THE POLITICS OF PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Finding local solutions to global challenges

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Author: Louise Wiuff Moe
INTRO
On 19 December 2016, the Danish Foreign Ministry and the Danish Institute for International Studies hosted a conference on “Preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE): finding local solutions to global challenges”, at which researchers, practitioners and policy-makers discussed the causes and drivers of extremism, as well as experiences with P/CVE in various parts of the world. The present brief discusses key insights from the conference and relates these to recent relevant policy research on the issue of CVE. On this basis, the brief outlines a set of recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners in their future efforts to develop P/CVE strategies.

The contemporary rise of P/CVE strategies reflects a growing international focus on joining forces in addressing transnational violence, extremism and terrorism. It is increasingly recognized that such security threats travel across national boundaries and therefore require responses based on global cooperation.

P/CVE is also gaining momentum as an approach that complements more traditional counterterrorism (CT) activities. Whereas CT mainly focuses on combatting terrorists, P/CVE aims at preventing individuals from becoming terrorists in the first place by using softer, people-centred measures. Such measures include out-reach programs focused on individuals and societies seen to be ‘at risk’, initiatives aimed at detecting and monitoring signs of radicalization, efforts to build the resources and resilience of communities so they can take action against radicalisation themselves, and exit programs designed to de-radicalise already radicalised individuals.

This brief discusses the possibilities for new forms of cooperation offered by this global outlook and people-centred focus on CVE. It also shows how these activities come with new risks and challenges in developing efficient frameworks for people-centred efforts and in finding local solutions to global problems. In this regard, it is crucial that the emphasis on international CVE cooperation and transfers of CVE expertise are matched by a careful assessment of the politics and institutions of the targeted country, while the focus on individuals “at risk” must be matched by analysis of the specific relational and political contexts in which these individuals are embedded.

P/CVE AS A HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL COOPERATION
P/CVE has emerged as a focal point for a range of active international partnerships involving both state and civil-society actors. Such partnerships span across not just the Global North and the Global South, but also across sectors such as policing, prison administrations, education and social services.
Denmark has particularly strong expertise in facilitating such cross-sectoral cooperation. Consequently, it has acquired an international reputation as a pioneering country in promoting P/CVE in a holistic and coordinated manner by using multiple capabilities that go beyond a punitive focus. As Danish CVE expertise has a focus on addressing a variety of risk factors, from low educational levels to psychological problems, social exclusion and exposure to extremist ideologies, it is also considered relevant for P/CVE efforts in third countries. For example, Denmark’s experience in offering assistance in reducing extremism and the security threat posed by al Shabaab in East Africa, as discussed at the conference by Martine Zeuthen (EU STRIVE, East Africa) and Trine Barnæe (Prevent Partnership Program in Kenya), suggests that there is scope for drawing on domestic expertise and adapting it to third countries. This assistance includes both outreach activities and exit programs. Other examples of new international partnerships and experience-sharing presented at the conference include Denmark’s civilian-focused P/CVE program, which builds on Danish expertise ranging from financial intelligence to dialogue and civil-society mobilization to help strengthen local P/CVE efforts in countries in North Africa and the Middle East. These partnerships are seen as having the potential to assist in countering extremism and to contribute to capacity-building and the democratic transformation of communities and institutions in third countries.

However, transfers of P/CVE expertise are also a profoundly political exercise, which often includes engagement with key security agencies in third countries. If not based on a sound understanding and analysis of the specific circumstances of the particular country, including its security sector and prison systems, exporting P/CVE runs the risk of being counterproductive.

Global challenges requiring local solutions

Research on the Danish context of P/CVE shows that, when different sectors and institutions (for example, schools, the police, social services) join forces in anti-radicalization efforts, straightforward knowledge transfer from one sector to another does not happen automatically. As one of the conference participants, researcher Lasse Lindekilde (Århus University), has previously shown, even when a working consensus exists that individuals and communities “at risk” should be the focus, there tends to be substantial diversity in professional norms, interests and practices. This entails that “there is no guarantee that ‘signs’ are interpreted or understood correctly” or consistently (Lindekilde 2015: 231). If we consider these conclusions from the Danish context on how differences in institutional and cultural norms and practices matter, it gives us reason to exercise the utmost caution when exporting P/CVE expertise to third countries with often profoundly different institutional norms and arrangements. As Jens Madsen (Special Representative for Counterterrorism, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark) stressed, P/CVE expertise cannot simply be transferred; it needs “translation” and adaptation to the specific local context.

Depending on the context, the state and its institutions are not benevolent allies per se. Political repression, corruption and persecution are not infrequent causes of population grievances in fragile state settings (often seen to be potential breeding grounds for extremism). On the one hand, this can be an argument for promoting democratization through advising on P/CVE approaches that move beyond repressive methods by promoting softer and preventive tools. On the other hand, expanding the capacities to detect and report on “signs of radicalization” in prisons, schools and communities may exacerbate already existing tensions, mistrust and, potentially, violence with regard to public institutions, and/or be used as a means of gathering “community intelligence” for advancing existing state practices of discriminatory profiling and repressive, often politicized law enforcement. In other words, P/CVE is not risk free.

Therefore the feasibility of initiatives aiming to transfer P/CVE expertise to third countries must be assessed based on thorough context-specific analyses of the particular history of the institutions to be engaged with. There also needs to be an honest and open weighing of the potential benefits and risks. In brief, while violent extremism is a security threat of global character, responses must be developed based on an appreciation of specific local contexts.

Too much focus on the individual?

