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CENS EXPERT SURVEY ON EXTREMISM REPORT 2 CURRENT PRIORITIES IN COUNTER-TERRORISM AND PREVENTION

Policy Report
July 2021

Cameron Sumpter

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Executive Summary

The CENS Expert Survey assessed prevailing views among 65 leading experts on violent extremism and its prevention in different parts of the world. This is the second of two RSIS Policy Reports on the survey results: The first discussed emerging issues regarding militant networks, while the present report considers strategies to counter terrorism and prevent violent extremism. Respondents working on/in Southeast Asia viewed community-based prevention programmes and coordination among stakeholders as the most important areas of counter-terrorism emphasis moving forward, while experts in “the West” (Europe and North America) saw prison programmes and reintegration as a greater priority. Online counter-messaging campaigns received comparatively less endorsement, despite recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic had generated greater extremist activity online. Supporting the families of imprisoned extremists was considered important for Southeast Asia respondents, but much less so among those in the West.

Introduction

Ten years after the death of Osama bin Laden, the US government is making moves to conclude its 20-year *Global War on Terrorism* — or at least the so-called “forever wars” in certain jurisdictions. But while terrorism may have fluctuated since September 2001, the threat has not abated. Competing strands of Salafi-Jihadi ideology have emerged in the past decade, and a complex spectrum of “far-right” extremism increasingly appears to involve transnational aspirations.¹ COVID-19 has further complicated the landscape by inducing widespread uncertainty and exacerbating vulnerabilities.

Strategies to counter terrorism have also transformed and expanded over the past 20 years. Initial military interventions and the overhaul of border and transit security measures were followed by the development of localised prevention initiatives involving a diverse range of stakeholders. Governments have attempted to build societal resilience to violent extremism through the promotion of tolerance and community engagement programmes. A range of rehabilitation and reintegration experiments have been conducted in prisons and communities on different continents. And the rise of social media over the past decade has brought a new and frequently changing set of challenges.

Evolutions to both threats and responses require continued thinking about solutions and mitigation. With this in mind, the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) designed an online expert survey to assess perceptions of trends associated with violent extremist networks and the direction of strategies to prevent their progress. This is the second of two RSIS Policy Reports presenting key findings from the two-month-long survey. The first edition looked at “Current and Emerging Threats” from violent extremist networks and ideologies, while the present report compares and contrasts views on counter-terrorism, and preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE) practice and policy priorities.

¹ The term “far-right” extremism is used here to describe (loosely) a contested spectrum comprising potentially violent xenophobic/bigoted/misogynistic attitudes operating under banners of various ethno-nationalist narratives. The survey did not differentiate between “white identity” far-right extremism, and that of Hindu and Buddhist majority societies in South and Southeast Asia, which may be seen as limiting the analysis to follow.

The CENS Expert Survey (CES)

The “Expert Survey on Violent Extremism and its Prevention” was conducted between January and March 2021. In late 2020, CENS researchers compiled a list of potential respondents, including notable academic researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who work on P/CVE related issues and the broader field of terrorism studies. Most respondents listed were previous speakers or participants at the international workshops and seminars that CENS has organised over the past several years. Others were contacts developed during CENS’ field research projects. Ultimately, the survey received 65 anonymised responses.

A majority of the respondents indicated that their geographical area of focus was Southeast Asia. Europe and North America were the second and third most selected, respectively, while a small minority included the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Australasia. The survey asked 17 questions, including multiple-choice, ranked choice, and open-ended formats. Six of the questions were specifically designed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and its prevention.

