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ISLAMIC MILITARY COUNTER TERRORISM COALITION

General Directorate of Planning and Coordination



Spotlight  
On

# MEASURING UP

## Evaluating the Impact of Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism Programs 2019

### Measuring Up

Evaluating the Impact of P/CVE Programs

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### Taking Stock

Analytic Tools for Understanding and Designing P/CVE Programs

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# **MEASURING UP:** Evaluating the Impact of Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism Programs **2019**

## MEASURING UP: Evaluating the Impact of Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism Programs

The emergence, evolution and ubiquity of violent extremism (VE) constitute a complex and onerous global threat. The vicarious and direct experience of the recent decades portends that combating extremism first – be it benign or malignant so to speak – can potentially set the wheels in motion for countering terrorism. To this end, a broad range of

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academic and civil institutions evinced rigorous engagement in helping to achieve such a formidable task and further develop new tools to address the scourge of VE, leading eventually to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the underlying and contributory causes of VE and associated tools and programs to combat all types of VE. This report provides practitioners, policymakers and researchers with an increasingly significant reference guide and an overview of challenges in evaluating the impact of CVE interventions and the prevention of VE, while exploring some potential solutions. The current report falls into two key sections.

**The first** section highlights the various analytical tools developed to understand the causes and methods of VE, and the strengths and weaknesses of the tools thereof, within frameworks and models at the micro and macro levels across different contexts. The report provides in-depth analyses of frameworks and common conceptual models used to understand VE. This also includes the development of

programs to combat extremist organizations and ideology and associated strategies to improve the program to combat VE.

**The second** section discusses the assessment of the impact of programs developed to prevent violent extremism, while providing practitioners, policymakers and researchers with a review for the challenges which the assessment of these programs encounters. It also explores some potential solutions and sheds light on relevant tools that assess the impact by measuring the changes in attitudes, behaviors and relationships.

### Individual Level Models

To well understand VE and develop plans to prevent or address VE, multiple conceptual frameworks and different analytical models are used in the report. The tools thereof can be classified into two categories of levels or analysis: micro-level tools for extremist individuals and macro-level tools for extremist groups. At the first level, extremism and the evolutionary trajectory thereof are examined over the past 15 years individually, both in linear and dynamic models, to understand the complexity of violent extremism to better understand the onerous operations of VE.

Micro level models tend to emphasize the impact of belief and ideas on the individual path to VE; while in linear models in particular, extremist ideas are

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often a precursor to an individual's involvement in VE. These models, especially early ones, describe extremism as a series of steps in which an individ-

ual gradually adopts extremist beliefs that ends in violent activity. Simply put, linear models implicitly hold that an individual's adoption of violent behavior is an ideologically driven process. However, other research reveals that ideology can be a secondary consideration. For example, research examining the motivations for participation in violent extremism organizations (VEOs) such as Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and Daesh has shown that engagement in VE actions and in VEOs may have more to do with material deprivation, an individual's predisposition to violence, or dynamics of coercion than with an individual's ideology.

Linear micro-level models provide a direct, accessible conceptualization of radicalization and is significantly based on the idea that radicalization is a process. Understanding radicalization per se suggests that there may be methods to interrupt or change an individual's trajectory toward VE. Such models opened the door to new levels and lines of thinking about how to understand, foretell, and prevent violent extremist activity. Linear models, however, have been enhanced by new research studies that emphasize the very complex individualized and nonlinear nature of radicalization. Dynamic models, on the other hand, incorporate a more multidimensional understanding of the factors leading individuals to VE.

While both linear and dynamic models of extremism serve to identify risk factors and exposure to violent extremism, they cannot predict that certain individuals will become extremists, or that they will carry out violence. While both linear and dynamic models of extremism help in identifying risk factors and exposure to VE, they cannot predict that certain individuals will become extremists, or that they will carry out violent acts. Such models do help in identifying risk factors for and vulnerabilities to the engagement of an individual in VE activities. Gaining a good level of understanding of risk factors is useful in building awareness of who might be vulnerable to recruitment by VEOs or to involvement in VE ac-

tivities and may help support early interventions by families, communities, schools, teachers, and others close to those at risk, providing protection to such vulnerable groups.

