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# Preventing Violent Extremism While Promoting Human Rights: Toward a Clarified UN Approach

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#### Introduction

Violent attacks by individuals and groups labeled "extremist" have occurred in most countries, and violent extremism is now widely regarded as a significant threat to global peace and development. The UN system has responded accordingly with the UN secretary-general's 2016 Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which recognizes the scale of the global threat and lays the groundwork for preventing violent extremism (PVE) through the UN system.¹ The Plan of Action looks beyond hard-security-based counterterrorism measures to systematic preventive action. By focusing on prevention, it mandates UN agencies and member states to adopt a comprehensive approach to engaging with the drivers of violent extremism as well as its consequences. Most notably, the Plan of Action encourages all states to institute a national plan of action on PVE and to draft new policies and laws accordingly.

The Plan of Action's comprehensive approach involves both aligning ongoing humanitarian, development, peacebuilding, security, and political interventions with the goals of preventing violent extremism and implementing PVE-specific programming in targeted contexts. Under this approach, PVE-aligned and PVE-specific activities cover a wide range of areas.<sup>2</sup> UN PVE initiatives aspire to use human rights-based approaches, which contrast with hard-security counterterrorism responses that are often perceived to be less sensitive to human rights. UN PVE initiatives work alongside a variety of national and international networks and consortia to preempt violent social movements. The UN's leadership and programming on PVE has provoked governmental and nongovernmental partners across the globe to align their interventions with the UN's approach—often through the promise of donor funding and convenient analyses of local conflict that do not threaten member-state governments.

To date, there has been inadequate research on how the UN and other international organizations can promote human rights as part of their PVE programming. This report introduces new research findings on the strategic

<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism—Report of the Secretary-General, December 24, 2015, UN Doc. A/70/674.

<sup>2</sup> Areas mentioned by UNDP include fostering economic development, promoting the rule of law, supporting participatory decision making, improving local security and service delivery, fighting corruption, empowering women, promoting dialogue with alienated groups, building the social inclusion of youth, connecting with religious leaders and faith-based organizations, promoting messages of tolerance in the media, and promoting cultural change in schools. UNDP, Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity: A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism, 2016, available at www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/discussion-paper---preventing-violent-extremism-through-inclusiv.html .

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shift of UN peacebuilding interventions toward PVE, and the barriers these interventions face to protecting human rights. The main finding is that ambiguities in UN PVE projects may be hindering the promotion of human rights.

This report is based on in-person interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018 with forty-seven respondents including staff from UN headquarters in New York, UN staff from national and regional offices in Kyrgyzstan, and government officials and civil society implementing partners in Kyrgyzstan. All interviews focused on Kyrgyzstan, though interviews in New York also compared the PVE intervention in Kyrgyzstan to other contexts. This research methodology allowed peacebuilding and development actors and their government partners to reflect upon their personal and institutional experience with emerging PVE approaches.

Kyrgyzstan was chosen as a case study for this research since the UN intervention in the country is typical of the expanding use of PVE approaches to peacebuilding and development across the globe. In this case, the UN's peacebuilding work has decisively shifted from focusing on social divisions and political mistrust following ethnic clashes in 2010 toward the adoption of PVE as an underlying approach in 2018 with the support of the UN Peacebuilding Fund.<sup>3</sup> The UN is now conducting PVE projects in at least forty-seven countries (as of 2017), and the European Union is conducting counterterrorism and PVE interventions in around forty countries (as of 2018).<sup>4</sup>

The UN faces significant challenges in implementing PVE projects and programming. UN PVE interventions are a new phenomenon and have undergone few detailed independent evaluations. The stakes are high—PVE initiatives are globally designed and constructed but acutely

experienced at the local level—making PVE projects socially and politically sensitive at multiple levels since they touch upon established interests and fears. Political sensitivity can result in local resistance, yielding unintended consequences despite the UN's good intentions. This report zeros in on one important challenge: how to ensure the promotion of international human rights in UNcommissioned PVE programming.

