

Preventing violent extremism: South Africa's place in the world

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Key points

1 South Africa is in a fortunate position at this early stage to implement PVE programmes before problems relating to violent extremism increase and become more complex. As a start, evidence-based and sustained prevention programmes should address known risks.

2 South Africa should generate empirical evidence to better understand the national and local dynamics that relate to violent extremism, and utilise information beyond what is available through its intelligence structures.

3 National legislation and policy should be updated to take account of international and national trends in violent extremism, including how these trends might evolve in the future.

4 South Africa should participate actively in international institutions and discussion forums as a means of both sharing its own experiences and learning lessons from other contexts.

Summary

The prevention of violent extremism (PVE) has become a priority for the global community. This policy brief examines the global environment in terms of policy and implementation frameworks, and explores South Africa's position in this prevention context. Recommendations are made as to how South Africa should take PVE forward, based on the risks in evidence at the moment.

WHERE UNRELENTING VIOLENCE prevails, the idea that action can be taken to eliminate such violence before it occurs, or at least intervene early to ameliorate its damaging effects, can bring great hope. Violent extremism has evolved significantly in the post-9/11 period, and has become firmly entrenched as a global threat. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the ongoing devastating effects of groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab in Africa have generated fear in the lives of millions. The brutality of these groups, and the proficiency of some in attracting new recruits and inspiring violent actions from across the world, signals the need for far more nuanced responses if the global community is to address violent extremism with any success. Importantly, many have come to the realisation that no country or community can reasonably consider itself to be immune to this threat.

The notion of prevention in this context is extremely empowering, offering a sense of agency and control where most seem to be powerless. The emergence of concepts such as 'preventing violent extremism' (PVE) and 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) offers a new approach in addition to those involving the use of force against extremist groups and criminal justice – both of which generally remain within the domain of state actors. The concepts of PVE and CVE have brought a greater inclusivity to addressing

the problems of violent extremism, and broadened the set of actors who are believed to have an influence on this problem. While organs of the state such as the criminal justice system and the military were previously the primary actors, the notion of PVE brings a wide range of non-state actors into positions of agency, including ordinary citizens.

This policy brief examines preventing violent extremism as it relates to South Africa as an actor in the global community. It is one of a series of three focusing on violent extremism and South Africa.

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The terminology used here is ‘preventing violent extremism’. It follows from a range of concepts and terms utilised in this field, including addressing ‘root causes’, ‘conditions conducive to terrorism’, and CVE. All of these, including PVE, are contested terms, and remain the subject of debate in terms of their meaning and scope. For the purposes of this discussion, PVE is used to refer to actions aimed at addressing the factors or dynamics that contribute to violent extremism. The United Nations (UN) Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, quoting from its Resolution 2178 (2014), states,

the Security Council makes explicit the link between violent extremism and terrorism, underscores the importance of measures being in line with international norms and recognizes the need for prevention: ‘violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism’, requires collective efforts, ‘including preventing radicalization, recruitment and mobilization of individuals into terrorist groups and becoming foreign terrorist fighters’. In that resolution, the Council ‘calls upon Member States to enhance efforts to counter this kind of violent extremism’.¹

Global context and preventing violent extremism: policy, implementation and key challenges

When the UN adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2006, the international community undertook

to implement a comprehensive approach to addressing terrorism.² Core to the strategy is the assertion that a number of conditions are conducive to the emergence, expansion and spread of terrorism on the local, national and international level. These conditions include matters of national cohesion, underdevelopment and poverty, inequality, political instability and marginalisation, as well as religious, ethnic and racial intolerance.³ To create viable solutions, the strategy recognises that several approaches are necessary and presents four pillars of action, namely:

- Undertake measures to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism
- Take measures to prevent and combat terrorism
- Increase states’ capacity to deal with the issue
- Ensure respect for human rights and strengthen the rule of law

In 2015 the UN General Assembly reaffirmed its commitment to counter violent extremism, encouraging the promotion of community engagement, tolerance and mutual respect as well as placing greater emphasis on understanding the drivers of radicalisation.⁴ The same year UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presented his Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism,⁵ which calls for a ‘whole of society’ approach to addressing violent extremism and outlines seven areas that require attention in defining policies and programmes for prevention.