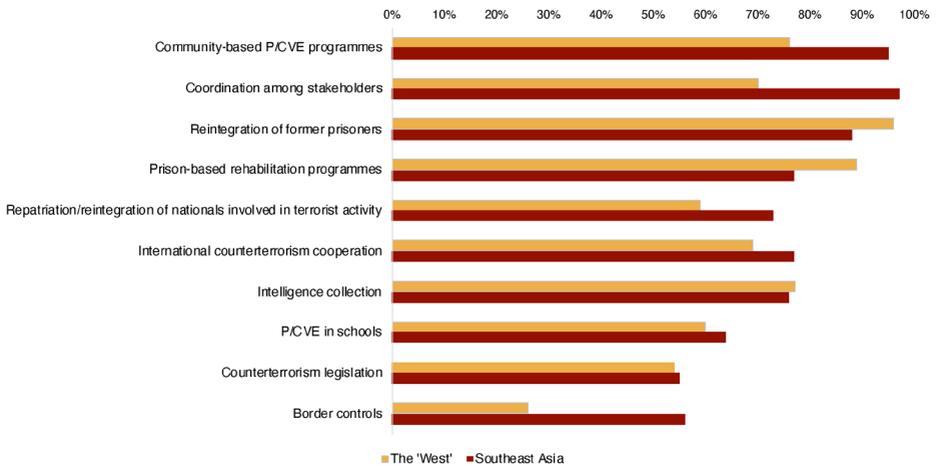
Counter-terrorism Priorities in Southeast Asia and “the West”

Given the dominant regions of focus among respondents, a useful way of analysing and presenting the results on counter-terrorism and P/CVE was to examine, compare, and contrast the priorities indicated by those working on Southeast Asia and those occupied with issues in Europe and/or North America, loosely defined here as “the West”. Of the 17 survey questions, three ranked-choice questions were directly focused on policy areas including counter-terrorism concerns, P/CVE priorities, and the relative importance of key stakeholders.

One question asked respondents to rate how much priority should now be given to each of 10 different counter-terrorism policy areas in their respective regions. Answer options included three levels of “less priority” and three of “more priority”, with one “neutral” option. For respondents in Southeast Asia, “community-based P/CVE programmes” and “coordination among stakeholders” were considered the most important, with over 95 per cent indicating these areas should be more prioritised. Among those focused on the West, 76 per cent thought community P/CVE initiatives should be given greater priority, while only 70 per cent asserted that stakeholder coordination required more attention.

For respondents in the West, the counter-terrorism policy areas that should be most prioritised were the “reintegration of former prisoners” and “prison-based rehabilitation programmes” at 96 per cent and 89 per cent, respectively. In Southeast Asia, these strategies were also seen as important, but only 77 per cent thought that prison programmes should be more prioritised in the current climate. Prisoner management and intervention programming have been a substantial focus in Southeast Asia for a number of years now, particularly in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. While in Europe, recent cases of recidivism have put pressure on so-called deradicalisation programmes.

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who thought each “counter-terrorism” category should be “more prioritised”



A greater difference was observed among views on the “repatriation/ reintegration of nationals involved in terrorist activity abroad”. Over 73 per cent of Southeast Asia respondents believed more emphasis should be placed on bringing people back to their home nations, while just 59 per cent of those in the West thought such efforts deserved more priority. This disparity could be explained by greater attention among respondents from the West towards “far-right” extremists, who are less likely to have travelled abroad to join or train with violent extremist organisations. The distinction between perceptions and priorities regarding Salafi-Jihadi and far-right extremists will be outlined further below.

Respondents from both Southeast Asia and the West cited “counter-terrorism legislation” and “border controls” as areas of policy currently requiring the least attention. A number of nations have amended laws applicable to terrorism over the past few years, including Indonesia in 2018 and the Philippines in 2020. Border security may now be viewed less urgently as foreign fighters and their supporters are leaving in far fewer numbers than five years ago, when the Islamic State’s so-called caliphate was attracting adherents from across the world. And those who did travel do not appear as intent on returning home from foreign war zones as many feared they would. However, the issue still carries more weight in Southeast Asia, as the border areas around the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas continue to attract Jihadi activity and movement.

