seventeen-year-old hairdressers, established businessmen, women abandoned by husbands … families who believe their children will have better prospects in a caliphate, young men, school dropouts and university students”. Although it is not possible to speak in terms of a specific profile that fits all foreign fighters or a single root to violent extremism abroad, the incidents of past foreign fighters may be used to discern a schematic model.

The first step for foreign fighters is to decide to join a conflict. The Soufan Group’s recent study argues that “the involvement of family or a close acquaintance in the radicalization process is a frequent determinant of the outcome. Where one joins, another is more likely to follow”. The nature and range of drivers that cause a person to migrate in order to engage in a fight abroad is wide – from identity,
ideology, religion to feelings of collective discontent and a relative sense of inequality (see Gurr, 1970, Relative Deprivation Theory\textsuperscript{17}). Studies point to terrorist organizations’ ability to instill in potential foreign fighters a distinct identity and moral and spiritual superiority\textsuperscript{18}. Khosrokhavar\textsuperscript{19} argues that when an individual is searching for a deeper meaning to his or her existence crowned with a distinctive identity, a window of opportunity opens up for extremists. Tucker\textsuperscript{20} suggests that foreign fighters who join ISIS are mostly young migrants with little theological background, rather embarking upon this path for the pursuit of community belonging and solidarity. “Overall, security officials believe that the decision to go fight in a foreign conflict is usually less an act of religious commitment than of young male rebellion and thirst for adventure”\textsuperscript{21}. Terevidic argues that only 10\% of fighters in the Syrian war possess strong religious beliefs\textsuperscript{22}. The domineering belief of many scholars and practitioners is that the incentive for economic gains and promised riches is the main driver of foreign fighters\textsuperscript{23}. The anecdote below illustrates this:

“Gulru Olimova grew up in Tajikistan, near the Afghan border (…) when she was 16, Gulru met a man called Loik Rajabov, and it wasn’t long before they were married. The couple went to live on the outskirts of the town, Kulyab, where they had three children. But like many young Tajiks, Rajabov struggled to earn a living for his family and had to make frequent trips to Moscow to work on construction sites. On his return from one of these trips, his mother-in-law told me, the black flag of Islamic State (Isis) was raised outside the family home. In autumn 2014, Rajabov took his wife and children with him to Moscow. A few months later he phoned his wife’s mother, Mairambi Olimova, from an unfamiliar number to say the family had moved to Syria”\textsuperscript{24}.

The second stage involves the foreign fighter to migrate to the war zone through specialized travel routes, in the process of which s/he connects with the fighting networks. Terrorist organizations welcome and exploit foreign fighters for different reasons\textsuperscript{25}. In the case of economic migrants who have recently left their home communities for economic motives (i.e. Central Asian migrants to Russia), they may be more susceptible to being recruited by terrorist organizations (and travelling to Syria and Iraq) for the perceived promise of economic gain. The third step concerns recruits’ training and fighting in the field of battle. These training camps give the foreign fighter a sense of mission and shared purpose. Networks form, deepen and strengthen as individuals become connected to another.

According to this model, the fourth step involves the return of foreign fighters into their home countries, having gained a certain “status”. This may be all the more dangerous in adding to a continued radicalization within existing criminal networks and sympathizers. “Sympathizers admired returnees from Iraq and Afghanistan, giving them the prestige to convince others to enter the fray”\textsuperscript{26}. The final step is to recruit others to join their cause.
Figure 1: A Schematic Model for Engaging in Violent Extremism Abroad

Although approximately 10,000 foreign fighters have lost their lives in the battle in Syria, this model illustrates a circular process, in which today’s recruits become tomorrow’s recruiters. Perhaps, it is noteworthy to mention hereby that the current flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq may be more alarming than before, owing to larger numbers of foreign fighters (more than 27,000 and from at least 86 countries as of March, 2016), the ease of travel (i.e. Turkey as a cheap and accessible transit route alternative, without visa restrictions), fighters’ new and distinct motivations (i.e. sectarianism), ties to existing as well as different networks, the existence of Al-Qaeda members and the influence of social media. In line with the PVE approach, preventive measures must be devised for each stage of this model to curb the danger posed by foreign fighters.

4. Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: A Transnational Phenomenon

“Today post-Soviet Central Asian countries are facing problems caused by old security challenges and the emergence of completely new threats”. The former involves the situation in Afghanistan, particularly its northern region where fighters are concentrated. Kazantsev writes that “UN Security Council papers stated ‘Afghan security forces estimated in March 2015 that some 6,500 foreign terrorist fighters were active in this country’”, 200 of which have origins in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Recent years have also witnessed the rise of a new Middle Eastern front, which has quickly gained significance in the Central Asian context. A particular risk is posed by IMU, historically the most threatening terrorist network in the region and an ally of Al-Qaeda, they have sworn allegiance to ISIS.

Estimations of Central Asian fighters in Syria and Iraq varies from source to source, partly because most travel to the region occurs from other countries. “Whereas one militant boasted that 2,000 Tajiks are currently based in Iraq and Syria, the Ministry of Interior has given a more circumspect figure of 500”. According to official sources, approximately 1,500 Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek radicals have travelled to Syria to take part in the conflict. International Crisis Group notes that, “out of the estimated 25,000 foreign fighters that have joined ISIS, 2,000 to 4,000 are from Central Asia”.
High-Level Experts Meeting on Framing Development Solutions to Preventing Violent Extremism  
13-15 June 2016, Dushanbe, Tajikistan

As seen in Figure 2, Central Asian recruits are primarily from Uzbekistan, including Uzbek citizens and ethnic Uzbeks from the Ferghana Valley and Osh region of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Whilst the majority of recruits arrive directly from their homeland, an increasing number of extremists undergo a process of radicalization as migrant workers, most often in Russia then in Turkey, prior to travelling to Syria and Iraq. Based on Lemon’s own dataset comprising 120 Tajik militants, over 80% of the recruitment occurred in Russia. Putz argues: “the greatest threat, perhaps, to the region is not necessarily ISIS but the Caucasian networks which radicalize and recruit Central Asians working in Russia”. Millions of Central Asian laborers are employed in Russia; many are cut off from family ties, are subject to frequent police brutality and extortion and are poorly assimilated. These push “migrants towards seeking closer ties with non-Russian communities of a similar cultural and religious background. Many Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants are exposed to fundamentalist teaching after their introduction to these communities and to jihadist-oriented groups (including Salafist groups), preaching radical versions of Islam in Russian cities.”

The anecdotes below offer further insight:

“The case of Umed, a twenty-seven-year-old Tajik from Khujand working on a Moscow construction site, typifies this process. Umed became more interested in Islam when living in Russia in 2011 and started attending the Park Pobeda mosque in Moscow. Soon after, he was approached by a group of Dagestanis after Friday prayer. They invited him to a ‘prayer meeting’, in which the leader talked about the need for jihad against non-believers. Quickly, Umed started associating with his old friends less and began talking of the need for jihad.”