**There are four factors behind the radicalization process that law enforcement and counter-violent extremists can observe: readiness for action (motivation and intent), objectives (symbols of Western, military and civilian hegemony), opportunity (access to training and resources), and acquired capacity (training and personal experience).**

Contemporary analysis of individual extremism has revealed a broad academic consensus that extremism is a dynamic rather than a linear process. Dynamic models emphasize that there is no single path to VE, and that individuals may be engaged or disengaged for different reasons at different times. Models developed over the last decade incorporate a more robust understanding of the psychosocial processes at play in radicalization and the existing interaction among multiple influencing factors. In this regard, the US National Counterterrorism Center has published a guide for practitioners on countering VE that includes a dynamic model for understanding extremism, which addresses the factors contributing to an individual's progress toward extremism. The model identifies three distinct and overlapping processes: extremism, mobilization, and action. It provides an overview of the important factors in the radicalization process, including individual perceptions, behaviors, relationships, and group dynamics. The model identifies four factors behind the radicalization process that law enforcement and counter-violent extremists can observe: readiness for action (motivation and intent), objectives (symbols of Western, military and civilian hegemony), opportunity (access to training and resources), and acquired capacity (training and personal experience).

## Macro-Level Models

At the macro level, the analysis deals with structural factors and the systemic root causes of VE, including individual and collective grievances, social dynamics and structural issues.

However, such levels of analysis and tools thereof do not always identify options for interventions directly, and such tools often contain many variables that make it difficult to isolate the influence of dynamics from relevant factors, especially in vulnerable environments.

**This concern is supported by evidence that suggests that designing an intervention to counteract a list of presumed drivers of VE may prove ineffective in the absence of consideration of the broader context. Even well-developed frameworks often omit key variables, such as political and social factors.**

Macro-level tools address and highlight systemic root causes and external factors that enable violent extremist movements and associated groups to emerge and flourish. Furthermore, macro-level tools tend to emphasize a holistic and contextual understanding of VE that moves beyond a security lens to consider the structural conditions conducive to VE, as well as relevant political and social dynamics.

Most macro-level tools are frameworks, not models; they propose a conscious approach to assessing the drivers of VE, and intervention points, many of which involve the study of extremist factors at the individual level, but differ from the micro-level tools as they are concerned with the assessment of individual factors, structural, social and environmental factors and dynamics, which further increase the weakness or strength of a community, or a specific environment for the influence of VE, rather than mapping the individual paths of extremism.

Macro level tools usually take one of two forms: tools that address leadership-enabling factors for mitigating VE, such as push-pull frameworks, and tools that promote analysis of the social, cultural and political dynamics that intersect with these factors, such as conflict analysis tools.

The push-pull framework was first developed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as a means to understand the motives for participation in and growth of violent extremist groups and insurgency movements. Factors contributing to VE in these frameworks include limited economic opportunities, political exclusion, vulnerable governance, and perceptions and experiences of grievances.

Interventions to prevent and combat VE based on the motives list may be problematic if they ignore key considerations, or if they address some real and perceived grievances, but do not include a full understanding of the underlying circumstances that have led to the emergence and growth of VE in a given environment. A plan to counter the supposed drivers of violent extremism has proven ineffective in the absence of consideration in the general context, even well-developed frameworks often overlook key political and socially sensitive variables.

## Conflict Analysis Tools

Well, in recognition of the highly complex interplay going between push-pull factors on the individual,

**The development of an effective intervention requires an analytical effort that prioritizes different drivers and evaluates the potential effectiveness of different interventions after identifying the conditions and factors that support or mitigate the activities of an extremist group.**

communal, and structural levels and associated role in increasing or decreasing the vulnerability of a given location to VE, some practitioners have

developed traditional conflict assessment frameworks to better understand VE and design protection and CVE policies, strategies, and interventions. This is to provide a step-by-step means of identifying the characteristics of VE in a certain area, and identifying what sort of intervention is most relevant and viable. Furthermore, this framework guides practitioners in identifying the key actors that promote VE and work to counter it in addition to understanding the role of relationships and group dynamics; identifying larger structural and cultural dynamics at play; and prioritizing specific drivers and areas using a threat assessment matrix.

