

# WHAT IS VIOLENT EXTREMISM?



Photo by UNHCR

**Violent extremism undermines our collective efforts towards maintaining peace and security, fostering sustainable development, protecting human rights, promoting the rule of law and taking humanitarian action. Violent extremist groups are contributing significantly to the cycle of insecurity and armed conflict affecting many regions of the world.<sup>1</sup>**

**No country or region is immune from its impact.<sup>2</sup>**

Before examining the ways in which government institutions and civil society organizations can work collectively to counter violent extremism, it is crucial to clarify what “violent extremism” means and identify ways in which actors use or threaten violence to advance extremist agendas. As with the term terrorism, there is no universally accepted definition of violent extremism, even among institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and NATO. Violent extremism is generally considered to be a broader term than terrorism, but the two are sometimes used interchangeably.<sup>3</sup>

"Extremism" is context dependent and thus subject to interpretation. In recent years, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and al Qaeda have formed the global understanding of what constitutes violent extremism, and these understandings have influenced domestic and international responses and prevention efforts. In the minds of many, the term conjures images of extremely radical ideology, unhinged violence, and exceptionally repressive societies. Yet even with the recent uptick in jihadist-inspired activity and the proliferation of efforts to mitigate violent extremism perpetrated by jihadists, the term violent extremism is not synonymous with one ideology, religion, or political goal.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, violent extremist threats "come from a range of groups and individuals, including domestic terrorists and homegrown violent extremists in the United States, as well as international terrorist groups."<sup>4</sup> Unlike like the term terrorism, which is defined in U.S. law, the U.S. government does not have one agreed-upon definition for violent extremism, just as other governments and international organizations do not. However, individual government agencies have offered their own definitions:

- The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation defines violent extremism as "encouraging, condoning, justifying, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals."<sup>5</sup>
- The U.S. Agency for International Development defines violent extremism as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic, or political objectives."
- Public Safety Canada defines violent extremism as "the process of taking radical views and putting them into violent action... [When persons] promote or engage in violence as a means of furthering their radical political, ideological, or religious views."<sup>6</sup>

Although these various definitions share similarities, the lack of a common definition can make it difficult for governments, civil society organizations, and international institutions to collaborate on unified initiatives to counter violent extremism. In addition, the varied contexts and characteristics of extremism make them subject to interpretation.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS ACROSS REGIONS

Among a variety of countries, there is evidence of common drivers to radicalization and violent extremism: lack of socioeconomic opportunities, marginalization and discrimination, poor governance, violations of human rights and the rule of law, prolonged and unresolved conflicts, and radicalization in prisons.<sup>7</sup> One critical recurring factor that is often overlooked is the poor treatment of women.

**The situation of women is a key marker of whether a society is descending into chaos, morphing into a breeding ground for extremist organizations.<sup>8</sup>**

## VIOLENT & NONVIOLENT EXTREMISM

When analyzing violent extremism, it is important to understand the differences and potential relationship between violent and nonviolent extremism.

**"Militant groups are usually the offshoot of [nonviolent] movements, and the difference ... lies not in their ideology and objective [but rather] in what they regard to be the appropriate strategy" to achieve their aims.<sup>9</sup>**

In this respect, the fundamental difference between violent and nonviolent extremism rests in the actor's use of violence to advance an agenda. But this distinction fails to capture the fluidity that frequently exists between the two.<sup>10</sup> Although nonviolent extremists do not engage in violence, they may sympathize with the violent extremists' ultimate goals and may assist in achieving them. Actors in a transitional or intermediary space—such as individuals who materially support kinetic activities without engaging in violence—further complicate the distinction between violent and nonviolent extremists.

Women are increasingly assuming roles in nonviolent and violent extremist groups. Today's violent extremist groups are actively recruiting women for many roles critical to their growth and ideological goals.

By recognizing the various stages of extremist involvement, it is possible to understand the triggers that can shift an individual from being a nonviolent sympathizer, to a supporter through tangential activities, to an active participant in violent extremism. Understanding the spectrum of extremist support and the relationship between the varied forms will enhance efforts to counter violent extremism.



**Program on Extremism at George Washington University** provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program produces empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study; develops pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public; and brings together experts from various continents and a range of disciplines, including government officials, scholars, former extremists, counter-extremism practitioners, and professionals providing firsthand assistance to families grappling with radicalization.

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## ENDNOTES

1. United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, General Assembly, p. 4, December 24, 2015.
2. Ibid., p. 1.
3. Andrew Glazzard and Martine Zeuthen, "Violent Extremism," web page, <http://www.gsdrc.org/professional-dev/violent-extremism/>.
4. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Countering Violent Extremism," website, <https://www.dhs.gov/countering-violent-extremism>.
5. U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "What Is Violent Extremism?" web page, accessed October 7, 2016, <https://cve.fbi.gov/whatis>.
6. Public Safety Canada, "Violent Extremism," web page, accessed October 7, 2016, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scr/cntr-trrsm/cntrng-vlnt-xtrmsm/vlnt-xtrmsm-eng.aspx>.
7. UN, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, p. 7–8.
8. Elizabeth Weingarten and Valerie Hudson, "Gender as a Second Language," *New America Weekly* 145 (December 8, 2016).
9. Fiore Geelhoed, "Fundamentalism," in Jeffrey Ian Ross, ed., *Religion and Violence: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict from Antiquity to the Present* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2011), p. 368.
10. Alex P. Schmid, "Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?" (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, May 2014): 1–29, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf>.