“On September 1, Iraqi television broadcast an “interview” with a 25 year-old Tajik called Olim Yusuf. Yusuf describes how he was recruited whilst working on a building site in Russia, where some six million Central Asian migrants work. After flying to Turkey, he crossed the border into Syria, where he spent two weeks training with other Russian-speaking Islamic State militants under the command of Chechen emir Umar Shishani.”

Central Asian migrants experience “a sense of exclusion both in Russia and their homeland, caused by the fact that since they are forced to work abroad they are no longer part of the society in their homeland, and simultaneously, they are not accepted as part of the society in the host country, either.” According to the same study, most Central Asian migrants in Russia are involved in low-skilled and poorly paid jobs, as a result of which joining ISIS comes to be seen as an opportunity to receive appreciation and improvement of their status quo. “Their [ISIS] media campaigns do pick up on the Central Asian migrants’ negative experiences in Russia, for example, but most of the messaging
is positive, focusing on ISIS efforts to build a caliphate and the new life it offers to those who join the struggle ... [while] local grievances are the main reasons behind many people’s decision to join ISIS. The promise of fixed income also appears as a tempting prospect for Central Asian migrants.

After the Tajik fighter Kurbonov was killed in August 2014, his brother declared that “[he] was not a religious man, and we do not understand how he was persuaded to go to war ... Like many young Muslims who join extremist groups, the Central Asian recruits appear to lack theological knowledge of the Qu’ran, Sunnah, Sharia or hadith. This renders them even more vulnerable to the messages of extremist groups, which lack strong religious foundations.

Central Asian countries have taken regulatory measures to deter foreign fighters. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have introduced laws that penalize fighting abroad. “The Tajik government – despite also offering amnesty to those who return – has passed a new “law on mercenaries” according to which unrepentant militants can be sentenced to 20 years in prison. In March 2014, a court in Kazakhstan sentenced two fighters to seven years in prison. Such punitive measures will do little to stem the tide of Central Asian fighters. Uzbekistan’s law, which bans terrorism training, is broadly understood as against foreign-trained fighters. The Uzbek law does not penalize individuals, who have no previous conviction, who turn themselves in. No such provision exists in the regulatory frameworks of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and skepticism abounds on Uzbekistan’s preparedness to rehabilitate returning foreign fighters. A Tajik political analyst claimed: “usually these types of laws are passed when they do not want the fighters to come back. The government is basically scaring them away, creating barriers to stop them from coming home.” Other regulatory initiatives include the tightening of religious expression and practice. “Tajikistan is the only country where under-18s are not allowed to pray in mosques, and where citizens need to request official permission to study religion abroad.” In 2011, Kazakhstan introduced a new Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations, which seeks to inoculate the society from extremist ideologies via promoting traditional religion. This new law is an amendment to the 1992 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, stipulating that people possess the freedom to believe and practice their beliefs. According to Lemon’s analysis, the recent law has “rendered it exceedingly difficult for religious groups to legally register”.

The situation in Afghanistan, in combination with the increasing threat of ISIS, adds to the destabilization of the region as a whole. “The region’s other international partners, including, the EU and the U.S., should also recognize that Central Asia is a growing source of foreign fighters and consider prioritizing policing reform, as well as a more tolerant attitude to religion, in their recommendations for combating the problem.” According to Heathersaw and Montgomery, the belief that a more observant Muslim population in Central Asia increases the region’s chances to support radicalization is a misreading of the link between politics and religion. Lemon asserts that: “Most local Islamic leaders have been clear in their rejection [of] extremist interpretations of Islam. And it is these more moderate voices that have greater support in the region”.

In this regard, “under current conditions the state should provide opportunities for Muslims to receive a proper religious education premised upon tolerance, acceptance of diversity, gradualness in religious teaching, and inculcating a sense of positive action in the minds and hearts of Muslims.” The Economists’ 2016 article “In Central Asia, Islamic State adds a new twist to a diplomatic puzzle” supports disallowing terrorists from spreading their propaganda through promoting religious freedom with this anecdote: “Last year, it [Uzbekistani government] released a popular Muslim personality,
Hayrulla Hamidov, after he had served five years of a six-year sentence. With his combination of sports reporting and light Islamic teaching, Mr. Hamidov is probably better at warding ordinary people away from IS than any heavy-handed government spin doctor could be.”

5. Foreign Fighters Returning to Central Asia: Prevention through Integration

The spillover from the Syrian war, and the fear that returning foreign fighters will intend to spread the ideas of violent extremism, deserves attention as even a few experienced and skilled returnees can infer serious risk. In this regard, “alleged plots included bomb attacks in Bishkek and Dushanbe and on strategic road tunnels through the Tajik mountains”\(^{59}\). The President of Tajikistan stated that, in November 2014, authorities arrested 13 members of the Jundallah terror organization, who gained their training in Syria, as they were preparing for an attack in Tajikistan\(^{60}\). Furthermore, the propaganda videos of former Central Asian commanders, who propagate the ideology of ISIS and summon Central Asian citizens to overthrow the existing political system are alarming\(^{61}\).

“A substantial proportion of foreign terrorist fighters (approximately 1 out of 9 jihadists), if not neutralized in their operational spaces (e.g. Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Syria, etc.), or rehabilitated by their respective national authorities, often cause serious security issues upon return to their countries of origin”\(^{62}\). Particular to the return of Central Asian foreign fighters, the permeability of national borders, the geographic proximity of the region, heightened terrorist activity worldwide and the questionable capabilities of national intelligence services intensify the challenge. Whilst migrants returning to Central Asia may not necessarily constitute a target group for radicals, the fragile socio-economic situation surrounding the region may render migrants more susceptible to being lured into radical ideologies.

That being said, enforcing ever-stricter laws on religious practice, developing a discourse of Islamic danger and executing harsh penalties may be counter-productive. “Such policies also reduce the likelihood that [foreign fighter] family members would speak to authorities for fear of incriminating their relatives”\(^{63}\). Returning foreign fighters that have difficulty integrating and lack sufficient support from their community may be more likely to enter the terrain of violent extremism, pursue direct recruitment strategies and form a bridge between extremist networks both outside and inside the region\(^{64}\). Central Asian countries should acknowledge the threat emanating from returning foreign fighters and demonstrate a willingness to minimize the risk at hand, via non-punitive, preventive and community-based integrative measures. This requires the welcoming of returning foreign fighters through dialogue and openness rather than static bans or rigid legislation. Executing a “one-size-fits-all” approach, where prison sentences are the ultimate punishment, fails to address the variety of motives that both drive and disengage foreign fighters, as well as the individual risk assessment that is necessary to tackle each case.” Adopting more appropriate and effective approaches to dealing with the [foreign fighters] issue will by extension help to discourage and prevent the emergence of such unpredictable homegrown threats”\(^{65}\).
END NOTES

4 Ibid. p. 4
10 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
This background paper is part of a series that seeks to understand the root causes of violent extremism, as the processes of understanding violent extremism and preventing violent extremism are mutually constitutive. Unraveling the root causes of violent extremism, in an effort to prevent this process or stop it as early as possible, requires interventions that are embedded in consideration of greater social, economic, political and cultural settings that constitute a breeding ground for violent extremism. The preventive approach attempts at going beyond the security aspect of violent extremism and unfold the development-related causes of this global threat.