### The Challenge of Promoting Human Rights through PVE Initiatives

Promoting human rights through PVE initiatives is a challenge for two main reasons. First, PVE projects often coexist with "hard" counterterrorism initiatives, which have tended to prioritize the interests of national governments and the security of donor nations over the concerns of local communities and individuals. Second, even "soft" PVE approaches can be pernicious if they exacerbate preexisting social tensions and divisions or legitimize government crackdowns and oppression that involve human rights abuses.<sup>5</sup>

UN policies and documents recognize the need to protect human rights, and Secretary-General António Guterres and other senior UN officials have acknowledged the challenge of doing so while addressing violent extremism and terrorism. However, adequate guidance on ensuring human rights in the implementation of PVE projects has yet to emerge, which undermines the aspiration of human rights-based approaches to PVE. This disconnect is made worse by the fact that PVE cannot be definitively segregated from the UN's cooperation with host governments on counterterrorism. Thus, while UN officials can different

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Thiessen, "United Nations Peacebuilding Impact in Kyrgyzstan: A Final Report on the Baseline and Endline Survey for the Kyrgyzstan Peacebuilding Priority Plan," 2017, Bishkek: UNDP Kyrgyzstan; Chuck Thiessen, "Measuring Peacebuilding in Kyrgyzstan: Baseline Survey for the Kyrgyzstan Peacebuilding Priority Plan," 2015, Bishkek: UNDP Kyrgyzstan.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Rosand, "Order from Chaos: How International Development Institutions are Becoming Hubs for Addressing Violent Extremism," Brookings Institute, October 19, 2017; United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, Developing National and Regional Action Plans to Prevent Violent Extremism, available at https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism.ctitf/files/UNOCT\_PVEReferenceGuide\_FINAL.pdf; Andrew Glazzard and Alastair Reed, "Global Evaluation of the European Union Engagement on Counter-Terrorism," Counter-Terrorism Monitoring, Reporting and Support Mechanism (CTMORSE), June 2018, available at http://ct-morse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/eu-ct-evaluation-v7-final.pdf.

<sup>5</sup> Insight by Joel Busher, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University.

<sup>6</sup> For example, "ensuring human rights and the rule of law" is the fourth pillar in the UN's *Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, which governs UN efforts to prevent and combat terrorism. See UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, "UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy," available at www.un.org/counterterrorism/ctitf/en/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy.

<sup>7</sup> UN Secretary-General, "Secretary-General's Opening Remarks at High-Level Conference on Counter-Terrorism," June 28, 2018, available at www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-06-28/secretary-generals-opening-remarks-high-level-conference-counter.

<sup>8</sup> Larry Attree, Jordan Street and Luca Venchiarutti, "United Nations Peace Operations in Complex Environments: Charting the Right Course," Saferworld, 2018.

tiate between their counterterrorism and PVE initiatives, local populations often cannot, which degrades the UN's ability to play a peacemaking role in conflict zones.

Due to this blurring between counterterrorism cooperation and PVE initiatives, initiatives formally aligned with the PVE agenda sometimes undermine human rights. To make matters worse, there is growing evidence that the UN system is unprepared to engage with the dilemmas of PVE due to funding shortages and inadequate staff and expertise.9 Moreover, many host states hinder UN efforts to ensure respect for human rights through measures such as targeting "foreign terrorist fighters"; issuing vague definitions of "terrorism" and "extremism"; declaring travel bans; revoking citizenships; expanding police and intelligence powers; issuing lengthy pre-charge and pre-trial detentions; clamping down on peaceful protests and other civil society action; limiting academic and religious freedom; declaring states of emergency; and misusing preventive detentions, control orders, special courts, and death penalties.10

This degradation of human rights can cancel any gains from PVE programming and inspire extremism and violence<sup>11</sup>—a concern shared with the UN's sustaining peace approach and its ongoing focus on prevention.<sup>12</sup> The UN Development Programme (UNDP), for example, has found that human rights grievances and poor governance are conducive to accelerated radicalization and the spread of violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>13</sup> Other research has revealed the correlation between state violence, sometimes committed in the name of counterterrorism, with support for violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>14</sup>

Considering this evidence, how can the UN be a

supportive but critical partner to its member states? The UN is not neutral—states invite it in to serve their agendas. Thus, PVE agendas are shaped by state-centric values and often must be implemented alongside hard-security counterterrorism initiatives. At the same time, the UN is mandated to uphold international human rights and push member states to uphold the human rights of all their constituents, including disaffected minority groups and populations affected by extremism. These dissonant mandates pose a challenge.