## Challenges of Macro-Level Application

In essence, macro-level frameworks provide an analytical structure for assessing the causes and tools of VE and promote a holistic and contextual understanding of the circumstances in which VEOs thrive. However, there are specific challenges in applying macro-level analysis tools. Push-pull models can help to identify factors that create an enabling environment for VE, such as individual and collective grievances that fuel participation in VEOs, but do not necessarily provide tools or information to develop effective interventions to well prevent or directly combat VE.

Words such as “radicalism” and “extremism,” are value-laden terms that shall have different denotations and connotations to different people. Indicators that measure impact and change must therefore represent the local lexicon and real understanding, otherwise the results are subject to inaccuracies.

The development of an effective intervention requires an analytical effort that prioritizes different drivers and evaluates the potential effectiveness of

different interventions after identifying the conditions and factors that support or mitigate the activities of an extremist group.

Macro-level frameworks often involve many factors, making it more difficult to identify and prioritize the most relevant issues in the development of interventions, and given the broad scope of macro-level tools, their use can bring about such a risk through ignoring critical factors or relationships. Moreover, what is really challenging is developing coherent policies, plans and programs within complex and rapidly changing environments..

Finally, macro-level frameworks do not always include consideration of relevant conflict dynamics, although violent extremist groups often harness their programs of existing conflict dynamics and seek opportunity in poorly governed and conflict-prone environments.

## Delineation of Models

As described, micro-level tools highlight understanding, identifying and countering radicalization in individuals. However, macro-level tools emphasize understanding and addressing the broader structural factors that enable VEOs to emerge and spread. The nature of extremism in conflict-prone and vulnerable environments is different, and requires careful consideration of the structural factors and related conflict dynamics, sociocultural understanding of the processes of recruitment and joining VEOs.

Although most analytical tools at the micro and macro levels tend to incorporate the influence of social dynamics and interpersonal relationships into VE, few are concerned with evaluating or integrating this aspect into the preparation of intervention projects and programs. One of the main findings of this study is that assessment frameworks and analytical models enhance understanding of the causes and drivers of VE, but most of them are of limited value in preparing interventions to prevent and combat VE.

## Measuring impact of Intervention Programs

The second section of the report examines and highlights the challenges of measuring the impact of intervention programs to prevent and combat VE, including the absence of specific practices, approaches or methods that can be used to assess the impact of such programs, and the absence of many published documents on the evaluation of such programs, which in turn has limited the exchange of lessons and good practices. The lack of acceptable assessments and the diversity of such programs have made it difficult to understand which efforts are useful in addressing VE, and which procedures and methods are effective in identifying their impact.

Although there is a paucity or dearth of data and the complexity of practices, challenges in assessing the impact of intervention programs to prevent and combat VE can be identified in two groups. The first group is represented in analytical challenges such as establishing a cause-effect relationship, examining variable content, and developing an effective measurement index. The second group is reflected in practical challenges such as collecting relevant information and data.

### Analytical Challenges

In the development of programs to prevent and combat VE, it is difficult to attribute the change directly to program efforts when evaluating such projects. Efforts to establish a cause-effect relationship run into two key obstacles: the impossibility of measuring causality, and the second is accounting for the large number of variables that may have contributed, enabled or affected the outputs of programs to prevent and combat VE, especially in fragile or conflict-prone environments.

Inasmuch as programs to prevent and combat VE are widely applied in various political, social and cultural environments, local definitions and awareness of concepts such as VE, violence, pluralism and

peace require lexicons to develop meaningful programs that can measure their impact. Words such as “radicalism” and “extremism,” are value-laden terms that shall have different denotations and connotations to different people. Indicators that measure impact and change must therefore represent the local lexicon and real understanding, otherwise the results are subject to inaccuracies. This makes it difficult to generalize local results to other communities or regions.