These areas are: dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law; engaging communities; empowering youth; gender equality and empowering women; education, skill development and employment facilitation; and strategic communications, the Internet and social media.⁶

The UN urges member states to use these key policy instruments (and other resolutions) as a general framework to develop national PVE plans of action to address their unique national contexts. Priorities for action include addressing the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) threat, preventing the financing of violent extremist groups, and promoting public-private PVE partnerships.^{7, 8} It is also worth noting the significant overlap with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN further encourages member states to rely on a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors, with a special focus on local and national drivers of violent extremism.⁹ It is expected that the UN’s policy framework

will be developed further under new Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, to bring greater coherence to counter-terrorism and prevention policy.

A number of regional and national policies have been developed by, among others, the African Union, African regional institutions (such as the Economic Community of West African States and the Southern African Development Community) and the European Union (EU).

Moving from policy to implementation

Several international institutions and organisations work towards the implementation of the global policy framework discussed above. This is in addition to the activities of regional institutions and national governments, which may take an international focus. This includes the work of UN bodies such as the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate, which serves the UN Security Council; the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, which houses the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre; and other UN structures such as the UN Sanctions Committee and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, which also support implementation. New UN agencies have recently entered this field, including the UN Development Programme, UN Women and the UN Children's Fund.

The new focus on prevention has taken traditional counter-terrorism work into the uncharted terrain of social and development interventions

The Global Counter-Terrorism Forum (GCTF) was established in 2011, by 30 states.¹⁰ South Africa was one of the founding members. Its work focuses on practical measures to prevent and respond to violent extremism, and it works globally to establish 'good practice' guidelines, undertake training activities, and coordinate activities through a range of thematic and geographically focused working groups. The GCTF and its members have also supported the establishment of independent institutions to assist policy implementation efforts.¹¹ Various other international actors contribute to implementation efforts, including EU initiatives, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and regional FATF-associated institutions.

A number of new structures such as the RESOLVE Network (Researching Solutions to Violent Extremism),¹² as well as other research networks, have also emerged recently. Notably, some of these are civil society-driven initiatives.

The new focus on prevention has taken traditional counter-terrorism work into the uncharted terrain of social and development interventions. PVE seeks to obtain security outcomes through actions primarily in the social sphere. In theory, this is a step beyond states as the primary actors and towards involving local actors in debates and practical actions to address violent extremism. PVE calls on local actors such as mayors, researchers, teachers, social and mental health workers, psychologists, the religious community, youth and other communities to engage in prevention activities, recognising that they are

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better positioned to take action in community spaces than government actors might be. This implies that new platforms will need to be developed to facilitate communication between state and non-state actors, in addition to addressing the challenges of coordination between state actors themselves.

PVE has the following three broad practical implications. First, we need to understand the drivers and dynamics of violent extremism from an evidence-based perspective, in specific local or broader contexts. Up to now this has most prominently involved research, which has identified 'push' and 'pull' factors; and efforts to understand or demonstrate the more complex dynamics relating to radicalisation and recruitment into extremist organisations. There is an emerging but limited body of evidence in this regard, particularly in Africa. Clearly, many more questions must be addressed, including exploring issues relating to resilience to violent extremism. Second, PVE programmes need to be designed and implemented to target the specific factors, dynamics or causes identified. The number of such programmes has expanded exponentially as donor interest in PVE has increased. Third, prevention programmes need to be evaluated and their results documented and publicised. This should contribute to building a body of knowledge on what kinds of programme interventions have positive effects, under what circumstances. These are all interrelated endeavours that should feed each other and collectively contribute to building PVE as a field in its own right.

The boundaries of PVE, however, are indistinct, especially from those of development activities.¹³ Its potential incursions into the terrain of development have resulted in concerns over the risks relating to the securitisation of development and the effects of this, in the context of foreign aid.¹⁴ More generally, it is understandably argued that development actions should be priorities in themselves (e.g. youth skills development and employment creation) and not conflated with security objectives. While there have been attempts to address this through, for example, the idea of distinguishing between actions that may be PVE-relevant and PVE-specific,¹⁵ this dilemma remains.