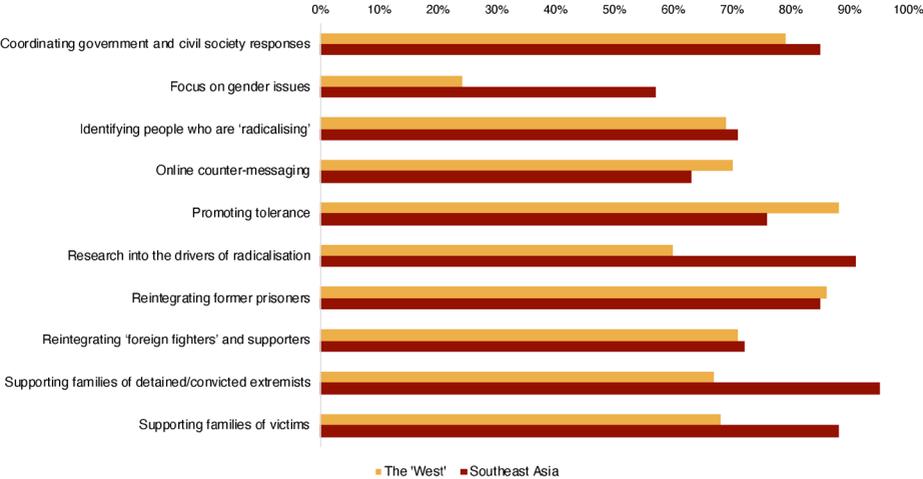
P/CVE Priorities in Particular

Another question on counter-terrorism strategy was narrowed somewhat to inquire about specific aspects of P/CVE priorities. Tellingly, “coordinating government and civil society responses” was the category that a majority of respondents indicated as needing additional priority. Prevention strategies are inherently multi-stakeholder endeavours, but locating common ground between security agencies and social service organisations is not always straightforward. Finding appropriate participants for interventions is also challenging. Roughly 70 per cent of all respondents thought that “identifying people who are radicalising” required greater attention, yet the importance of “researching the drivers of radicalisation” differed between respondents focused on Southeast Asia and the West, at 91 per cent and 60 per cent respectively. Promoting tolerance was deemed significantly more pressing in the West than in Southeast Asia.

The importance of “online counter-messaging” also appeared to divide respondents, but this category was given less importance overall, with 63 per cent of those focused on Southeast Asia and 70 per cent of those in the West stating that it should be more prioritised. These comparatively lower figures emerged despite a majority of all respondents indicating on one of the COVID-19 questions that the “online information space” was the key area that violent extremists had attempted to exploit during the pandemic. It’s possible the low rate of respondents who thought counter-messaging should be given greater priority can be explained by the already significant emphasis placed on this aspect of P/CVE strategy. While there is little consensus that such initiatives are effective in preventing radicalisation, online counter-propaganda is cheaper and arguably less risky than personalised approaches in the real world.

A major difference between respondents engaged with issues in Southeast Asia and those in the West was the importance of assisting the families of both convicted violent extremists and the victims of terrorist violence. Among Southeast Asia respondents, 88 per cent stated that helping the families of victims should be given greater priority, while only 68 per cent of respondents focused on the West believed it should. Support for the families of prisoners produced an even starker distinction, with 95 per cent of those working on Southeast Asia calling for more priority to be given to this assistance, compared to only 67 per cent of those focused on the West. Building trust and goodwill among convicted terrorists by helping their families is a key disengagement strategy in Indonesia, for example, but varying conceptions of risk and political concerns may hinder this approach in other nations.

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who thought each P/CVE category should be “more prioritised”



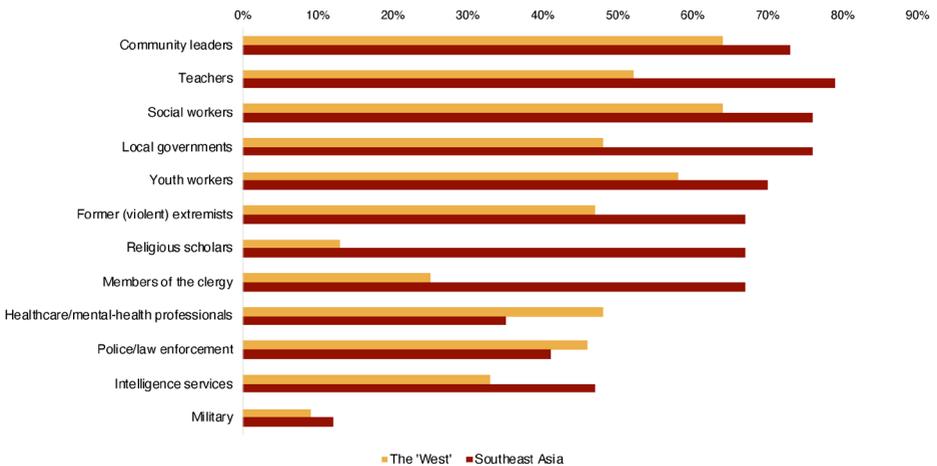
The category of gender produced the most disparate results overall, with views spread fairly evenly across the board from “least prioritised” to “most important”. Over 57 per cent of respondents in Southeast Asia thought that gender issues should be more prioritised within P/CVE policy and practice, while only 24 per cent of those in the West stated the same. Roughly a third of respondents focused on the West were “neutral” on the inclusion of gender issues, leaving 42 per cent who thought gender should be less prioritised when considering P/CVE policy and strategy. Far fewer in the Southeast Asia camp were neutral (12 per cent), but over 30 per cent believed gender should be less of a priority.

