Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Making It More Effective

By Joshua Snider

SYNOPSIS

States in the West took the lead in preventing and countering violent extremism in the two decades since the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York by terrorists. But their agendas and interventions often came with a legitimacy gap at recipient levels, especially those conditional on the "development-security nexus". In recent years, the Gulf states in the Middle East have started to punch above their weight in areas related to capacity building for preventing and countering violent extremism, and their robust humanitarian and development policy agendas can be tweaked further to strengthen intra-regional cooperation in tackling this threat.

COMMENTARY

The struggle against violent extremism is a socio-cultural and policy problem that preoccupies states and civil society across the world. While all regions deal with anti-state extremist movements, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have been uniquely impacted by pernicious forms of violent extremism.

The destabilisation of the MENA region, notably following the US military intervention to remove Saddam Hussein in Iraq, created strategic opportunities for violent extremist organisations (VEOs) to expand operations and use violent religiosity as a form of opposition and resistance politics. This trend was exacerbated by post-Arab Spring civil wars in Syria and Libya, resulting in another wave of extremist-driven violence, notably the rise of groupings under the banners of Islamic State of Iraq and Lebanon (ISIL) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The enduring appeal of these VEOs across the MENA demonstrates the insidious link between violent forms of identity politics, state fragility, and sectarian responses to conflict.

The Legitimacy Gap

Over the past two decades there has been a proliferation of western funding for initiatives to prevent and counter extremism across the MENA, Africa, and Indo-Pacific regions. Unfortunately, the raison d'etre of these programmes and their perceived connection to security interests of the US and western states have resulted in various legitimacy gaps. For example, in states across the MENA, hardline Islamist groups accuse local non-government organisations which accepted western funding of playing "Uncle Tom" to US and/or western security interests.

Hard and soft preventive and counter-extremist activities in the region's refugee camps in Jordan, Iraq and Syria are challenged by the presence of Islamist movements which continue to threaten, intimidate and spread extremist narratives. At the same time, there have also been accusations of a wider development-security nexus amid the perception that western states linked the provision of development or humanitarian assistance to counter-terrorism agendas and geopolitics of the Global War on Terror (GWoT).

Criticism of western-led preventive and counter-extremist initiatives resulted in narratives that this was largely a performative exercise designed to mollify the western conscience over the excesses of the GWoT but lacked the authenticity and authority to reach the constituencies most in need of the interventions. Thus, performative CVE as an extension of public diplomacy might have played out well in western capitals, but at the programme and country levels, these activities often work at cross-purposes when trying to reach radicalised constituencies which have been exposed to aggressive anti-western and anti-state narratives.

The Role of Gulf States

The role of these states, notably Saudi Arabia and UAE as leaders in the programme development and capacity building of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), is an important element that has not been adequately considered in either academic or policy circles. Gulf states' increased engagement in P/CVE capacity building has occurred within the context of changes in identity politics.

These changes have been instrumental in seeing states within the region take on a greater role in response to the problem of Islamist-driven religio-political extremism. While debates persist on the scale of the existential threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood, many Gulf states, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, see the Brotherhood's ideology and political Islamism more broadly as a source of disunity and not complementary to the region's political order.

The Gulf states' role is manifest in several ways. At a macro level, P/CVE efforts have been integrated as a component of foreign and development policies. Gulf states are among generous humanitarian actors and their development agencies have implicitly and explicitly linked P/CVE initiatives to humanitarian and development efforts.

The UAE-funded UAE-PAP programme centred in Waziristan region in Pakistan is an example of a large-scale development project that has implicit counter-extremism connections by addressing structural disadvantage in an area that has been

vulnerable to penetration by VEOs. States in the Gulf region have been actively engaged in generating new ideas via Track 2 diplomatic efforts to address issues associated with toleration and peaceful coexistence in Muslim-majority states. These include leading roles in the establishment of the Muslim Council of Elders in 2014 and the Marrakesh Declaration in 2016.

Outside their own borders, the Gulf states have been engaged in P/CVE programming at both the tactical and operational levels. Saudi Arabia has used its direct experience with violent extremism domestically to develop and export a disengagement tool that focuses on theological re-education, which has been in turn adopted by states in the Indo-Pacific and Africa.

The UAE has focused its efforts on capacity building via trans-national partnerships and has established several institutions that either work directly on P/CVE issues or provide support to governments and civil society which do so. The Hedayah Center, for example, focuses on capacity building, and the dissemination of information and programme support for various state and civil society-led P/CVE initiatives around the world. And the Sawab Center is a bilateral effort with the US to counter extremist narratives in the information and cyber domain. Saudi initiatives have also included direct institution-building, notably the King Salman Centre for International Peace (KSCIP) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The Road Ahead?

There are several aspects in which Gulf states might streamline or improve their capacity building activities.

First, Gulf states might examine intra-regional cooperation on issues related to P/CVE capacity building. While there has been growing collective interest in this problem, the responses have been atomised. Following the Al Ula agreement (and cessation of intra-regional tension), there is space for expanded intra-regional cooperation and consensus on collective action on the provision of P/CVE capacity building. Greater intra-regional cooperation would result in eliminating redundancies in the provision of programme support duplication and/or allow for a division of labour.

Second, policy makers within the region might examine P/CVE and its role. P/CVE is a high-stakes development activity, and as such, the region's powerful international development and cooperation agencies like the Kuwait Fund, Qatar Charity, the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, and the Saudi Fund for Development, all have an important role to play. Here, states might leverage collective financial capabilities and form a development trust that focuses specifically on P/CVE issues.

Third, the Gulf states' P/CVE initiatives often face an information gap, especially in the regions and territories where the programmes are being deployed. While states advertise what they do to some degree, there have been cases where P/CVE activities have remained in the shadows which has generated mistrust. The case of the KSCIP is an interesting one in this regard. The opacity and lack of information on KSCIP's function, i.e., what that centre did day-to-day, who worked there, and the scope of programmes, led to an "optics" problem for sections of Malaysian civil society.

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