

PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA

Key Outcomes

A regional summit for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in South and Central Asia was convened by the government of Kazakhstan on 29-30 June in Astana. The event brought together government officials, civil society, and private sector representatives from the region to explore select themes from the Action Agenda outlined by international actors at the White House Summit to Counter Violent Extremism held in February 2015. In addition to exchanging experiences and lessons learned, participants put forward a number of concrete proposals for furthering efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism in the region.

Prior to the regional CVE summit, the Global Center on Cooperative Security (Global Center) organized a related conference to explore civil society roles in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in the region. Held in Istanbul, Turkey from 23-25 June 2015, the conference brought together civil society experts and practitioners working in fields such as media, education, development, research and community engagement, to identify practical ways to enhance civil society capacities and community resilience against violent radicalization, and reflect on good practices and lessons learned to date through local and regional initiatives. The Global Center presented key outcomes from Istanbul to government officials and guests in Astana, and also facilitated a number of civil society panels during the second day of the Summit in Kazakhstan.¹

Civil society participants in Istanbul and Astana reiterated the need for a whole of society approach to preventing and countering violent extremism and pointed out that there is existing work being done that may not have P/CVE as a primary objective but that may nonetheless have attendant P/CVE benefits. Many of these programs are already being carried out by grassroots organizations within communities and there may be scope to scale up and further strengthen these efforts, without necessarily labelling them “P/CVE.”

Nevertheless, a number of constraints faced by civil society organizations and their partners in undertaking P/CVE activities were highlighted throughout the discussions. Consequently, participants underscored the critical value of capacity development support, including trainings, information sharing and exchange, technical assistance, and enhanced access to information technologies and research. It was pointed out that while a wealth of research and information on radicalization and violent extremism already exists, these are often not specific to local or community-level dynamics and there is need for greater depth and analysis to inform evidence-based P/CVE programming at these levels. To that end, participants stressed the need for more and better quantitative and qualitative research to develop a more nuanced understanding about

¹ This summary is not a comprehensive reporting on of the Astana proceedings; it is intended to supplement the formal outcome document from the summit and reflect key substantive highlights from the civil society and private sector discussions from both the Istanbul and Astana events. The official summary of the Astana Summit can be found here: Report of the Central and South Asia Regional Conference on Countering Violent Extremism, 29 June 2015, <http://prokuror.gov.kz/eng/news/press-releases/central-and-south-asia-regional-conference-countering-violent-extremism-cve>. Similarly, this document is not a comprehensive report on the Istanbul dialogues but presents the key highlights and recommendations elicited from the discussions. For further information on these meetings, visit www.cvesummit.org and register for access to documents relating to the regional CVE meetings and summits.

the drivers of violent extremism and test commonly held assumptions about these drivers in their communities and region. It was pointed out that, without the ability to conduct or access research, it is difficult for civil society organizations to 1) make the case for P/CVE programming; 2) understand gaps and priorities in order to develop locally relevant and contextually sensitive initiatives; and 3) to support enhanced research capacities within their organizations. Participants also underscored the need to ensure that local research is genuinely independent, and is not conducted in a way that simply confirms donor or government biases.

Building collaborative and multi-sectoral partnerships was a central theme throughout the discussions, especially in light of the multidimensional threat posed by violent extremism – to development, stability, peace, and security. Participants considered a number of success stories of civil society working in partnership with government to support or implement P/CVE efforts. It was emphasized that these partnerships should be based on mutual trust and understanding of each other's roles, responsibilities, and contributions to P/CVE efforts. Consultative, two-way dialogue between and among governments, civil society and relevant private sector representatives was underscored as critical to developing contextually sensitive P/CVE programming.

Relatedly, the need to ensure safe spaces for civil society groups to operate, especially in the area of P/CVE, was highlighted as a critical way of strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships. A number of government and law enforcement officials in Astana also reinforced these points, asserting that stability and security required positive and meaningful interactions between governments and societies and underscored the need to empower civil society organizations, ensure respect for human rights, and address underlying drivers which can create an enabling environment for violent extremism. Participants also highlighted open lines of communication as important to ensuring that government actions and policies are not counterproductive and can help to mitigate unintended consequences.

Participants underscored the need for more bottom-up P/CVE approaches to ensure that initiatives are reflective of local and community needs. It was noted that in some cases, this may involve *not* developing a P/CVE specific project but to integrate it into new or existing programs in the area, as needed. National governments and regional and international partners could also provide support in helping local organizations and implementers scale up or strengthen these efforts, as necessary. However, caution was urged to ensure that civil society organizations are not viewed as part of a “security” agenda but as working *with* – not *for* – government and other international actors in the fight against violent extremism. As such, the ability of state actors to deliver on community priorities and needs was highlighted as a way to strengthen partnerships, which could also include CVE efforts.