Integrating Gender in PVE Policy and Programming:¹
What it means, Why it matters and How to do it

Draft Working Paper
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Key Takeaways
1. Instead of narrow focus on ‘violent’ extremism, it needs to be acknowledged that any extremist ideology spreading into the mainstream provides the space for violence to take root and become normalized.
2. There is a need for a new framing that addresses the social and identity based aspects of the extremism phenomenon, alongside the economic, security and governance issues.
3. Targeting of and impact on women of current violent extremist movements is not accidental or ‘collateral damage.’ It is deliberate, tactical and strategic. However, there is still a tendency to ignore the gendered aspects of men’s vulnerabilities and motivations for joining extremist movements.
4. International rhetoric in support of women’s rights and organizations is not matched by action. Individuals taking a stand to counter extremism, provide alternative visions and defend human rights and women in particular are targeted, across geographies and cultural contexts, curtailing their ability to inform the public about basic human rights and equality, or religious tenets that preach respect and coexistence.
5. The PVE agenda risks doing more harm than good if governments use it to limit space for civic activism and debate.
1. The Relevance of Gender Analysis in Understanding and Framing PVE

From the 2015 US Summit on Countering Violent Extremism to the UN Security Council and UNSG's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE) and regional and national policies, the international community has recognized the importance of gender analysis and the work of women-led organizations, in preventing and countering extremism. But why does gender matter and what does it mean in practice and in terms of PVE programming?

In addressing violent extremism, gender matters because the actors, the driving ideology and the actions of such groups are deeply gendered, meaning that feminine and masculine role models are separated, as are the forces that challenge them and provide alternatives. Among the critical lessons that emerge from a gendered approach to addressing violent extremism are the following:

a) It is not enough to focus on ‘violent’ extremism. Extremist ideology that spreads into the mainstream provides the space for violence to take root and become normalized. The gender lens is a very effective ‘early warning’ indicator of rising extremism – because the violence it condones is often either invisible or deemed to be ‘cultural’, yet it is the same phenomenon that metastasizes and spreads into society and becomes ‘terrorism’ or ‘violent extremism’.

b) Framing of this as ‘countering or preventing’ violent extremism is too limited and ineffective. Extremist movements recruit on the basis of promising desirable alternatives to people’s grievances. They also tap into the aspirations of youth and women. Simply being against them is not enough.

c) The international community must articulate and stand by a set of values and principles that promote dignity, rights, peace and pluralism as positive, non-violent and practical alternatives. As discussed below local actors are leading the way in this regard. There is a need for a new framing that addresses the social and identity based aspects of the extremism phenomenon, alongside the economic, security and governance issues.

If PVE policies and programming do not take these aspects into account, the strategies designed to curtail the forces of violent extremism will not only fail, but may exacerbate conditions and contribute to their increase.

2. Gender in Recruitment: Who, Why and How/Men and Women

We take it for granted that the majority of fighters and adherents to extremist movements are young men recruited and groomed by older men. But why? What attracts them? What makes them vulnerable to recruitment? There is significant research being done currently on the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors associated with radicalization. The reality is that there are countless variables and significant differences from one context to the other that affect both women and men.

Economic incentives are relevant in some settings – especially where poverty is rife and jobs are few, but they are not the common denominator across countries. Other socio-political and psycho-social factors are more evident.
Many of those who join and support these movements have borne the brunt of decades of state corruption, poor governance, repressive regimes, and poor development policies. Although they come from various socio-economic classes, they have witnessed or experienced rising inequality and absence of opportunity to live dignified lives. As young men they are facing a challenge of fulfilling their own socially circumscribed or ‘gendered’ roles such as being good providers and husbands. Yet many lack the skills or education needed to compete in a competitive and often service-oriented work place. The men also find themselves in some places in competition with women – who may be better educated- for the few scarce jobs that do exist.

There is also a consistent lack of religious literacy across many settings. So young men and women who are religious, are being lured with extremist religious ideology that implicitly and explicitly condones the use of violence or discrimination against ‘outsiders’ or ‘others’ in the name of God, or ethnic or racial supremacy.

The targeting and recruitment of women has also captured the world’s attention. In general, women’s involvement in armed ideologically-driven movements is not a new phenomenon. They are often motivated by their need to assert agency and garner respect for contributing to a greater – preferably just – cause. Many also join to avenge crimes committed against themselves by state actors, or against their families and male relatives. In the case of current movements that claim the mantle of Islam, the recruitment of women is evident in a number of ways.

In Pakistan a radical Sheikh on local radio stations recruited the mothers of young men by railing against the injustice and corruption of the state, and offering the promise of a just and equitable Islamic society. The women donated their gold and encouraged their sons to join the Pakistani Taliban movement. Additionally, in Pakistan, the growth of women-only madrassahs – religious schools with funding from various sources including Gulf Arab states and individuals – has provided a steady flow of women who are educated in regressive, Wahhabi style interpretations of Islam. The curricula are designed by mainly men with three key goals: to educate girls to be ideal mothers, train them to perform their domestic chores, and ensure women preserve and transmit conservative Islamic traditions and beliefs to their off-spring. The number of women attending these madrassahs in Pakistan is increasing as more facilities and financial incentives are offered. These religious schools rely on memorization of select religious texts. The texts selected include passages that convey the overt rejection of women’s presence in the workforce and in other public spaces. In such a conservative society, this targeting of women is interpreted as commitment to religion.

Meanwhile the recruitment of young (mostly under 18) women in Europe reflects the tensions that mostly second and third generation migrants are experiencing. The pressures are immense from all sides. At home and within their communities, they may be pressed into conforming with conservative and submissive notions of femininity – to heed the guidance of their parents and live restricted lives. While they may seek greater freedom of choice and agency, the hyper-sexualized society they live in, also puts pressures on them.

For young men and women in the West, a sense of alienation, desire to belong and contribute to a greater cause are factors that make them vulnerable to recruitment online. Many are also subjected to sexual grooming or seduction – making them unknowing victims as well.

3. Gender in the Ideology of Extremist Movements

In the past twenty years since the seminal 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, there has been a rising backlash against women’s rights across cultures, religions, and regions. Every major
world religion – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism – is witnessing the outgrowth of an extreme minority that exploits religion to justify intolerance, oppression and violence. There is also growing ethno-nationalism with similar traits.

Women’s basic physical and legal rights and security are at the center of these ideological battles. In each instance, the vociferous minority has made significant strides into mainstream debate and daily life. Women are facing new challenges, ranging from limitations on reproductive health rights in the United States, to girls’ access to education as witnessed in the attacks on schoolgirls in Pakistan and Nigeria, to the accelerated spread of the hijab and niqab among Muslims also in Central Asia and the Western Balkans who previously did not adhere to such dress codes.