### Practical Challenges

The availability and reliability of data are common challenges when evaluating the impact of protection and CVE programs. Local populations, government officials, and program staff may be reluctant to participate in surveys or disclose information. In areas where security concerns limit access to certain locations or populations, bias resulting from oversampling of those living in more accessible areas may ensue. Such challenges are significant but not unique to prevention and CVE intervention programs. In addition, although third-party evaluations can help mitigate such a concern, the resources they require may not always be available. The sensitive and security-relevant nature of several questions asked in an effort to assess attitudes and support for VE can distort the reliability of information culled from local populations or officials who fear the potential consequences of providing frank information.

### Evaluating CVE Interventions

A critically important question in evaluating programs designed to address VE is: What are we seeking to change? Broadly speaking, the common answer to such a question is that all CVE programs aim to prevent or reduce VE. However, there are many approaches and types of programs that reflect different theories of change, objectives, levels of analysis and methods of understanding the drivers and causes of VE.



Evaluating the impact of programs to counter VE is difficult and time-consuming, and may be impossible to implement. Researchers and academics have instead been concerned with developing tools that evaluate the collective attitudes of individuals, behaviors, and relationships, as a better measure of evaluating local intervention for programs to prevent and combat VE. All these programs seek to elicit changes in attitudes for individuals, groups, behaviors and relationships. To this end, such programs aim to examine the structural, individual and social dynamics that motivate individuals to join violent extremist groups, or create the necessary conditions for their spread.

## Measuring Change in Attitudes

Many of the CVE interventions and programs along with the evaluations reviewed in this report measure changes in the ideological, social and political beliefs of the targeted individuals, in particular their attitudes towards the use of violence and their ideological leanings. The weakness here is to confirm the assumption of the nexus between extremist beliefs and violent activities.

A new sophisticated tool used in the development of CVE interventions and programs is the application of complex integrative theory, which serves as an impact assessment tool.

## Measuring Changes in Behaviors and Activities

The most direct measures of the impact of CVE program on VE are those that assess change in behavior and activities, including:

- ▶ Measures of changes in individual involvement in violent extremist groups and activities, such as vulnerability to extremist propaganda and online participation.
- ▶ Measures of changes in participation in non-violent acts or engagement with activities designed to promote tolerance or peace or to counter extremism.

While these behavioral measures can assess CVE interventions, they do not work well in measuring perspectives, attitudes and beliefs. Behavior can be measured using various surveys, interviews and case studies, gathering evidence of violent incidents and perpetrators, and monitoring the rate of recidivism of former terrorists, which are standard approaches to evaluating CVE program interventions aimed at de-radicalization and rehabilitation of former violent extremists, but these measures have limited impact in measuring CVE intervention programs, especially programs that deal with those who have no criminal or violent history or record.

Measures of online behavior are especially relevant to assessing the impact of online counter-radicalization interventions. In some intervention programs, evaluators measure behaviors based on the amount of time individuals spend engaging with counternarrative material, the number of times individuals “like” or recommend online content to others, and the number of people who view these materials. It is difficult to determine who is viewing the content, for what purpose, and whether or not changes in how often material is viewed or shared actually represent a change in behaviors of those engaged.

## Measuring Changes in Relationships and Social Networks

Measures of relationships and social networks generally fall into two key categories:

- ▶ Measures that predict individual relationships and ties to members outside and inside of an individual’s community or to VEOs
- ▶ Measures that predict levels of cohesion, integration and engagement of individuals on a communal level

Most references to measuring change in individual relationships and social networks have been limited to evaluations of online CVE interventions that use social media accounts and their followers to monitor

group dynamics and relationships. Analyzing social relationships and networks is definitely an important factor in understanding and combating VE, and in the face of the difficulty of measuring it, most evaluations of change in relationships have

been limited to cyberspace, despite the importance of analyzing social networks outside the internet through questionnaires and collecting information about social networks, relationships and behavioral attitudes towards other individuals.

## About the Authors

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### TAKING STOCK: ANALYTIC TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND DESIGNING P/CVE PROGRAMS



### MEASURING UP: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF P/CVE PROGRAMS





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