Based on its current broad characterisation, PVE programmes could span a wide range of actions and include public education, employment creation, counter-radicalisation messaging, education on to the interpretation of Islamic texts, 'deradicalisation'

and rehabilitation in detention centres, among many others. Inherent in many of these programmes is the potential to cause harm and have the reverse effects of those originally intended. Inappropriately designed programmes could easily stigmatise certain communities and ethnicities such as Muslim communities in Western countries and ethnic minorities in Muslim nations, and breed resentment. Programmes related to children, youth and other vulnerable groups also carry significant ethical risks, as do those that serve to instrumentalise local community structures and leaders.

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By their very nature, social programmes often have long timelines in terms of when their results may be observed. Preventing violent extremism cannot be addressed in the short term, and this is not unique to this field. Much can be learned from the field of criminal violence prevention, as well as the broader field of development. Programmes often require investment over long periods and some could likely only be expected to show results over five to 15 years, or even only in the next generation, depending on the nature of the dynamics being addressed.

With little available evidence to work from in the African context, the PVE programmes that are implemented can, at best, be viewed as exploratory in nature. Yet programme testing is essential to build the knowledge base necessary to have an impact on the problem of violent extremism, through the identification, and careful expansion, of programmatic elements that show evidence of impact. This establishes the imperative for programmes to be well researched and designed, to be rooted in high ethical standards, and to include funding for strong evaluation and documentation.

Therefore, while PVE might present as the 'silver bullet' to addressing violent extremism, it is complex in nature, and requires scrupulous thinking and planning, and patience in terms of observing results.

South Africa and preventing violent extremism

South Africa has historically had experience in dealing with violent extremism, the sources of which have

primarily been domestic in nature. The post 9/11 experience of terrorism has had limited but increasing manifestations in South Africa.¹⁶ These experiences have brought greater realisation that South Africa is not immune from the international dynamics of violent extremism, nor should it become complacent about these influences in its national environment.

While the South African government is preoccupied with a number of more pressing political, economic and social concerns such as criminal violence,¹⁷ economic stagnation,¹⁸ corruption¹⁹ and social protests,²⁰ it is important to explore how the government should position itself in relation to violent extremism. Evidence produced in this series of policy briefs indicates that while the threat of violent extremism is currently relatively low, addressing the issue of South Africans' leaving to serve as foreign fighters for ISIS in the Middle East, and the potential risks related to returnees, is a priority. Recent patterns also suggest that the country should be vigilant about being utilised as a base for the planning of attacks and the facilitation of terrorist activities through corruption and financing.

The country therefore finds itself in the fortunate position of being able to act in terms of prevention, starting with the risks that have already been observed. From a public policy perspective, South Africa has yet to apply itself to the matter of PVE. While this is likely due to the limited risks relating to violent extremism that have emerged thus far, there is much to explore in this regard.

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Research into the drivers and dynamics of radicalisation may offer valuable insights for South Africa as it considers its policies and systems. A recent review of evidence on youth radicalisation from East Africa and the Horn, West Africa and the Sahel, and North Africa points to important considerations for South Africa and the countries of the Southern African region. Evidence indicates that factors relating to the political and economic environment (e.g. disillusionment with public institutions, corruption, government repression, limited employment opportunities, economic exclusion) are key factors contributing to violent extremism. A number of social factors, and those relating to identity and belonging, also feature in this evidence. Religion also emerges as a factor, including real or perceived injustices or threats relating to religious identity.²¹ Overall, it is valuable to recognise that the pathways to radicalisation and recruitment into extremist groups are highly individualised, with different factors working in concert to influence a specific individual's choices. Many of these factors are present in South Africa, yet may not manifest in violent extremism but rather in other forms of social unrest.

South Africa has one of the most youthful populations in the world, with a median age of 26.8 years.²² With an overall population estimated at around 55 million, there are about 20 million young people between the ages of 15

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and 34.²³ These statistics, coupled with large-scale protest actions (such as the student fee protests in 2015 and 2016), should give pause to the South African government in terms of addressing the factors that could lead to increased insecurity.