This targeting of and impact on women is not accidental or ‘collateral damage.’ It is deliberate, tactical and strategic. While the dominant voices and leaders of rising conservatism and extremism are male, women are both active and passive supporters of these ideologies. It is notable that movements that espouse discriminatory attitudes towards women are making a great effort to reach out and co-opt them while secular states that claim to uphold women’s rights tend to minimize and marginalize women’s movements fighting for equality. On the other hand, the women that actively support these extremist ideologies often don’t feel that they are being discriminated but on the contrary, for these women it’s a privilege to hand over the heavy responsibility of decision making and breadwinning to men.

The ideologies espoused exploit these grievances and aspirations of the young. Extremist movements tap into basic human needs, including the desire for dignity, respect, and economic, political and social inclusivity. They use political, moral, religious, and social discourses to support their agendas. They also promise justice and retribution for those who may have experienced violence at the hands of the state or foreign powers. And they promise social inclusivity for those women who have been abandoned by their own community due to liberal sexual behavior or even sexual or gender-based violence.

Masculinity and sexuality are key factors of extremist ideology as they emphasize and justify patriarchy and the subservience of women as models of a moral and just society. In non-western settings, they typically tie concepts of women’s rights to notions of ‘western’ immorality² and feminism as an extension of colonialist politics.³ They create boundaries between women and men, manifested through legal and physical means, including the regression of women away from the public space and life. They promulgate rigid understandings of religious texts that define what it means to be a good wife, daughter, or woman.⁴ Similarly the rights and responsibilities of men are clearly articulated, and there is often a clear implication that women are under the protection (and by extension, ownership) of men.

The actions against women clearly demonstrate this ideology. Women are either co-opted (and recruited as noted above) into joining the forces, or coerced into providing services or being used for sexual exploitation and violence (as with the Yazidi women in Iraq) or they are targeted and silenced for daring to challenge the ideology. The attacks are evident in various settings.

In the public sphere, using the pulpit and media, the targeting of women is either condoned or encouraged. Often women are blamed - the way they dress, the places they frequent, their
mannerism or fact that they are alone - for the physical attacks they endure. The mainstream and social media platforms are powerful tools that fringe actors use to convey their viewpoint.

In the political sphere, women are accused of indecency and often face threats to their life for daring to speak out or enter politics. The movements also use women strategically in politics and propaganda. In Algeria, political party quotas for women were introduced as calculated “window dressing” to gain favor with the middle class and the West. In many instances participation in democratic processes (elections) is used to legitimate (and claim popular backing) for repressive governments or for repressive legislation. In the legal sphere, the suspension of equal rights legislation and introduction of discriminatory laws is both a means and ends for conservative/extreme movements. Governments, even if not religious in nature, appease movements and conservative forces by supporting and often promoting push back on women’s rights. The issues vary across regions, but the impetus to control women’s bodies and legal persona is shared and a strategy for countering contestations on power or to solidify power.

Extremists have also used gaps in education such as illiteracy to influence youth and communities. Religious education is taught in mosques and emphasizes prayer and rituals, with little awareness of religious values. In Yemen, private Salafi schools funded and managed by Saudis inject regressive views and one-sided religious teachings directly into the education system.5

4. The Relevance of Gender in Responses: Locally Rooted, Globally Connected Women’s Movements

Given the targeting of women, it is no surprise that women’s rights movements across the world have been among the first to warn against and respond to the rise of extremism. Despite profound risks, many women are taking a stand to counter extremism, provide alternative visions and defend human rights.

Just as extremist movements are locally rooted and globally connected, so too are women’s movements. However, the organizations and individual leaders that collectively form women’s movements in countries across the region do not have the resources, structures, or extensive outreach capabilities of the extremists. Despite shared concerns and values, there can be fragmentation among them. Their capacity for developing and implementing long term strategies are often limited by the need to respond to more immediate crises and needs on the ground or tightening security conditions.

They are further hindered by attacks from national states and a lack of recognition from the international policy community. Too often, despite the commitments to Security Council Resolution 1325 and rhetorical support for women’s leadership and participation, the perspectives and experiences that women bring forward are categorized as “women’s issues” or disconnected from peace and security and now, PVE-related debates and decisions.

Yet the reality on the ground, across countries affected by extremism, is that these pro-peace and pro-plurality women-led organizations and movements are the rare locally rooted, transnational groups that have mobilized to counter rising extremism and they can boast decades of experience in doing so. Their efforts could have a powerful, positive impact if national and international policy actors heeded their leadership and knowledge.
5. The Policy Context and Political Realities

There is significant political or rhetorical support for the inclusion of gendered analysis and support to women-led organizations in PVE related work. At the policy level for example the following commitments are notable. However, the political agenda has caused critical challenges for civil society actors, especially women (as summarized below).

The Policy Commitments: A number of policy commitments have been made in the context of women's empowerment and countering and preventing violent extremism. The first major commitment was with the February 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) that referenced the importance of women and gender perspectives in addressing extremism. The Summit, which drew in US-based and international state and non-state actors, highlighted the need for socio-economic responses and encouraged support for innovative practices by civil society, youth, and women. It also noted the importance of gender perspectives in the analysis of drivers and mitigations of extremism.

In June 2015, the European Regional Summit on countering violent extremism (CVE) called for support to women's networking. Focusing on youth and women’s activism, the Summit concluded that improved networking among existing women-led civil society organizations is essential.

In October 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2242 emphasized the critical need for women’s leadership and support for the inclusion of women’s organizations in strategy development and programming to address extremism. Finally in January 2016, the UN Secretary General’s Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism calls for protection and empowerment of women as central consideration of strategies devised to counter terrorism and violent extremism. The Plan of Action emphasizes that there is also a need to ensure that efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism do not impact adversely on women’s rights.

The Political Reality: Despite these commitments however, the reality is far removed from the policies. There are a number of pervasive challenges.

- First, there is still a tendency to ignore the gendered aspects of men’s vulnerabilities and motivations for joining extremist movements. Gender is very much conflated with women.

- Second, in the discussions about women and PVE there is a tendency to view them in three simplistic categories: passive victims, perpetrators of violence or as mothers that can be recruited to fight radicalization in their homes. The activism of women through their organizations and movements is either ignored or taken for granted. Even when they are addressed, there is a tendency to expect them to follow the policy directives of states and multilaterals, as opposed to having them engaged in the analysis and policy development processes. In other words, women’s expertise and knowledge is not valued. They are ‘talked at’ as opposed to being ‘listened to’.

- Third, there is also a tendency among some cohorts of feminist academia to ‘speak for’ women, as they fear that states are instrumentalizing women’s activists. This is also damaging, as it denigrates and undermines the leadership and courage that women in many countries are demonstrating.
Finally, for women-led organizations active in the realm of rights, peace and prevention of extremism is far removed from the political rhetoric. The PVE agenda is doing more harm than good if governments are using it as an excuse to limit space for civic activism and dissent. The challenges are very real. Strong, open, and vibrant civil societies are critical to the prevention of extremism, but states, including those strongly allied with Western governments are using the fight against terror and violent extremism to suppress legitimate NGOs, media, opposition political groups, and individuals who criticize state policies and actions. Moreover, the turmoil across the Middle East, North Africa and Asia (MENA/Asia) that is prompting mass displacement also constrains local civil society to organize, deepen expertise and impact, as their staff is forced to flee when faced with oppression from state and non-state forces.

