Written Testimony

**Submitted to the British Council All Party Parliamentary Group on
Building Resilience to Radicalism in MENA
November 2016**

Chairman, honorable members,

Search for Common Ground is a world leader in International
peacebuilding. Since 1982, we operate programs in 35 countries across
Africa, Asia and the Middle East, where we partner with government,
civil society, media and the private sector to strengthen societies'
capacity to transform conflict.

In the MENA region, in particular, we have worked in 10 countries on a
variety of issues ranging from social cohesion, security sector
reform, youth and women's participation in governance, as well as
countering violent extremism (CVE).

The need to address violent extremism is clear. Incidents and deaths
from violent extremism have increased in the past years, including the
sharpest increase in deaths from violent extremism between 2013 and
2014 in the 21st century.[1] As such, according to a recent CSIS survey,
respondents perceived violent extremism as the number one challenge
facing their country.[2] And addressing this problem has remained a top
security concern for political leaders world-wide.[3] Yet, these foreign
policy responses have been largely dominated by conventional and
militarized approaches to counter-terrorism that generally fail to
address the root causes propelling the current wave of violent
extremism. These conventional military-led counterterrorism responses
have yet to yield long-term, positive results in reducing terrorist
incidents or support for terrorist movements. In fact, in many of our
consultations we see a response to security sector human rights abuses
in the name of counterterrorism as a driving factor of violent
extremism.

Many governments did begin to invest in civilian-led strategies to
prevent and counter violent extremism – P/CVE. While far from perfect,
this framing allows a more holistic approach to this specific form of
violence, which prioritizes the identification of root drivers of and
contextualized responses to violent extremism.

This switch in focus from adversarial and militaristic responses to an
emphasis on bottom-up approaches for peace and security allows for
more overlap and synchronization with organizations like Search for

---

[1] http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf
[2] https://www.csis.org/analysis/survey-findings-global-perceptions-violent-extremism
[3] https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf

Common Ground. Indeed, countering and preventing violent extremism entails supporting the social fabric of communities to deal with these issues locally.

In this testimony, we will draw on our more than three decades of Search experience as practitioners on the ground, in terms of addressing violence linked to political, ethno-racial, and religious extremist ideologies world-wide. We will focus our comments, however, on how we transform violent extremism by equipping state and non-state actors with the tools and tactics drawn from peacebuilding to 1) address the causes of violent extremism; and 2) ensure responses do not further aggravate and radicalize affected communities.

First, we will provide an overview of our approach to countering violent extremism, particularly that committed in the name of religion, which includes **four pillars**. In so doing, we will demonstrate what this programming looks like in practice. Then, we will discuss what we have learned from this experience. Finally, we will propose **three recommendations** for moving forward in the resilience building agenda.

Our Approach to CVE

Violent extremism is a choice made by individuals or groups to use violence to address real or perceived grievances in line with an extremist viewpoint. Extremist viewpoints are those that advocate increasingly exclusionary group identities, not only based on religion, but any ideology, whether it be based on race, ethnicity, gender, etc. These viewpoints themselves are not necessarily bad; the problem emerges when violence is chosen as the mechanism for imposing this exclusionary ideology. Responding to it must then take into account the full host of incentives and attractions for recruitment to violence.

Violent extremist organizations, including ISIS, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al Shabaab, and others justify their movements through a set of arguments designed to attract supporters, often youth. We saw in a recent set of consultations with 122 individuals across 14 countries, that the two most cited drivers of violent extremism in youth were injustice and corruption and socioeconomic marginalization/inequality.[4] So, oftentimes, extremist organizations play off these frustrations by promising pathways to religious salvation, invitations to redress political grievances, and opportunities for personal development, fulfillment, and belonging.

---

[4] Search for Common Ground. *Working Together to Address Violent Extremism: A Strategy for Youth-Government Partnerships*. Forthcoming.

We deal with the variances in recruitment by directing our approach on the drivers of violent extremism. **Our approach to CVE is laid upon four pillars:** 1) Prevention from joining violent extremist groups; 2) Disengagement for those already affiliated with these groups; 3) Enabling effective state responses; and 4) Amplifying alternative narratives to VE.

1. Prevention

Our first pillar, prevention, is focused on empowering communities to identify and address potential and actual drivers of violent extremism. We look to empower and support communities to use non-violent means to address their grievances and to develop the social structures needed to handle those at risk of radicalization.

In Tunisia, through dialogue, we engage with community leaders, women, youth, religious leaders, and local authorities, to collaboratively identify localized push and pull drivers to violent radicalization, as well as advance collaborative local response in each community. So far, our engagement and research in 6 communities with 667 participants, has shown that drivers are **localized** and **differ** from one community to another. That is, one community may suffer from a strong sentiment of historical injustice and isolation from the central decision-making powers. In another community, the grievances might be primarily about the deficient education system. And in a third one, it might be the deep distrust with the local police. Therefore, each community's cause of and reactions to violence will be different from one another, thereby necessitating community-led responses.

2. Disengagement

In our second pillar, disengagement, we look to disrupt the incentive structure tying people to violent extremist groups. In this work, we support people currently or previously engaged in violent extremist groups or at risk of radicalization, to choose alternative non-violent pathways forward. This work is conducted mainly within the prison system and in support to national authorities.