Given the range of views on the inclusion of gender, it was interesting to filter overall responses to counter-terrorism priorities based on whether or not gender was seen as an important issue. The results were conspicuous. Among all respondents who thought gender should be less of a focus, only 40 per cent thought that “community-based P/CVE programmes” should be more prioritised and 25 per cent saw “coordination among stakeholders” as an important aspect of counter-terrorism policy. For those who did prioritise gender, 100 per cent believed these two categories should also be more of a priority. Almost 90 per cent of those who prioritised gender wanted to see more of an emphasis on P/CVE in schools, compared with 60 per cent of respondents who thought gender should not be a priority.

A further question asked respondents to rate the importance of key stakeholders in P/CVE initiatives in their area of focus. Removing the “gender” filter, comparison and contrasts returned to the broader categories of those who work on Southeast Asia and those focused on violent extremism in the West. Both groups considered “community leaders” and “social workers” to be among the most essential P/CVE actors, yet Southeast Asia respondents viewed teachers as the single most essential contributor, which was substantially lower among experts in the West. The “military” was firmly at the bottom of each list. “Police/law enforcement officers” were seen as more/most important contributors to P/CVE programming by 41 per cent of Southeast Asia respondents and 46 per cent of those in the West.

Notable differences were seen in two other categories: Only 48 per cent of people focused on the West thought “local governments” were “more/most important”, compared with 76 per cent of the Southeast Asia respondents. “Former (violent) extremists” were considered “more/most important” stakeholders by two-thirds of Southeast Asia respondents, but by only a quarter of those in the West. Again, this highlighted the importance placed on developing relationships with convicted terrorists and their families in some parts of Southeast Asia, notably Indonesia.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who thought each P/CVE stakeholder was “more/most important”