## The Ambiguity of PVE Interventions

In 2018, the UN Peacebuilding Fund in Kyrgyzstan initiated a \$20.1 million suite of PVE peacebuilding projects, as outlined in Box 1. The question remains to what extent this suite of projects can protect the human rights of local populations. Interviews conducted for this research feature a concern that PVE approaches to peacebuilding are fundamentally ambiguous. Indeed, ambiguities in UN PVE interventions may be hindering the promotion of human rights. It is important to note that ambiguity is different from uncertainty. While uncertainty can be reduced by better and more information, ambiguity implies that there exist multiple and simultaneous ways to interpret a problem.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, ambiguity underscores the way that interpretation can shape the UN's intervention decisions. Two areas of ambiguity in UN PVE projects are important to explore: (1) ambiguity in the terminology and strategies of intervention; and (2) ambiguity in the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism.

<sup>9</sup> International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), "The United Nations Counter-Terrorism Complex: Bureaucracy, Political Influence and Civil Liberties," September 2017, available at www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/9.25\_fidh\_final\_compressed-2.pdf.

<sup>10</sup> Letta Tayler, "Overreach: How New Global Counterterrorism Measures Jeopardize Rights," Human Rights Watch, 2017, available at www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/global.

<sup>11</sup> James Bowen and Arsla Jawaid, "Why Preventing Violent Extremism Needs Sustaining Peace," New York: International Peace Institute, October 2017.

<sup>12</sup> UN General Assembly and Security Council, Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace—Report of the Secretary-General, UN Doc. A/72/707-S/2018/43, January 18, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Larry Attree, "Shouldn't YOU be Countering Violent Extremism?," Saferworld, 2017. Compare with International Peace Institute, "Investing in Peace and the Prevention of Violence in the Sahel-Sahara: Voices from Africa," September 28, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Lipson, "Performance under Ambiguity: International Organization Performance in UN Peacekeeping." *The Review of International Organizations* 5, no. 3 (2010): 249-84; Jacqueline Best, "Ambiguity and Uncertainty in International Organizations: A History of Debating Imf Conditionality," *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2012): 674-88, p. 677.

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#### Box 1. The UN's approach to PVE in Kyrgyzstan<sup>16</sup>

The UN in Kyrgyzstan is currently implementing several PVE-specific projects:

- Working with young decision makers in conflict-prone communities to resist radicalization;
- Reducing social disparities and increasing inclusion in communities vulnerable to extremist influence;
- Building community resilience to violent ideologies through the education system and civic dialogues;
- Working with prisons, the probation system, the police, and forensics services to prevent radicalization inside prisons, manage violent extremist offenders, and ensure fair trials;
- Building the capacities of state justice and security institutions at multiple levels to better apply the rule of law and establish human rights-compliant mechanisms; and
- Empowering women and girls and bolstering their capacity to resist radicalization and violent extremism.

### AMBIGUITY IN THE TERMINOLOGY AND STRATEGIES OF INTERVENTION

UN staff and their governmental and nongovernmental implementing partners define and understand fundamental terminology and strategies of PVE intervention in different ways. Respondents struggled to settle on common understandings of terms related to PVE work, notably "radicalization" and the meaning of and difference between "extremism," "violent extremism," and "terrorism."

Dissonance was especially noticeable between government officials, on the one hand, and UN and civil society representatives, on the other. For example, UN respondents clearly described "violent extremism" as the target of their PVE projects. Government partners, however, consistently dismissed the conditioning term "violent," arguing that "violent extremism" was a tautology and that extremism is inherently violent. Thus, according to government officials, holding extremist beliefs, even without violently acting on them, is indictable within the state justice system. In contrast, UN respondents were careful not to judge beliefs held in confidence by citizens as violent in nature or grounds for indictment. This illustrates how definitions of terminology can influence the nature of PVE interventions.

This terminological discord reveals deeper

uncertainty over intervention strategies: Should PVE interventions focus on reforming extremists' beliefs or behaviors? Government respondents claimed they had a license to target personal and group ideologies, identities, religious beliefs, and other "matters of the mind." These interventions, however, have significant potential to contravene international human rights law through discrimination and arbitrary arrests and violations of the rights to security, a fair trial, and freedom of thought and religion, assembly, and movement. UN respondents disagreed, believing external intervention should be restricted to individuals and groups' behaviors, including acts of violence. Even so, the UN can be complicit in government actions that degrade human rights since it is mandated to support member-state governments. The UN risks its reputation being tarnished by blowback against discriminatory government approaches such as the repression of discordant ethnic-minority groups or the suppression of legitimate political protest.