International rhetoric in support of women’s rights and organizations is not matched by action. Women in particular are targeted, across geographies and cultural contexts, curtailing their ability to inform the public about basic human rights and equality, or religious tenets that preach respect and coexistence. At the international level we are witness to serious efforts by conservative governments and groups to push back on guarantees for women. As such, the international arena is no longer a space where the complexities of women’s status and the challenges faced by activists in promoting rights can be taken up. In the absence of legal supports and guarantees, extremists are filling the vacuum, spreading their own intolerant ideology, slandering and threatening women human rights defenders (WHRDs).

Women defending human rights have to navigate a narrow path of maintaining their independence in the face of immense pressure from governments that want to co-opt their agenda without addressing their demands. Simultaneously in their efforts to limit funding of extremism, many governments have instituted financial restrictions making it impossible for local NGOs to access even the limited international resources that exist. Local organizations face difficulties as they try to operate with flexibility and sustain themselves.

Across the world governments are forming fully funded shadow NGOs with access to international spaces but advocating regressive messages on rights. In the Arab world, since the 2011 revolutions, women’s rights groups have also had to contend with the negative legacies of ‘state feminism’ espoused by past regimes. Islamists and extremists deliberately equate them with past regimes or western immorality to undermine their credibility, and target those who persist in their activism.

When major powers such as the United States frame women’s empowerment and leadership as beneficial to their security interests, they feed into the rhetoric of extremist groups who link gender equality with western immorality or state corruption. Strong rhetoric in the Security Council on the importance of women’s organizations (as in Resolution 2242) that is unmatched with a demand for women’s security and protection guarantees, signifies that when geo-politics and short-term state interests come into the equation, global commitments to women are still of secondary importance. The overemphasis on women as mothers that warn against extremism can be downright dangerous for activists. They can be accused of being ‘instrumentalized’ as de facto ‘frontline whistleblowers’ for western governments, and face even greater threats. They can also put other women at risk.

Simultaneously despite the promise to support women’s civil society organizations, funding for NGOs is growing more precarious. There is an assumption that such organizations are inherently risky – either because they are unknown, or because they work among communities affected by extremism. Donors are afraid of funds inadvertently reaching ‘terrorist’ or that corruption or incompetence obstructs the demand for impact and results. As such the ‘appetite for risk’ among
donors is reduced. The irony is self-evident, however. As the risk being taken is by independent civil society organizations and leaders, who are willing to face death threats to serve their societies. There is a need for a paradigm shift in thinking and approach – moving away from the concept of civil society being a risk, to valuing their knowledge, judgment and commitment. In effect, the appetite for risk should be replaced with the ‘appetite for trust’.
**END NOTES**

1. This paper draws on existing publications by ICAN and the authors, and recent reflections based on practical experiences of the authors.
2. Yemeni scholar and journalist, Sep 2013.
3. Ibid.
This background paper is part of a series that seeks to understand the root causes of violent extremism, as the processes of understanding violent extremism and preventing violent extremism are mutually constitutive. Unraveling the root causes of violent extremism, in an effort to prevent this process or stop it as early as possible, requires interventions that are embedded in consideration of greater social, economic, political and cultural settings that otherwise can enable the conditions conducive for violent extremism to thrive. The preventive approach attempts at going beyond the security aspect of violent extremism and unfold the development-related causes of this global threat.

Youth and Violent Extremism

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Key Takeaways

1. Three types of causes and drivers of radicalization are particular relevant for youth: identity crisis, political disenfranchisement, and socio-economic exclusion.
2. Youth are especially vulnerable to radicalization through the following means: media and communication technologies, mosques and religious schools, social networks (both on-line and off-line).
3. Many regular youth-focused development projects already contribute to addressing structural causes of youth radicalization.
4. To increase PVE-effectiveness of youth-focused development work much more efforts should be spend on identifying specific vulnerable groups and geographic targeting of interventions.
1. Introduction

Radicalization and violent extremism are intergenerational phenomena that can affect people in different age cohorts. Yet youth, which is defined here as a group composed of 14-30 years old, occupies a special space in discussions dealing with issues of understanding and preventing violent extremism. While the existing literature differs in terms of the exact role and place of youth in the phenomenon of violent extremism, there is a general agreement about the need to pay close attention to this group. As the summary of the first ever debates in the UN Security Council on violent extremism stated: “youth must ... be at the heart of efforts to counter violent extremism and promote peace”.

One reason why youth are so central to discussions about radicalization and violent extremism is that young people constitute a dominant or very large group in radical and extremist organizations. This is consistent with a historical pattern of young people being disproportionally drawn to radical activities and movements (both peaceful and violent – i.e., university radicalism in the West in the 1960s, the Red Guards in China’s Cultural Revolution, etc.). The very names of some prominent violent extremist organizations in the contemporary world contain references to youth – Taliban (translated as “Students”) and Al-Shabab (translated as “Young”). As a result of this any forms of engagement with extremist organizations, and the success of policies such as de-radicalization, thus requires understanding the beliefs, motivations and behaviors of the young members of these organizations.

Another reason for a special focus on youth is that they are beset by a set of specific vulnerabilities (identity crisis, political disenfranchisement, and socio-economic exclusion) which make young people particularly susceptible to the appeal of ideologies promoting radical views and violence. Youth constitute a major pool of potential recruits for all sorts of emerging extremist organizations. Work on preventing violent extremism should thus consider addressing these particular vulnerabilities in order to reduce the risks of youth involvement in violent extremism. Finally, undertaking preventive work without direct involvement of young people in designing and implementing preventive measures can limit the effectiveness of such work and decrease the chances of addressing global violent extremism challenges.

This paper proceeds with a discussion of the main causes and drivers that lead young people to adopt radical views and extremist behavior. This discussion is informed by the literature’s understanding of the key vulnerabilities of youth. The paper then turns to outlining the means and modes of radicalization and recruitment. The final section provides a short overview of the types of youth-focused prevention policies that have been considered or implemented by national and international actors. Throughout the paper particular attention is given to arguments and evidences from the region that UNDP defines as Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (ECIS).

2. Causes and drivers of youth radicalization

Determinants of radicalization, which is understood here as the process of adopting a worldview that contradicts or falls outside the range of mainstream views, are complex and diverse. Reasons why radicalized individuals move beyond just endorsing non-mainstream beliefs and start engaging in violence also vary. With regards to youth radicalization, the literature highlights the following reasons/factors that lead young people to adopt radical views and violent methods to pursue their agendas: identity crises/quest for meaning; political disenfranchisement and repression; socio-economic inequality.