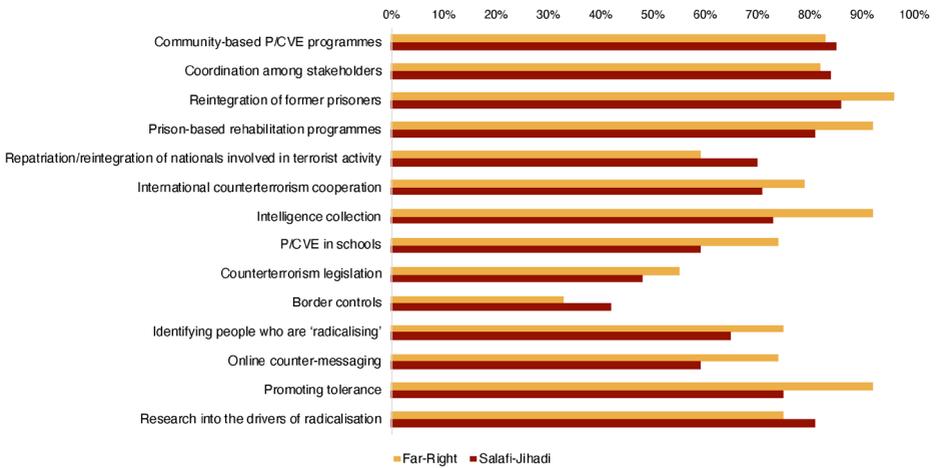
Salafi-Jihadi vs Far-Right Focus

The increasing threat of terrorist violence from “far-right” extremists (for want of a better term) emerged more clearly as the Islamic State lost its territory in Iraq and Syria, and the wider Salafi-Jihadi movement appeared to be in flux or rebuilding. Therefore, it seemed practical to filter the survey results to see how experts focused on these separate ideological movements view counter-terrorism and prevention priorities. A clear similarity between the two was the assertion that “community-based P/CVE programmes” and stakeholder coordination were among the most important counter-terrorism priorities. Yet those with a far-right focus deemed prison and reintegration initiatives as even more pertinent, with almost 100 per cent calling for greater policy emphasis moving forward. Promoting societal tolerance was also seen as much more relevant for experts concerned with the far-right than those working on Salafi-Jihadism.

Intelligence collection and identification were areas of quite considerable variation. While 73 per cent of experts working on Salafi-Jihadism believed intelligence collection should be a greater priority, this figure rose to 92 per cent among far-right researchers and practitioners. Similarly, just 65 per cent of Salafi-Jihadi specialists considered “identifying people who were radicalising” as something deserving greater priority, compared with 75 per cent of those looking at the far-right. It is tempting to speculate that these differences are explained by the nature of the two ideological movements. While Salafi-Jihadi organisations have splintered in recent years, group affiliation may still be more common than for extremists on the far-right, who tend to exist along a messy spectrum of views and objectives.

Far-right extremists also appear adept at concealing the true nature of their beliefs through plausible deniability, as they employ innuendo and humour in their communications — particularly online. When asked which aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic violent extremists had sought to exploit, the top two categories for those focused on the far-right were “increased Internet/social media use (due to social restrictions)” and the “online information space”. For respondents focused on Salafi-Jihadism the top category was “socio-economic disruption”, followed closely by the “online information space”. Experts focused on the far-right were more likely to prioritise “online counter-messaging” strategies to prevent violent extremism, with 74 per cent asserting the approach should be given greater priority, compared with just 59 per cent among those working on Salafi-Jihadism.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who thought each “counter-terrorism” and P/CVE category should be “more prioritised”



Conclusion

The statistical results from this expert survey come with fairly clear caveats. The project was not intended to be a robust quantitative study, but rather a snapshot of current views among specialists who work on these issues everyday — either through research, policy analysis, or programmatic work in their respective regions.

One view that stood out among all respondents when asked about counterterrorism priorities was the emphasis on prevention — whether through secondary interventions such as community-based P/CVE programmes, or tertiary initiatives aiming to prevent reoffending or re-engagement among (former) prisoners. The priority given to community leaders and social workers as key P/CVE stakeholders reinforced this assessment. Respondents concerned with issues in Southeast Asia also viewed former violent extremists as important figures in P/CVE programming. While this strategy comes with risk, it may be an approach worth more thought among policymakers in other parts of the world.

Calibrating the right P/CVE policy and practice for a given context is not easy, as the problem of violent extremism tends to come with significant political baggage and social sensitivities. While P/CVE practitioners must tread carefully, they often do so with insufficient or insecure funding streams. International donor organisations have increasingly allocated funding for P/CVE in nations throughout the world in recent years, but local actors often pursue project outcomes knowing the money will eventually dry up, at which point they need to either look elsewhere or start something anew. P/CVE project goals are mostly long-term, which do not gel well with short-term funding cycles. Over the past 20 years, terrorist violence has come in fits and starts. It is crucial that material support for community-based prevention strategies does not wax and wane correspondingly.

Another prominent area cited as requiring greater emphasis was coordination among stakeholders, particularly those involved in P/CVE initiatives. Southeast Asia respondents asserted that local governments should play a more central role in prevention programming, while in Europe and North America many on-going programmes have already focused on the municipal level. Various P/CVE models have emerged in different nations since experiments began 10–15 years ago. Some are led by national governments, others at a regional or city level. Several see law enforcement at the forefront, while others are driven by civil society organisations with no police involvement. Whatever the particular arrangement, communication and community consultation are key, as the multidisciplinary nature of P/CVE requires coordination among

parties that don't traditionally work together — and may even have different conceptions of the problem.