In Morocco, we partner with the Prison administration, the Foundation Mohammed VI for the reintegration of prisoners, Rabita Mohamedia of Islamic Scholars, and the National Center for Human Rights. We currently work in 34 prisons (holding 70 percent of all detainees) to train prison management, guards, and detainees in a diversity of techniques to better manage conflicts and enhance detainee self-esteem. Alongside the work in the prisons, we also tackle communities' sensitization to the return and reception of ex-prisoners. The combination of these efforts intends to lessen the appeal of and incentives for recruitment into violent extremist groups and decrease recidivism.

3. Enabling Effective State Responses

In our third pillar, we assist governments to work collaboratively with non-state actors to expand the portfolio of policy options available to them, beyond the use of adversarial approaches or kinetic force. For instance, we support the collaborative relationships between Indonesia's Anti-Terrorism Policy Unit and human rights groups to develop human rights principles, devise complaints mechanisms, and strengthen communication with communities.

This work does not yet come very naturally, and often requires bringing in other stakeholders. For instance, in Jordan surveys showed that if and when families are suspicious that their child is becoming radicalized, only 7% of them would turn to state security agencies for local support, while 46% of them would turn to trusted religious leaders. This demonstrates that there is great import in equipping religious leaders and other important actors in the community with the skills to approach these complex issues. We have done this type of engagement in Morocco, where we worked closely with Rabita Mohamedia of Islamic Scholars to contextualize community mediation curriculum and train hundreds of Moroccan Imams and Morchidates. We have piloted this work in Western Europe as well.

4. Amplifying Alternative Narratives

Finally, in our fourth pillar to CVE, we seek to amplify credible and constructive narratives to reduce the appeal of violence as an option. We work with local writers and producers to create television series, radio programs, and comic books, which tackle issues of identity and promote principles of societal collaboration and inclusion. Participation in violence is often driven by emotional experiences, not rational calculation, and media programs such as drama series and reality TV shows can foster empathy and influence social norms by connecting with audiences' emotional needs and aspirations.

What We've Seen in our Work on these Issues

Our experience, both in the Middle East and North Africa and elsewhere, corroborates the findings that policies focused on militaristic or adversarial approaches to VE often dominate the state-citizen relationship, orient youth in ways that frustrate and block their desire to engage in or drive change, and/or rely solely on rational argumentation to address phenomena that are driven by emotional needs and aspirations.

Instead, bottom-up approaches for peace and security that empower those who maintain commitment to a peaceful and inclusive path forward become more successful in generating positive results. That means,

incorporating efforts to develop localized strategies across state and non-state actors, which engage religious leaders and organizations, create opportunities for collaboration between states and citizens, and support youth empowerment and personal development.

1. Engaging Religious Leaders and Organizations

Government and civil society partners should work with religious leaders based on their important social roles rather than focusing on theology. These leaders often carry significant influence over their constituency and exercise crucial roles in the community outside of religious leadership. In Central African Republic, for instance, studies reveal that religious and community leaders, traditional authorities, and Peace and Mediation Committees are the key people to peacefully solve conflicts in the communities, while the reach and capacity of state infrastructure and governance remains weak and centralized.[5] Effective CVE support then may include meeting capacity-building needs expressed by religious leaders; creating opportunities for them to interact with government and other sectors of society around shared concerns or challenges; and working with faith-based community organizations.

2. Creating Opportunities for Collaboration between States and Citizens

Strategies supporting new forms of engagement and interest-based advocacy can yield solutions that improve both security and human rights. When we work with the security sector, local government, and community groups to broaden the number of actors involved in addressing the risk of violent extremism, we can build confidence, create channels of communication and cooperation, and lead to better security and governance outcomes.

3. Supporting Youth Empowerment and Personal Development

Many extremist groups recruit on platforms of personal growth, in-group belonging, and the change to exact meaningful social change. Social programs that offer these same opportunities can meet the needs that drive extremist groups' appeal. For example, virtual exchanges that use structured interactions to connect youth around the world can create emotional connections and humanize the "other" across geographic boundaries.

---

[5] https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/SFCG_Etude-de-base-et-finale_2016-CAF007-et-CAF002-final.pdf

Recommendations to Her Majesty's Government

While the drivers of violent extremism are context-specific and diverse, there are broad recommendations that we can put forth to inform more successful CVE policy.

- **Shifting the Policy Framework on CVE:** The current policy framework on CVE is heavily framed on the counter-radicalization or counter-extremism space. This can be damaging to program-goal setting because of its negative narrative — for instance, is the highest goal for youth that they avoid becoming violent/radical? Under this narrative, strategies often stigmatize youth by treating them as potential weapons of mass destruction, but instead, youth must be drivers of social change who can channel their aspirations through constructive non-violent activism. We recommend leveraging UNSCR 2250 (Youth, Peace and Security), which provides a framework through which Governments can provide greater resources and space for youth to positively mobilize for peacebuilding within and across their communities. Skills building, information sharing, and community works programs can offer youth meaningful ways to connect and engage with their communities in a way that engenders a sense of ownership and belonging within the community.

- **Incorporating a Whole-of-Society Approach:** In our experience, a whole-of-society approach, involving all stakeholders (state and non-state) in design and implementation of interventions and programming, is the best way forward. This requires deliberate trust- and relationship-building between and within communities and across state-citizen relationships that may be non-existent or tense. Broadening the number of actors involved in addressing the risk of violent extremism can build confidence, create channels of communication, and lead to better security and governance outcomes, while also helping create a civic space that is less susceptible to the message of violent extremism.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to address this important issue and for your interest and support in addressing violent extremism.