Identity crisis/quest for meaning. It is both common and expected that young people will engage in an exploration of who they are and to try to make sense of their own lives and the lives of the people around them. Such self-exploration and search for meaning is often an emotionally
complex and intense process. When the proper guidance and support are missing, the results of this search can be frustrating. An identity crisis and the ensuing frustration it generates is, for example, an important element in explaining the phenomenon of foreign fighters from Europe. Discussing his research at the March 2015 Security Council Debate on Preventing Violent Extremism, Peter Neumann emphasized that the young people he had studied “didn’t feel they had a stake in their societies. They often felt that, because of who they were, how they looked and where their parents or grandparents had come from, they weren’t European and they didn’t belong”.6

While young people can experience identity crises in any type of setting, societies that are themselves in transition appear to intensify young people’s search for meaning and identity. The 2012 Safer World study of youth attitudes and beliefs in the three Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) that share the Ferghana Valley highlights the challenges of transitional settings: “The group of under 24-year-olds has grown up and matured in a completely different political and historical context to previous generations: today’s Central Asian youth have no common Soviet identity, have been educated in an impoverished and deteriorating education system, have limited economic prospects and have been raised in an environment of nation-building and religious revival”.7 Transitional settings are characterized by the fact that old identities are challenged and in the process of dissolution, while the new ones are still fluid and not firmly established. This unsettled atmosphere can further complicate youth’s search for meaning and identity, thereby increasing young people’s vulnerability to radical ideological indoctrination.

Political disenfranchisement. Representatives of older generations typically control the decision making powers in modern societies. The UN Secretary General’s remarks at the UN Security Council’s first debate on violent extremism captured the essence of the problem in the following way: “Young people drive change, but they are not in the driver’s seat”.8 The lack of effective participation in decision making is part of the reason why youth often exhibit higher levels of distrust in political systems and institutions. Even in democratic systems that are based on genuine representation of societal interests, effective accountability mechanisms for keeping elites responsive, and the functioning rule of law, political processes do not meet the expectations of young people and hence generate some of their frustration and grievances. Ensuring the political inclusion of youth becomes even more problematic for democratic political systems when ethnic, sectarian, and religious divides exist in society.

Additional challenges for youth participation exist in societies where democratic principles and rules are less institutionalized. The title of the above mentioned Safer World report on Central Asian youth – “Nobody Has Ever Asked About Young People’s Opinions”– reflects the frustration of youth with the lack of meaningful engagement with decision making structures and the low responsiveness of governmental apparatuses to specific needs and priorities of young people. Youth in the region also appear to have a skeptical view of government-supported youth organizations and self-governing initiatives, characterizing them as more focused on entertainment than on genuine involvement in policy making.9 The governments’ employment of repressive measures with regards to political activism and the use of law enforcement and judicial institutions to intimidate political opponents, media organizations, and human rights activists contribute to the sense of injustice of the existing political and legal order among young people.
**Socio-economic inequality.** Young people often have a direct and immediate experience with various types of socio-economic inequality. They might face serious difficulties in finding a job, securing a place for job-related training, or receiving good quality education. They might grow up in families that experience systematic patterns of exclusion and marginalization. Even if they have not directly experienced socio-economic hardships, they are still exposed to the increasingly unequal wealth distribution and access to social services existing in many societies.

These global challenges for the socio-economic inclusion of youth have additional dimensions in the context of Central Asia – regional economies lack the capacity to absorb the large numbers of youth that join the work force every year, low education standards limit the set of skills available for young people, and weak or non-existent social protection systems have little to offer in terms of providing a safety net or support for the transition from education/training to the labor market. The socio-economic challenges in large parts of Eastern Europe and Central Asia are exacerbated by the recent economic crisis caused by a large drop in energy prices and the increase in geopolitical tensions in the Eurasian region. The economic crisis reduced the considerable demand for migrants’ labor in oil-producing countries of the region and put additional pressures on Central Asian countries which rely on labor migration and remittances to generate employment and income for large segments of their populations. Returning labor migrants – and the young constitute a major part of this group – can generate serious tests for the ability of the region’s governments and societies to absorb economic shocks.

Together, these three broadly defined bundles of factors - *identity crisis, political disenfranchisement, and socio-economic exclusion* - feed frustration among young people, increase their sense of isolation from society, and make the young ripe targets for ideological indoctrination and recruitment by violent extremist organizations. The causes and drivers of youth radicalization, obviously, cannot be limited just to these three broad categories of factors. Individual journeys to violent extremism might be a product of a different combination of drivers. While the above discussion focused on the ‘push’ factors, it is important to recognize the role of factors that can be conditionally conceptualized as ‘pull’ factors. Global and regional power politics, changing global culture and the banalization of violence, and the increasingly sophisticated and attractive communication campaigns by extremist organizations can also play an important role in explaining radicalization outcomes.

To conclude this short discussion of factors leading to youth radicalization it is important to mention one other major characteristic of the context in which the processes of radicalization of the young take place. Some societies in the ECIS region – especially those located in Central Asia – are experiencing what is known as the “youth bulge” phenomena. According to recent estimates, persons below 30 years old account for 51% of the population in Kazakhstan, 57% in Uzbekistan, and 64% in Tajikistan. It should be noted that even though this “youth bulge” is not in and of itself a direct driver of radicalization, it is a factor that exacerbates many of the identified conditions conducive to radicalization and violent extremism. While calls to transform the “youth bulge” from a problem into an opportunity are rhetorically appealing, examples of effective policies to achieve such transformation are scarce. In the context of preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts, the ‘youth bulge’ constitutes a confounding factor that cannot be ignored.

3. Means and modes of radicalization

The question about the specific mechanisms and channels through which people become radicalized receives a lot of attention in the literature. The general discussion about means of radicalization is very much relevant to the youth-focused discussion. At the same time, some of the available mechanisms and channels are exclusively targeting young people. This section briefly
summarizes some key findings of the literature and illustrates them with examples from the ECIS region. For the purposes of this paper we will use the following classification of means: media and modern communication technologies, schools, mosques, social networks, returnees.

**Media and communication technologies.** Young people are always fast and early adopters of technology, and this is particularly true in the wake of the internet revolution that changed the ways societies receive and circulate information. Given that so many young people lead digital lives today it is not surprising that internet-based media outlets and social networks play a role in drawing vulnerable youth towards radicalization.\(^4\), \(^5\), \(^6\) With market forces driving down the price of cameras and editing software, it is unsurprising that the sophistication and variety of extremists’ propaganda is constantly increasing, thus making it all the more difficult for governmental and societal actors to effectively counter it. Yet even more difficult is to counter the communication and indoctrination that occurs in small and tightly knit on-line communities out of sight of the public’s consciousness.