South Africa is not a stranger to understanding security problems from a prevention perspective. As early as 1996 the National Crime Prevention Strategy identified prevention as one of the key pillars in addressing criminal violence in South Africa's post-apartheid environment.²⁴ The more recent National Development Plan (NDP) recognises the negative impact of violence in South Africa – the second highest cause of death in the country after HIV/AIDS – and seeks to reduce the level of violence by 50%.²⁵ The NDP specifically recognises the social determinants of the rising levels of violence in society,²⁶ as well as the political and economic conditions that may promote violence.²⁷ The National Security Strategy (NSS), adopted in 2012, addresses matters of terrorism, but its substance relating to prevention is unknown, as the document is classified.²⁸ Countering corruption and domestic stability challenges are considered important pillars of fighting crime in South Africa.²⁹

The National Development Plan recognises the negative impact of violence in South Africa

The White Paper on Safety and Security (WPSS) recognises the potential of early interventions at the individual, family and community level, and their impact on creating resilience to crime and violence.³⁰ It reiterates the link between poverty, inequality and crime, as well as the need to address these factors as part of prevention efforts.³¹ However, domestic terrorism and violent extremism are not addressed in the WPSS. The National Youth Policy 2015–2020 also recognises that employment, the availability of recreational facilities and skills development are important in violence and crime prevention.³² A number of public programmes focus on addressing these matters, including the Expanded Public Works Programme,³³ the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment initiative, the public service internship programme³⁴ and the Social Crime Prevention Strategy.³⁵ Various initiatives (past and current) relating to children and youth have also been established by local governments and led by civil society organisations (CSOs), to serve prevention ends.

The value of these policies and programmes lies in the political will and capacity of the government to ensure their effective implementation and sustain their results over time. It is at this level where prevention results are yet to be observed. In relation to violent crime, for example – one of South Africa's most urgent problems – the murder rate has increased almost 20% in the past four years, and grew 3.2% in the period 2015–2016³⁶ notwithstanding expansive policy statements relating to prevention. Gould states,

The murder rate is a key measure of violence in society. The increase in this category means we must rethink our approach to improving public safety.³⁷

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Clearly a more comprehensive review is necessary to understand what policies are prioritised, and to ascertain the results and sustainability of implementation efforts. The ability of the government to expand CSO and donor programmes that have shown good results is also a key question in this regard.

South Africa and preventing violent extremism: considerations and recommendations

While violent extremism does not present as being among South Africa's most immediate problems, international and national developments indicate that it is an issue that should not be ignored. Clear risks have been observed, and South Africa is uniquely positioned at this time to implement prevention and early intervention measures, notwithstanding its lack of formal policy in this regard (that is available in the public domain).

A number of issues should be given consideration:

Address emerging risks (and strengthen resilience)

The FTF patterns observed in South Africa thus far,³⁸ as well as potential threats relating to the planning and facilitation of terrorism,³⁹ are clear starting points to be assessed and addressed in terms of prevention efforts, beyond what can be offered through South Africa's security agencies.

South Africa is in the fortunate position of possessing a range of institutional and cultural features that, at least in theory, may promote resilience to violent extremism. These include its basic rights and freedoms (including religious freedom), and checks against state abuses. There is a significant imperative for the country to demonstrate its protection and promotion of these.

In addressing violent extremism from a preventive perspective, there is much to be gained from engaging with the guidance offered by related UN Security Council resolutions, as well as the instruments, training and good practices offered by institutions such as the GCTF, which facilitates ongoing activities through, for example, its FTF working group. Addressing the financing of terrorism is also an area where the global community offers much guidance and support through a range of institutions and frameworks, including the FATF and its related bodies.⁴⁰

National policy and legislation

South Africa should review its national legislation and policy framework to ensure that both prevention and responsive measures relating to violent extremism are given appropriate attention. The country's key piece of legislation, namely the Protection of Constitutional Democracy against Terrorist and Related Activities Act,⁴¹ was passed in 2004 and is likely to require updating in the light of new international and national dynamics relating to violent extremism, as well as evidence from other parts of the world on effective approaches. Other relevant security policies such as the NSS and the WPSS should also take adequate account of violent extremism. PVE has yet to be addressed in any comprehensive fashion within policy, and should also be considered within this policy review.

It is essential that this policy review be evidence based. The available body of evidence (including from Africa) on the effects of various response measures on violent extremism offers important lessons. One of the most significant findings thus far is that repressive measures that utilise force and violate human rights exacerbate the problem.⁴² Measures that target groups based on assumptions that Muslims, or certain ethnicities or migrant communities, are more likely to become offenders have been found to worsen problems of exclusion, victimisation and the experience of threat by these communities.⁴³

Repressive measures that utilise force and violate human rights exacerbate the problem

South Africa has the benefit of having a range of smaller-scale criminal violence prevention programmes from which to draw lessons that may be applied to PVE programmes. Many such programmes have been implemented and documented by provincial or local government authorities, as well as a range of non-state actors such as CSOs and donors.