The global rise of P/CVE has brought a focus on individual motivations for engaging in violent extremism into security policy analysis. Whereas the Global War on Terror initially tended to frame terrorists as plain evil, P/CVE takes a more nuanced approach by
collecting and producing knowledge about the social and psychological drivers of radicalization and individual vulnerabilities. On this basis, P/CVE describes radicalization as an individual process whereby a person gradually but increasingly moves from behaving normally to a stage of radicalization and further, to a point where the now radicalized individual transgresses the border between radical thinking and violent actions (see, for example, PET and CTA 2016: 2). While this offers a general model for interventions that move beyond more simplistic CT, research has revealed that this model, with its emphasis on individual and psychological factors, risks missing out on the crucial political and relational factors that drive violent extremism.

The centrality of networks and “the how”

Current research discussed at the conference points to a need for P/CVE to be based on a better understanding of the interplay between individual “risk factors” and relational mechanisms. In fact, a new EU-funded research project, PRIME (2014-2017), has shown that even so-called “lone-wolf terrorists” are generally not so alone. As a rule they are impacted by group and network dynamics, and before becoming involved in terrorist events, they have, in most cases, regularly engaged in a number of detectable activities related to radicalised or terrorist networks (see also Gill et al. 2014).

While P/CVE’s focus on individual socio-psychological processes and motivations tends to direct attention to the question of why individuals become radicalised, Professor Scott Atran’s work (École Normale Supérieure and Oxford University), presented at the conference, argues for the need to combine the focus on relational and network mechanisms with increased attention to how radicalisation unfolds. Given the difficulty in tracing motivations, the focus on why tends to fall back on a generalised model for intervention. Focusing on the how, in turn, may serve as a means to move away from broad-based P/CVE interventions into communities seen as potentially hosting “at risk” individuals to prioritize instead more focused engagements with the specific and observable small-group or neighbourhood dynamics that drive violent extremism. A 2014 European Union report has established that “[e]mpirical studies show that broadening the scope of ‘soft’ counter-radicalisation measures to what is considered traditionally community cohesion work (…) is detrimental to both objectives of countering radicalization and fostering community cohesion” (Bigo et al. 2014: 32). Sometime less is more when prioritizing focused efforts centring on detectable activities within pressure groups and emerging extremist networks.

Think outside the box: counter-engagements

Research focusing on the relational dynamics of violent extremism has also pointed to the importance of the sense of significance and moral appeal offered by certain extremist movements such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. This focus challenges the prevailing understanding of vulnerable and/or psychologically disturbed individuals as the main sympathisers, directing attention instead to questions of values, dreams, and the search for adventure and meaning in life. In a world where the Global North is struggling with xenophobic nationalism, immigration and a deeply divided middle class, and where civil wars and mass displacement have flanked the war on terror in the Global South, it is not surprising that the search for ideals and a moral community is growing, in particular among migrant youth. Therefore, while job creation, poverty alleviation, development and better integration remain important efforts in relation to P/CVE, there also is a need to think “outside the box.”

Scott Atran’s research, shows that the appeal of Al Qaeda and ISIS is based exactly on their ability to provide “opportunities for personal engagement, where people have an audience with whom they can share and refine their grievances, hopes and desires” (see Atran 2015). To counter this appeal, P/CVE initiatives must be able to offer attractive alternatives; in this regard, material rewards or generic religious or ideological “counter-narratives” promoted through online outreach programs are not likely to provide an engaging match. Counter-engagements, according to Atran, instead need to focus on creating the conditions and platforms for intimate social networks where youth can engage with each other in making sense of their experiences and grievances, as well as pursuing their personal agendas and hopes. This resonated with the practitioner experiences of Khadije Nasser (Institute for Strategic Dialogue) and Louisa Waugh (International Alert) in their work with CVE in Lebanon and Mali.

As Atran remarks,

"If you can find concrete ways to help and empower them without trying too hard to control, they could well win the future" (Atran 2015).
A need for evidence-based approaches
In the face of growing extremism, there are substantial political and popular pressures to "do something". Yet, this pressure may lead to hasty policies that in the best case do not have an impact and in the worst case become part of the problem they are designed to solve. Anneli Botha (Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria) demonstrated that ongoing empirical research comparing the perspectives of interveners and local populations on why and how individuals join extremist groups has shown that too often P/CVE approaches are based on perceptions (of grievances, motivations etc.) rather than on actual empirical assessments (see also Botha 2014). As a result, CVE risks becoming supply-driven rather than demand-driven, and evaluations risk devising misguided indicators. More empirical research is needed on both the phenomenon of violent extremism and what works and doesn’t work in countering it.

Recommendations
Policy-makers and CVE practitioners should:

- Promote local solutions to P/CVE. While violent extremism is a global problem requiring global collaboration, responses to the problem must always be tailor-made to suit local circumstances. Accordingly, efforts to transfer CVE expertise must be based on thorough context-specific analysis of the role and history of the institutions being engaged with.

- Direct more attention to the relational and social dynamics and networks that shape most processes of radicalisation, even the so-called "lone-wolf" extremism. This entails moving beyond prevailing models that explain radicalisation in individual terms.

- Focus analysis on how and not only why violent extremism develops, and use such analysis to prioritize focused engagements with the specific and observable small-group or neighbourhood dynamics that drive violent extremism. This is more effective than broadening the scope of "soft" counter-radicalisation measures.

- Think "outside the box". Counter-engagements must provide opportunities for personal engagement and platforms for intimate social networks where youth can engage with each other in making sense of their experiences and pursuing their personal agendas and hopes.

- Prioritize evidence-based approaches to P/CVE. In order to improve CVE designs and evaluation indicators, more research is needed on both the phenomenon of violent extremism and on what works and doesn’t work in countering it.
References

Bigo, Didier, Laurent Bonelli, Emmanuel Guittet & Francesco Ragazzi. 2014. Preventing and Countering Youth Radicalisation in the EU. EU report, study for the LIBE Committee