**Schools.** Schools are a typical target for radicalization as they provide a captive and malleable audience. Increasingly those seeking to radicalize the youth are founding and running their own schools, especially in areas lacking “government-funded programmes that provide similar educational or social services.”\(^7\) As these schools are focused on indoctrination rather than teaching skills or critical thinking they increase the vulnerability to radicalization of the students as they are “largely unprepared for the types of jobs needed to prosper in a modern economy.”\(^8\)

One recent study of the situation in Kyrgyzstan, for example, attributes the growing numbers of wahlhabists in the country to the fact that a large number of young people are recruited in the hundreds of unregulated and Pakistani- and Middle Eastern-funded madrassas in the country or receive scholarships for religious training abroad in South Asia or the Middle East. The belief is widespread that these madrasas carry a hidden agenda to teach youth extremist ideology. The study cites an expert formerly with UN Women in Bishkek who claims that wahlhabist institutions are growing because of the absence of government-funded programs that provide similar educational or social services, especially to youth whose parents are laborers in Russia.\(^9\)

**Mosques.** Places of worship constitute an important social setting where different actors can exert influence over young people. In such a setting of influence propagating extremist views and ideas might be a deliberate choice of those operating some of the mosques. Extremist views can also be instilled in the young due to the lack of adequate religious knowledge and background. The rapid proliferation of new mosques in Central Asia in the post-communist period led to a situation where many religious institutions lacked qualified personnel to conduct religious services or supervise the teaching. Yet it can be dangerous to over emphasise the role of mosques in the process of radicalization. While it is easy to pinpoint mosques as centers of radicalization due to there being “genuine instances in which religious institutions are used as a cover for political extremism and violence,” it needs to be put into a larger social context as merely one of many places that people congregate and are hence available for recruitment. Looking at it in this way we see that mosques are just one setting ripe for recruiters similar to more “mundane places such as cafes and gym clubs or in a more closed environment such as prison,”\(^10\) that have high rates of recruitment. A caveat though that many of these findings are based on recruitment data outside the ECIS region and it is yet to be seen whether these findings hold for the region.

\(^4\)\(^5\)\(^6\)\(^7\)\(^8\)\(^9\)\(^10\)
Social networks. Social networks are another means through which radicalization takes place. Popular culture aside, social networks exist both online and off, as they are most simply a description of the relationship ties between and among people. Given that social networks are about the relationships between people it is not surprise that they have been found to be “crucial in drawing vulnerable youths” towards radicalisation. While in general recruiters for radicalization will typically exploit social networks that are based on unifying conditions such as a shared identity (i.e. language, ethnicity, nationalism), the specifics of how social networks are used are based on cultural contexts. In a place such as the Western Balkans, recruiters manipulate social networks in small tight-knit but isolated villages, as well as the using the broader identity based factors of a social network such as politics and religion. While in Central Asia recruiters utilize personal and political social networks that are based on kinship, that are able to spread through multiple clans and tribes.

Returnees. Returnees from foreign conflicts can serve as another possible source of radicalization. Given the position of returnees between their home social networks and the extremist network they provide a point of contact between the two, coupled with the fact that they can be seen as either a heroic character or as an authority figure for vulnerable youth, they can be potent recruiters. Yet given the relatively small numbers of returnees there is currently a lack of substantial evidence concerning the role of the returnee in recruitment. Rather there is evidence that the returnee is just one of many tools that the recruiter utilize to take advantage of an existing social network.

This brief look at the manner in which recruitment for radicalisation occurs shows that it can take a variety of forms. Given the myriad of ways in which radicalization takes place there is no clear way to prevent recruitment for radicalization entirely. Even if a particular mode of recruitment is completely stopped, recruiters will just exploit another. This does not mean we should stop trying to prevent radicalization. Rather this is evidence of the necessity of addressing the grievances that lead to violent extremism, thereby limiting the underlying drivers that recruiters for violent extremism are able to exploit.

4. Practicing prevention: approaches and policies to date

The risks of youth radicalization in the ECIS region have been increasingly recognized by governments, civil society organizations, and the international community. This section provides a short overview of prevention-oriented responses that have been formulated to date. These responses are discussed under general thematic labels and examples provided are far from an exhaustive list of various initiatives – the intention here is just to illustrate what is being done with the support of developmental organizations and what are considered to be priorities in the work currently conducted on the ground. Responses are categorized in this section as follows: VE-focused research, work with faith-based organizations/schools, employment and livelihood opportunities, and community engagement.

Research. Significant efforts to better understand the local context and dynamics of radicalization have started to be employed throughout the region. Both academic and applied policy research studies have appeared in recent years. A large share of these studies are case studies of individual countries. These studies usually try to provide a general analysis of the violent extremism phenomenon with issues of youth radicalization being just one of the topics analyzed. The focus of the research work is usually on understanding the causes and means of radicalization in a particular country context. Also important for these studies are questions about specific motivations that drive young people into adopting radical beliefs and joining extremist organizations, as well as questions about socio-economic profiles and the geographic origins of radicalized individuals. Another common topic of

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research is content analysis of media discourses on the religious situation inside a country, online extremist propaganda, radicalization-related online forum discussion, etc.

The findings of these studies improve the general understanding of the challenges and provide directions for future research and policy work. For example, the government-commissioned 2015 report, “Comprehensive Assessment to Counter Violent Radicalisation in Kosovo” highlights the following findings:

Amid the diversity of motives and factors (of radicalization), a few stand out. Personal connections are paramount; the close friends and family of a violent extremist are the people most likely to succumb to radicalisation. Young men are heavily over-represented among violent extremists worldwide. Policy makers should take these well-established trends into account.26

Among its recommendations, the report stresses that the authorities, "with the aid of international partners, urgently need to tackle the country's inability to offer its youth the hope of meaningful, rewarding work".27

The limitations of these first generation studies, especially those purportedly directed towards providing specific policy recommendations, are the rather generic nature of some of the proposed recipes for preventing violent extremism. Research findings are also somewhat fragmented – for example, the information on socio-demographic and geographic profiles of extremists or on specific means of recruitment are often far from being systematic or complete – which makes it difficult to fine-tune specific preventive policies. There is also a recognition in the academic and policy making communities that further research is needed to better understand violent extremism phenomenon.

While further improvements in our understanding of the violent extremism phenomenon requires focused and systematic empirical research on causes, mechanism, and dynamics of radicalization, it is important to recognize the value and contribution of research work that is not explicitly focused on radicalization and violent extremism. One example of such work is the UNICEF-supported 2015 report, “Review of studies on factors that contribute to marginalization of adolescents and youth in Republic of Tajikistan.” Based on the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) concept methodology, the report systematically examines the findings of the country-level studies about different causes of marginalization.28 This type of research work can be valuable for understanding the specific socio-economic characteristics and types of risk factors and vulnerabilities that encourage youth radicalization.

Work with faith-based organizations/schools. There is a recognition of the importance of working with religious authorities and faith-based organizations to prevent radicalization of young people. For developmental organizations, this work takes a number of forms: support of intra/inter-religious dialogue, assistance in modernizing religious education curricula, support of media programs dealing with religious education, review of legislative provisions in the religious sphere.
The quality of religious education is seen as one key element in preventing youth radicalization. Religious leaders and educators play a major role in shaping the world view of young people, especially those who are enrolled in religious institutions or devotedly practice their religion. While it is governmental authorities that regulate the functioning of religious institutions and determine the curricula of religious schools, any significant reforms often require support of donors to provide needed expertise and resources. Even more resources-intensive are efforts to tailor and spread a message of religious tolerance and acceptance through different layers of society using mass media, dialogue platforms, and workshop and conference events.