The use of social media by violent extremist organisations has been a growing trend for a number of years, with the Islamic State taking full advantage in the mid-2010s through a sophisticated online propaganda strategy. The rise of “far-right” extremism has complicated the issue further, as multiple loosely connected grievances and identities interact with each other (and attention-seeking algorithms) on different platforms — from mainstream spaces to niche forums and encrypted messaging apps. But despite greater emphasis among survey respondents focused on the far-right, the importance of “online counter-messaging” was cited as a low priority overall, when compared with real world prevention endeavours. Progress may be more likely through a reconsideration of some of the technology companies’ processes and incentives, rather than simply trying to advertise tolerance on their platforms.

While respondents focused on the far-right and Salafi-Jihadism appeared to agree on a number of counter-terrorism and P/CVE priorities, a telling disparity was the importance of improving intelligence collection. The survey took place directly following the 6 January 2021 storming of the US Capitol in Washington DC, which raised questions as to what security agencies did or did not know, and whether information was shared appropriately. The presence of alleged far-right extremist views among state institutions in the US and Europe has also emerged as an area of concern, potentially compelling a different approach to collecting intelligence than for international terrorist threats.

Finally, the array of answers given on the relevance of gender issues to P/CVE was somewhat revealing. The study and practice of counter-terrorism is a diverse field, with a range of political angles comprising different levels of conservative, pacifist, liberal, and hawkish perspectives on where problems lie and how they may be mitigated. Responding to contextual variations is essential, but it also seems clear that the prevention of violent extremism is fundamentally a multidisciplinary pursuit. Progress will always require respect for different views and consistent communication among all relevant stakeholders and competing interests.

About the Author



Cameron Sumpter is a Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS). His research interests include processes of radicalisation, prison-based disengagement strategies, and civil society initiatives to prevent/counter violent extremism (P/CVE).

About the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS)

The **S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)** is a global think tank and professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. An autonomous school, RSIS' mission is to be a leading research and graduate teaching institution in strategic and international affairs in the Asia Pacific. With the core functions of research, graduate education, and networking, it produces research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-traditional Security, Cybersecurity, Maritime Security and Terrorism Studies.

CENS is a research unit of RSIS at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Established on 1 April 2006, CENS raison d'être is to raise the intellectual capital invested in strategising national security. To do so, CENS is devoted to rigorous policy-relevant analysis across a range of national security issues. CENS is multinational in composition, comprising both Singaporeans and foreign analysts who are specialists in various aspects of national and homeland security affairs.



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Annex — CES Questions

- Q1: Which is/are your geographical area(s) of focus?
- Q2: What are issues most/relevant in your country/region of focus?
- Q3: Which aspects of counter-terrorism policy in your country/region should be prioritised?
- Q4: Over the past two years, have violent extremists in your country/region of focus prioritised online or offline methods of recruitment?
- Q5: Which of the following media tools do violent extremists use for recruitment in your country/region of focus?
- Q6: Based on the online media you selected, which should be given most attention, and why?
- Q7: Which offline venues are the most important sources of violent extremist recruitment in your country/region of focus?
- Q8: Which areas of P/CVE policy and practice should be prioritised in your country/region of focus?
- Q9: Who should be the key stakeholders in P/CVE initiatives in your region/country of focus?
- Q10: Which new/emerging technologies are violent extremists using in your country/region of focus?
- Q11: Are you seeing evidence of tactical/strategic convergence between ideological and non-ideological violent organisations in your country/region of focus? If so, please elaborate.
- Q12: Have violent extremists in your country/region of expertise sought to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Q13: Are violent extremists in your country/region of expertise seeking to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Q14: Which COVID-19 associated dynamics have violent extremists sought to exploit in your country/area of focus?
- Q15: Will the COVID-19 pandemic lead to more extremist violence in coming years?
- Q16: What form/type of violence? (Please expand on Q16)
- Q17: What aspect of the pandemic and recovery period will potentially generate more violent extremist activity?



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