Several respondents believed terminological disagreement partly stems from ambiguity in the evidence available to them in designing PVE projects. For example, respondents at multiple levels believed that needs assessments and conflict analyses are sometimes poorly conducted, with conclusions drawn before the research is complete and, in some cases, inappropriately transferred between contexts. Dissonance in interpretation is

exacerbated by a lack of quality baseline data. Since the UN's strategic shift toward PVE interventions is a recent phenomenon, the UN has not identified or measured relevant indicators of radicalization and extremism in many member states. Further, respondents did not always trust data provided by the government, especially when its data-gathering methods are not transparent.

As a result, the UN is developing PVE projects based on unsettled research and data that is incomplete, unclear, and of tenuous validity or trustworthiness. In the absence of appropriately disaggregated data, UN agencies and their government counterparts may lean back toward counterterrorism measures to address radicalization as opposed to strategic and nuanced preventive approaches. Further, unsettled research leaves PVE projects vulnerable to the self-interests of host-government partners, which increases the risk that they will de-prioritize the human rights of local populations.

PVE projects are therefore vulnerable to being leveraged by states to undermine legal challenges to their governance. The ambiguity described above has sparked local-level suspicion of UN and government PVE programming. This suspicion is based upon criticisms that states are characterizing and labeling dissenting domestic groups and legitimate resistance movements as violent extremists to "present as PVE, and thereby legitimize, any measure taken to stem such groups' recruitment, messaging or outreach."17 Groups that criticize or resist state authorities may find their human rights violated by PVE initiatives, often with the support of the UN. This is possible because the ambiguity of international PVE initiatives facilitates the prioritization of national security objectives over human rights concerns. This rollback of human rights disproportionately affects civil society activists, peaceful protesters, ethnic minorities, impoverished groups, the religiously devout, reporters and bloggers, and academics—all with the perceived support of the UN under its PVE agenda.<sup>18</sup>

# AMBIGUITY IN THE DRIVERS OF RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

UN peacebuilding practitioners and their governmental and nongovernmental partners do not agree on which drivers of violent extremism are most relevant or how they should respond to these drivers. This is a significant area of ambiguity and disagreement given the necessity of identifying, negotiating, and agreeing on a theory of change to guide UN PVE projects. This ambiguity is made worse by the fact that most drivers cannot be isolated but feed off each other. Respondents discussed numerous contested drivers, including the following:

- Deepening religiosity: A significant majority of respondents grappled with whether religiosity is a reliable indicator of radicalization. Government respondents were consistently willing to connect deepening Islamic devotion to extremism and were concerned that political Islam will disrupt the political status quo. UN and civil society respondents, on the other hand, expressed concern that states would conflate religious radicalization with violent extremism and, consequently, disregard human rights.
- Ethnic discord: Numerous UN and civil society respondents believed that unresolved tensions with and discrimination against minority groups by majority groups and governments are driving members of these groups toward violent ideologies. In Kyrgyzstan, numerous respondents referred to continued injustice following violence in 2010 as motivating radicalization among minority populations. Government respondents carefully avoided this topic.
- Migration: Some respondents (from both the UN and the government) believed that some individuals are radicalized after migrating from their home countries. They suggested that economic migrants from Kyrgyzstan travel to Russia where they are stigmatized and grow more susceptible to recruitment into extremist

<sup>17</sup> David H. Ucko, "Preventing Violent Extremism through the United Nations: The Rise and Fall of a Good Idea," International Affairs 94, no. 2 (2018), p. 265.

<sup>18</sup> Mana Farooghi and Louisa Waugh, "They Treat Us All like Jihadis': Looking beyond Violent Extremism to Building Peace in Mali," International Alert, December 2016, available at www.international-alert.org/publications/they-treat-us-all-like-jihadis-en; David H. Ucko, "Preventing Violent Extremism through the United Nations"; UNDP, Journey to Extremism in Africa.

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networks due to a lack of family and community support. Other responses from the UN and governments were not convinced migration was an important driver.

- Political and economic marginalization: Numerous UN and civil society respondents believed that political and economic grievances may motivate violent extremism. One important political grievance mentioned was human rights abuses resulting from counterterrorist action in local communities. Government respondents did not discuss this driver.
- Poverty and inadequate education: Respondents wrestled with whether poverty and low levels of education motivate violent extremism. These drivers were contested by UN respondents. Development actors in the UN tended to point to their efforts to address poverty and improve education as necessary PVE activities. Their "political" counterparts, however, argued that most extremist fighters from Kyrgyzstan did not emerge from poverty and were often well educated.