In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a considerable amount of development partners' efforts goes to support media initiatives aimed at popularizing the principles of moderate Hanafi madhab, which is one of the traditional Islamic Sunni schools. While Hanafi madhab is an indigenous school for much of the Central Asian region, the chaotic period of post-Soviet transition led to a proliferation of different types of Islamic teaching and subsequently a confusion in religious understanding and views. The figures recently cited by the Director of the State Commission on Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic illustrate the scope of the problem. According to the official, about 90% of teachers at religious educational institutions were not able to pass teaching qualification exams to confirm their religious teaching credentials. The Director anticipates that many of the existing madrassas will be closed. The government is already piloting some theological college alternatives to provide quality religious education for adolescents and plans to intensify efforts to modernize formal religious education and raise awareness about moderate Islamic teachings at the secondary and university levels of the country's education system.

**Employment and livelihood support.** Unemployment and a lack of livelihood options are among the most frequently cited drivers of radicalization. Job creation and livelihood support is also a regular type of programming that development partners support in the region. Such programming not only provides means of subsistence for youth but also provides the opportunity to address effects of poverty and unemployment such as idleness, low self-esteem, and frustration. While this type of programming is common throughout the region, it also remains one of the most challenging types of development work, as creating new employment opportunities and generating jobs is a challenging task in any country.

Employment-generating schemes for youth is a part of a longer process which starts with receiving basic and life skills education, professional training and on-the-job skills enhancement. While there has been a considerable amount of knowledge generated on how the entire process can be supported, attempts to use this knowledge garnered from ‘regular’ development work across the region in order to target youth that is perceived as vulnerable to radicalization are still relatively few. One example, is with the recently developed program by UN team in Kosovo*, which is entitled “Conflict-prevention through inclusive employment: an economic development approach to preventing violent extremism in Kosovo”. The program focuses on what is called “peak vulnerability group” - young males aged below 21 who experience the major transition from full-time secondary education to job market. The purpose of the program is “to reduce the vulnerability inherent in the school-to-work transition... through directly engaging Kosovo school-leavers in employment and non-party political engagement.” The program envisions conducting risk analysis in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs to identify and select at-risk municipalities as priority cites for program activities.

Even when employment and livelihood support are not explicitly structured through the PVE lenses, there might be reasons to believe that they indirectly contribute to the prevention. In Tajikistan, for example, UNDP’s project “Livelihood Improvement of Rural Population” (LIPR) was
designed to target some of the most disadvantageous rural populations throughout the country. Among districts selected for the projects implementation were localities in the Ferghana Valley that have seen some of the largest numbers of community members leaving to join ISIS in Syria. The project activities have helped to economically develop the affected communities and improve local governance.31

**Community engagement.** This term is used here as a label for the various types of initiatives aimed at increasing levels of youth engagement in the life of their communities. The purpose of this engagement is to make young people a more active part of public discussions, allow them to raise their concerns in the public sphere and in official institutions, and to encourage youth participation in decision making. An important element of these initiatives are to support to youth-focused network, to generate collaborative work, and to increase dialogue and peer-to-peer exchanges. The emphasis in community engagement types of youth initiatives are increasingly based on youth-designed or co-designed projects.

Community engagement initiatives supported by the development community are common throughout the ECIS region. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recently implemented project “Dialogue for the Future: Promoting Coexistence and Diversity,” which was supported by UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), explicitly focused on increasing participation, awareness and influence of youth in policy dialogue on issues impacting B&H’s development and reform agenda (Dialogue for the Future, 2014). In Kosovo, the project “Co-design with Youth in Kosovo”, a pilot initiative on collaborative design with UN Kosovo and students from Universities in Pristina and Copenhagen, supported a large number of youth designed activities such as dialogue platforms, blogging on the community, environmental awareness campaigns, charity work, etc.32 In Kyrgyzstan, PBF-supported project seek to engage the youth in preparing local development plans (to integrate youth related activities and secure local budgets for their implementation), to strengthen capacity of local self-government staff on youth-related issues, and to popularize street sports to engage a wider strata of youth.33

To increase the effectiveness of these initiatives in preventing radicalization and violent extremism a more deliberate targeting is required. Youth that are most vulnerable to radicalization are often not the same youth that are easily accessible for project initiatives. The existing projects that fall under the community engagement label also tend to work on urban youth. In societies with a high proportion of rural population, which is the case for all Central Asian countries, rural youth appear to be underrepresented in projects of this type.

5. **Conclusion**

The paper provided a brief ECIS-centered overview of causes and drivers of youth radicalization summarizing various arguments articulated in the literature under the three general types of factors. It also examined the literature’s findings on channels and mechanisms through which young people get drawn into violent extremism networks. While this overview reveals the magnitude of drivers and mechanisms and reiterates what is by now a common point about there being no single path to radicalization, it also allows for a more analytically focused discussion of radicalization processes. Even though overall there are many paths to radicalization, it is clear that some are more prevalent and widespread. As such creating a thorough understanding of the widespread types and patterns of
radicalization, especially in regards to youth, can help better addresses challenges of violent extremism.

The paper also reviewed developmental policy responses articulated in the ECIS region. This review highlighted the need for more ground-level and context-specific research on radicalization issues. It also revealed the existence of a great deal of youth-related programming by developmental actors. This programming has already contributed in a generic manner to the reduction of the attractiveness of violent extremism by systematically addressing some of key youth vulnerability issues. Yet, much more has to be done to ensure that youth-related development initiatives are directly relevant to the prevention of violent extremism.
END NOTE

2 Noelle Richard, “Understanding and Supporting the Role of youth in Preventing violent extremism” presented at UNDP Global Meeting on Preventing violent extremism in Oslo, 14-16 March, 2016
3 It is important to note that radicalization should not always imply a negative world view – some views and positions, which were considered non-mainstream at their time, led to progressive societal changes (i.e. civil rights movements, women’s rights movements, etc.)
4 The transition from being a radical to becoming a violent extremist is not automatic and rarely linear. See on this...
5 Awan, 2016
7 “Nobody has ever asked about young people’s opinions”: Young people’s perspectives on identity, exclusion and the prospects for a peaceful future in Central Asia, Safer World, March 2012.
9 “Nobody has ever asked about young people’s opinions”: Young people’s perspectives on identity, exclusion and the prospects for a peaceful future in Central Asia, Safer World, March 2012.
10 Noelle Richard, “Understanding and Supporting the Role of youth in Preventing violent extremism” presented at UNDP Global Meeting on Preventing violent extremism in Oslo, 14-16 March, 2016
19 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
Meetings Coverage, 7272nd Meeting, (2014), retrieved March 18, 2015 from:
27 Ibid.
29 KTRKKG, 2016.
*References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).
30 Conflict-prevention through inclusive employment: an economic development approach to preventing violent extremism in Kosovo.
31 LIPR 2014.
32 Codesign with Youth, 2016
33 Youth for Peaceful Change, 2013