Implementing national policy

South Africa has an expansive policy framework that may, in part, be directed towards PVE efforts where required. However, a cursory review of the extent to which crime and violence prevention policies and youth policies are achieving their intended effects, does not inspire optimism. Evidence of continued high levels of criminal

violence⁴⁴ and weak delivery of services to youth (including education and employment) is a concern, and raises questions as to whether any additional policies relating to PVE will be effectively implemented.

Here, as South Africa's analysis of its internal concerns regarding violent extremism continues, it is useful to assess what PVE-specific interventions should be prioritised for intervention.

Civil society as a central actor

South Africa's hard-won democracy is testimony to the role that civil society has played, and continues to play, as an agent of change in every avenue of life in the country. In fact, CSOs have made great progress in criminal violence prevention programming but struggle with taking effective programmes to greater scale, without significant and sustained investments from the government.

Community organisations can take the lead in addressing the risks relating to violent extremism, and should position themselves to do this well, through good research, and creative, careful programming. Civil society also has a role in highlighting the potential or actual harm caused to citizens relating to terrorism responses.

Participation in international forums

In the post-apartheid period South Africa established itself as an international leader, given its approach to human rights, democracy and good governance. While much of this currency has been lost, it retains the constitutional framework, as well as the institutions and policies, that provides a foundation from which to reclaim its positive international profile. Addressing violent extremism through rights-based programming is one area where leadership could again be offered in the international arena.

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A RECENT PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY INDICATES A DRAMATIC LACK OF TRUST IN POLITICAL LEADERS

The country has much to learn from, and share with, both its African counterparts and the international community. While it was a founding member of the GCTF in 2011, South Africa's participation in GCTF activities has been limited, and many benefits could be gained from this institution's wide range of implementation tools, 'good practice' guidelines and other support.

There is also much to be gained from engaging with international actors beyond just the bilateral level, and in relation to specific cases. The country should move beyond its internal focus and become far more actively engaged in relevant international institutions involved in research, policy and practice.

Development imperatives

South Africans continue to experience the dire impact of development deficits, and matters of health, education and social service delivery dominate the lives of

the majority of citizens. The SDGs remain an important framework for measuring progress and ensuring consistent action to address these problems, including security and justice issues (Goal 16). South Africa cannot afford to lose its focus on these critical matters, as it grapples with a number of other internal concerns. Again, engagement with other countries facing similar problems, including multiple demands on limited capacity and resources, might be instructive.

Governance and politics

As discussed above, evidence indicates that political factors, including disillusionment with government actors and corruption, play an important role in establishing the grievances that give rise to violent extremism. In South Africa such concerns have up to now manifested differently; primarily in public protests relating to service delivery, some of which have resulted in violence. A recent public opinion survey indicates a dramatic lack of trust in political leaders, with almost 60% of people indicating little or no trust in the South African Parliament and around 54% indicating little or no trust in local government. Furthermore, 57.9% of respondents reported that they have no influence over the actions of politicians, and around 25% indicated that they have either used force or are willing to use force to achieve political ends.⁴⁵ These are matters that will be significant to safety and security in the future.

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Much needs to be done in this regard, including addressing the ability of the government to communicate with its citizens, in a timely manner, when concerns and grievances are expressed.

Government communication with citizens on the threat of violent extremism has been limited, notwithstanding the range of work being undertaken behind the scenes. While it is clear that not all the details of its activities can be shared, ongoing communication is necessary to address fears that the government is not being responsive to potential threats.

Conclusion

South Africa currently possesses an unusual window of opportunity in relation to the prevention of violent extremism. While there is evidence of current prevention policies relating to violent crime having limited effects, this opportunity should not be ignored.

The government and civil society are both key actors here, and each is called on to learn lessons from international counter-terrorism and prevention experiences, and share in the wealth of benefits the global community has to offer.

As the dynamics of the global threat of violent extremism evolve at an alarming rate, prevention efforts become more important, particularly where early signs indicate concern. The time for prevention is likely to be right now – and the costs of failing to do so may be irreversibly high.

60%

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Notes

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