The point here is not to debate any of the drivers listed above but, rather, to point out that there exists a "menu" of drivers. Such a menu allows the UN and host governments to prioritize which drivers of violent extremism to focus on. This may allow governments to cherry-pick drivers that serve their interests over those of disaffected social groups or political opponents. For example, there is growing evidence that states may unfairly label conservative religious and political opponents as "extremists" deserving of exclusion and suspicion.19 In so doing, states can construct a national narrative about violent extremism through unmediated discussions that exclude alternative viewpoints.20 This selection of drivers can also allow states to scapegoat marginalized groups to distract local populations from issues related to ineffective central governance.21

## Conclusions and Recommendations

By adopting an ambiguous approach to PVE, the UN leaves its interventions vulnerable to misuse and subversion, potentially contributing to human rights abuses. These vulnerabilities guide this report's recommendations. To better protect the human rights of local populations in member states, the UN should clarify the way it conceives of PVE and utilize local insights to provide clearer guidance on how to foster a more inclusive, society-wide understanding of why violent extremism emerges and how to engage with the complex pathways on which individuals become radicalized. Clear understandings of terminology and drivers can serve as reference points for the UN in its engagement with state institutions, including police and security forces, to ensure that they respect the human rights of all constituents, including those labeled "extremists." It is also worth noting that clarity does not imply simplicity—clarity may instead reveal that complex and holistic responses are required.

The UN can take several steps to reduce ambiguity and clarify its terms of engagement with host states to ensure the promotion of human rights in PVE initiatives. First, it can reduce conceptual ambiguity by analyzing the paths local constituents take to radicalization and violent extremism on an ongoing basis rather than as a one-off activity.22 This could allow for ongoing negotiation of important PVE concepts and intervention strategies. This analysis should also be participatory and involve a broad range of stakeholders, including humanitarian and politically oriented UN agencies, as well as local and national governments and civil society including at-risk communities. The inputs of underrepresented groups should be prioritized to provide insight into how they experience violent extremism and human rights violations.23

<sup>19</sup> Attree, "Shouldn't YOU be Countering Violent Extremism?"; Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, "Why Conventional Wisdom on Radicalization Fails: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse," *International Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Insight by Joel Busher, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University.

<sup>21</sup> Shandon Harris-Hogan and Kate Barrelle, "Assisting Practitioners to Understand Countering Violent Extremism," Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression 8, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>22</sup> Insight by Jordan Street, Saferworld.

 $<sup>23\ \</sup> Swedish\ International\ Development\ Cooperation\ Agency\ (SIDA),\ "Preventing\ Violent\ Extremism\ (PVE)\ through\ Development,"\ December\ 2017,\ available\ at\ www.sida.se/globalassets/sida/eng/where-we-work/for-partners/s209461_thematicoverview\_preventing\_violent\_extremism\_webb-003\_final.pdf\ .$ 

Second, the UN can reduce ambiguity regarding the drivers of violent extremism by basing PVE initiatives on independent research that uses rigorous methods of data collection. However, independent research is in short supply and may need to be commissioned. Future research should move beyond individual-level indicators to qualitatively investigate structural issues and grievances. It should also consider multiple drivers together and the way they interact. In fact, it is unlikely that enumerating the "drivers of violent extremism" is a useful exercise in many cases. It is more helpful to recognize that there are multiple pathways to violent extremism, all of which are complex and saturated with contingencies.<sup>24</sup>

Third, the UN can make clear that it supports governmental and nongovernmental oversight groups that keep states accountable for promoting human rights when engaging with violent extremism. The UN can assist these groups in helping state institutions revise contentious policies and practices to align with international human rights. For example, UN PVE projects should cooperate with state judicial oversight

bodies to monitor law enforcement and other security actors as part of an agreed program of reform. This can ensure that PVE activities are not hijacked by competing security agendas that exacerbate violence and neglect human rights. However, the ability of oversight groups to influence host-state institutions is dependent on their openness to external criticism.

Reducing ambiguity in this way should dilute the inherent contradiction in the UN's dual role as a critic and supporter of host states. While clarity will create tension and conflict between the UN and host governments, conflict is necessary for difficult transformations to occur.<sup>25</sup> The UN should seek to reduce the odds, in any way possible, that states instrumentalize violent extremism for political ends or use PVE initiatives to legitimize the oppression of political opponents. This requires UN country teams to hit the reset button on human rights and increasingly follow the recommendations of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) for engaging with government counterparts.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Insight by Joel Busher, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul Lederach, Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation across Cultures, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Insight by Jordan Street, Saferworld.

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