United Nations response to violent extremism

Despite recurrent difficulties, the international community has developed an extensive repertoire of legal and institutional tools for global cooperation to counter terrorism. In the light of the rise of jihadi movements like ISIL/Da'esh, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, counterterrorism efforts have increasingly shifted towards countering violent extremism (CVE) as a threat to peace and security.

Countering violent extremism: focus on prevention

A framework for global cooperation against terrorism is established in numerous international treaties. The United Nations (UN) highlighted the need to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism in its 2006 global counter-terrorism strategy. In 2013, UN General Assembly Resolution 68/127 urged the international community 'to unite against violent extremism in all its forms and manifestations'. UN Security Council **Resolution 2178** (2014) laid the foundations for CVE cooperation at UN level. It underlined that 'countering violent extremism, which could be conducive to terrorism ... is an essential element in addressing the threat to international peace and security posed by foreign terrorist fighters'. Adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and binding on all states, the resolution lists a number of **specific measures** to take, including: preventing individual suspects from entering or transiting their territories; disrupting financial support for Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs); developing strategies to counter violent extremist narratives; adopting tailored approaches to countering recruitment; and promoting social inclusion and cohesion. Recognising the need for more 'systematic preventive measures', UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon engaged in an extensive inter-agency consultation process, which led to the development of a **Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism** presented in December 2015. Supported by the EU but without universal backing in the UN General Assembly, the Plan will be given 'further consideration' in the context of the **Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy** (GCTS) review process due to start in May 2016.

Preventing violent extremism

The aim of CVE, broadly defined, is to discredit and delegitimise 'the **ideology** that drives violent extremism and mobilises a steady stream of recruits to extremist causes'. Consequently, CVE policies address the root causes of radicalisation, such as social exclusion, disenfranchisement, poverty, xenophobia and human rights abuses. Given the negative impact of violent extremism on security, development, human rights, the rule of law and humanitarian action, the **UN Action Plan** pursues 'a practical approach' to preventing violent extremism, while avoiding giving definitions. The Plan distinguishes between two categories of drivers: conditions and structural context conducive to violent extremism (push factors) and individual experiences and motivations that strengthen radicalisation processes, ultimately leading to violent extremist actions (pull factors). The implementation of the Plan is based on an 'all-of-society' and 'all-of-government' approach, including within the UN family. The translation of this general political commitment into a practical policy framework is the prerogative of each state, in compliance with their obligations under international law.

Push factors	• Lack of economic opportunity: poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption • Marginalisation and discrimination: restricted political, social and economic mobility • Poor governance, violation of human rights, and rule of law issues: repressive policies, surveillance • Prolonged and unresolved conflicts: security vacuum, instability, deep-rooted grievances • Radicalisation in prisons: harsh treatment, prison conditions, gang activity, lack of security, drug use
Pull factors	• Individual background and motivation: negative experiences with state institutions • Collective grievances and victimisation: oppression, subjugation, foreign intervention • Distortion and misuse of beliefs, political ideologies, and ethnic and cultural differences • Leadership and social networks: charismatic leaders, informal family and social networks

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The UN Action Plan encourages Member States to develop national action plans to prevent violent extremism (PVE), that complement national counterterrorism strategies and address the local drivers of violent extremism in a multidisciplinary manner. **Specific objectives** include tackling the challenges linked to FTFs and terrorism financing, aligning national development policies, and strengthening regional cooperation frameworks. The UN Action Plan identifies seven priority areas: dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law; engaging communities; empowering youth; gender equality and empowering women; education, skills development and facilitating employment; and strategic communication, including via the internet. Consequently, future UN PVE efforts will focus on adapting peacekeeping operations and missions; enhancing the capacities of UN agencies; funds and programmes; launching a UN global communication strategy; launching a global awareness campaign; and providing support to UN member states. A January 2016 report on PVE and an April 2016 report on the implementation of the UN GCTE by Secretary-General Ban contain a set of recommendations to that effect.

Putting plans into action

In 2015, the UN published three reports on the **implementation** of UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014). While the reports acknowledge that some progress has been made, they also point to the evolving nature of the threat and many shortcomings in different parts of the world. The first report presented in May identified returning foreign terrorist fighters ('alumni') as a significant longer-term risk, since many states have still taken few or no operational measures to prevent suspected potential foreign terrorist fighters from travelling abroad. In addition, many countries still lack the capacity to accurately track the use of evasive travel patterns ('broken travel'). Many states still lack legislation enabling prosecution of preparatory or accessory acts conducted on their territory with the aim of committing terrorist acts on the territory of another state. The reports also identify the need for more coordinated and systematic information-sharing between law enforcement, immigration officials and customs authorities. The second report paid particular attention to the link between the use of the internet and radicalisation, including for recruitment, funding and propaganda. The report also highlights policy and operational challenges related to the cross-border nature of data flows, encryption and anonymity, which, while protecting the confidentiality of online communication and the privacy of internet users, also help terrorists conceal their identities. The implementation report presented in December 2015 provided complementary analysis of the phenomenon of violent extremism (e.g. among women and girls) and policy responses, including alternatives to incarceration (i.e. rehabilitation and reintegration), partnerships with at-risk communities, and the role of local authorities in the implementation of national PVE plans. The Capacity Building Implementation Plan for countering the Flow of Foreign Fighters aims to further support states in fulfilling their obligations under UNSCR 2178.

Limits of the CVE agenda

The implementation of the CVE agenda within national legal and institutional frameworks faces numerous **limitations**, stemming from the complexity of the phenomenon of violent extremism itself and the multidisciplinary nature of the policy response. While some of these challenges are typical of law enforcement and intelligence cooperation (e.g. limited information-sharing), others are new and perhaps require a hybrid response combining instruments more typical of foreign policy, development or psychology. This is particularly the case for countering the narratives of terrorism, which often exploits grievances rooted in the foreign policy decisions of other countries; or undermining the credibility and resources of terrorist organisations that mimic state functions by providing public services or security. There are also many **risks** linked to the translation of CVE plans into specific policies. Vague language, heavy-handed law enforcement responses, concerns about the use of torture, arbitrary detention, fair trial violations, or stringent regulation of religious organisations and education, may undermine human rights and civil liberties and ultimately foster a sense of grievance among marginalised communities. Consequently, the UN mechanisms play an important role in ensuring the complementarity of national and regional plans for PVE, including through capacity-building in third countries, and their compatibility with the existing international law.

In February 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on anti-terrorism measures, which integrates the elements of CVE into the EU's toolkit of measures against terrorism. In November, the EP adopted a resolution on the prevention of radicalisation and recruitment of European citizens by terrorist organisations, which includes proposals for a comprehensive joint EU strategy to tackle extremism. In December, the European Commission presented a proposal for a directive on combatting terrorism that implements international standards and other commitments made by the EU, including in UNSCR 2178(2014) and UNSCR 2249(2015).