

United States Countering Violent Extremism Policy

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Although counterterrorism (CT) has been a dominant theme in U.S. national security policy since the September 11 attacks, recently there has been a rhetorical shift to “countering violent extremism” (CVE). This had led to questions over how the CVE and CT agendas relate to one another, and how CVE influences and intersects with the Administration’s stated commitment to preventing mass atrocities and genocide. These questions have particular salience given allegations that non-state actors (NSAs) like the Islamic State (ISIL) and Boko Haram have committed mass atrocities.

Background

Addressing the challenges presented by violent extremism is identified as a national security priority in both the [2015 National Security Strategy](#)¹ and [2015 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review](#) (QDDR). Both documents highlight the impact of violence by extremist groups not only in terms of their direct threats to the U.S. and its allies, but also in terms of their impact on local populations, fomenting conflict, violating human rights and the rule of law, and preventing efforts to promote development and prosperity.

President Obama elevated the issue by hosting the first White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2015, which featured participation from over 65 countries. U.S. prioritization has also helped to drive UN interest in the issue: President Obama hosted a UN Leaders’ Summit on Countering ISIL and Violent Extremism in September 2015 with leaders from more than 100 countries. Subsequently, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon presented a “Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism” to the UN General Assembly in early 2016.

In many ways, CVE policy complements the atrocity prevention agenda, highlighting the need to develop a coherent response to atrocities committed by NSAs. However, it also threatens to undercut it. CVE has focused largely on preventing violence committed by radical Islamist groups. While developing a coherent strategy to such situations is important and essential, it risks ignoring mass violence committed by other actors, whether states or non-Islamist NSAs.

Policy Documents

[*Development Response to Violent Extremism – USAID – 2011*](#)

In 2011, USAID published the “Development Response to Violent Extremism.” To help the USG better identify the causes of violent extremism and tailor responses, the report researched the drivers of violent extremism and categorized them into two sets of factors: “push” (factors create the opportunities for violent extremists to gain traction) and “pull” (factors help explain how adherents to violent extremism are able to attract recruits).

[*Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review – State Department - 2015*](#)

The first strategic goal of the 2015 QDDR is “Preventing and Mitigating Conflict and Violent Extremism.” This goal was divided into two streams of work. First, expanding prevention efforts to counter violent extremism, and second, strengthening the USG’s ability to prevent and respond to internal conflict, atrocities, and fragility. The framing seemed to underscore CVE as an expansion of atrocities prevention. However, the intersection of these two objectives was not well articulated, and each stream contained a distinct set of action steps.

Specific CVE, the QDDR stated the key element was addressing the drivers the fuel the spread of violent extremism. This work spanned multiple regions and focuses on education, economic opportunity, good governance, and security solutions, and further highlighted working with partners.

Department of State & USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism – 2016

Building off the 2015 QDDR, the State Department and USAID situated CVE policy within the larger framework of promoting good governance, rule of law, respect for human rights, and sustainable, inclusive development. Similar to the findings of USAID in 2011, the report emphasized the prevention of violent extremism and the prioritization of areas that have high risk of deepening or expanding support for violent extremism.

The strategic objectives focused on amplifying prevention and long-term development goals. The report recommended the State Department and USAID should use foreign assistance tools, including development programs, to target identified drivers of violent extremism in specific geographic areas or for particular segments of a population and then build local capacity and strengthen community resilience to counter violent extremist radicalization and recruitment.

Structures

At the State Department, the Office of the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights (J) is home to development and implementation of CVE policy, includingⁱⁱ:

- The Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism leads the Department of State in the whole-of-government effort by developing coordinated strategies and approaches to defeat terrorism abroad and securing the counterterrorism cooperation of international partners; and
- The Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations provides conflict analysis, strategic planning and technical expertise in support of locally-based initiatives related to CVE, atrocities prevention and stabilization.

USAID is currently expanding its role in CVE by establishing a Secretariat on Countering Violent Extremism who will lead policy engagement and support analysis, program design, and lessons learned in coordination with USAID's regional and technical bureaus as well as the State Department. Currently, USAID funds CVE work through the Complex Crises Fund and Office of Transition Initiatives.

Both the Defense Department and State Department provide CT-related security assistance to military and law enforcement bodies. This occurs through financial assistance, training, and the provision of equipment to partners. Recent funding authorities, including the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF), have prioritized training and equipping partner security forces. DoD receives the majority of these funds. There are, however, efforts – supported in large part by Combatant Commanders – to provide the necessary authorities to enable money from DoD to be transferred to civilian agencies to advance more comprehensive CVE efforts.

ⁱ [Preventing mass atrocities](#) is included in a separate section of the 2015 National Security Strategy.

ⁱⁱ Within J, the Bureaus of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement also play a role in CVE efforts.