The discussions also focused on the importance of developing positive narratives against violent extremism – not just counternarratives to argue point-for-point with extremists – but also alternative “master” narratives that can be powerful incentives for positive action. It was emphasized that the message, the medium, and the messenger are all integral to effective messaging. *How, with whom, and when* interventions are conducted are as much a part of the message as the content itself. For messaging to be effective and resonate with key audiences, it should be emotive and engaging, and locally driven. In this effort, the credibility of interlocutors is key and it is therefore important to insulate and protect credible voices to allow them to continue their work.

Participants explored the role that both governments and civil society, including religious leaders, can play in countering religious and ideological drivers of violent extremism. While there are some existing government initiatives that seek to promote “religious literacy” and counter violent extremist narratives, it was suggested that it may be counterproductive for government to provide certain interpretations of religion and that doing so may impinge on religious liberty and risk undermining the legitimacy of mainstream religious institutions. Participants explored some alternatives, such as supporting educational and other initiatives that promote critical thinking, tolerance, and pluralism. The work of several civil society organizations was highlighted in this regard, including those working with religious schools to incorporate critical thinking and to reform and/or expand their curricula.

There was also widespread consensus on the important role of youth and women in strengthening resilience against violent extremism. The role of mothers was highlighted in terms of early identification of grievances or dynamics that might create an enabling environment for violent extremists. Civil society programs that empower mothers to engage with local government and community leaders also highlighted how such programs might contribute to positive relationship-building between state authorities and communities, and mitigate some of the grievances that can fuel disillusionment and marginalization, making extremist narratives more compelling. However, it was noted that women could also be ideological and operational supporters and members of violent extremist groups, and that preventive programming should be tailored to this group based on a closer understanding of their grievances and drivers.

Participants also noted the disproportionate youth populations in many countries and the attraction of extremist groups to many of these youths. To that end, it was noted that youth voices could play critical roles in challenging violent extremism especially as research suggests that many might join violent extremist groups for non-ideological reasons and for reasons such as employment, social status, and material or other incentives. Participants also shared some good practices and lessons learned from innovative programming used in post-conflict societies to promote peace and tolerance, such as engaging youth and empowering youths to tell their stories through photography and other creative avenues rather than resorting to violence.

The role of private sector entities was also highlighted, in particular how businesses, media, entrepreneurs and others can work with governments, municipalities, and local communities to strengthen resilience to extremism. Examples of public-private partnerships were discussed in particular with regard to the internet and working with internet service providers and social media companies to enforce their terms of use policies to try and limit of violent extremist messages. Participants heard about a range of initiatives undertaken by private sector groups that underscore the opportunities presented by sports, arts, and culture to reach key audiences and promote positive narratives.²

While participants recounted troubling stories of the difficult environments that they currently work in, they also shared positive stories about transformation and resilience, which underscores the need to learn

² See, for example, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Rafia Bhulai, Wedad Alhassen, and Sara Zeiger, “Thinking Outside the Box: Exploring the Critical Roles of Sports, Arts, and Culture in Preventing Violent Extremism,” Global Center on Cooperative Security and Hedayah, Policy Brief, February 2015, http://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/15Feb17_SAC_Brief_Hedayah_GlobalCenter.pdf

lessons and good practices from these experiences. Why have some countries or communities been more resilient in the face of violent extremism? What can be learnt from these experiences to help prevent violent extremism from gaining a foothold in these and other communities? Just as much as participants argued for greater attention for where there is growing radicalization, there is also a need to understand where and how radicalization is being resisted. In addition, while many differences exist between the two regions of South and Central Asia, participants shared many common challenges across the region. This also highlights potential for some transferability of lessons learned and opportunities to build on existing good work being done. Greater interaction across regions, not only South and Central Asia, but globally, can also help organizations working within similar fields share good practices and enhance collaboration in the fight against violent extremism.

Finally, to evaluate the impact of a CVE intervention, participants stressed the importance of identifying a clear objective and target audience and to articulate a clear theory of change or intervention logic, to integrate monitoring and evaluation into the design and implementation phases, and ensure that lessons learned are integrated into follow up plans. The need for honest assessments of programs and for learning from failures alongside successes, and for future programming to build on these lessons, was highlighted. Transparency, honesty and flexibility were held up as important aspects of sustainable programming and building strong and enduring partnerships.

The discussions in Istanbul and Astana generated a number of concrete and innovative ideas to further CVE objectives in local, national and regional contexts. Such efforts include developing media-based projects to facilitate interaction between community actors; sharing moderate and alternative messages and interpretations to wider audiences; fostering the development of educational programming; and facilitating CVE training for frontline officials and CVE actors. Participants also underscored the need to further develop a network or community of practice on CVE in the regions, given the rapidly evolving nature of the challenge posed by violent extremism and its transnational dimension.

For further information on the CVE summit process please visit www.CVESummit.org

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