MERCY CORPS

# Overcoming Misperceptions *about* Violent Extremism

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) and U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) aim to improve efforts by the U.S. government to prevent conflict, including violent extremism, around the world. The GFA's goals reflect the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission and the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States. **As a result, the GFA's cross-cutting themes include "curbing extremist ideology" and "making society less vulnerable to the spread of extremism."** Mercy Corps has spent years conducting in-depth research on deterring youth participation in violence, which in many fragile contexts—like Kenya and Niger—includes preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). This brief outlines key takeaways from this research that GFA implementers should consider when devising P/CVE initiatives and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning plans under the SPCPS.

A specific focus on VE should be commensurate with the risk it poses.

Violent extremism is just one aspect of conflict and instability. According to data from ACLED (Figure 1), over the past five years, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) were responsible for only 8% of attacks on civilians and 13% of fatalities in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia.[1] Non-VEOs were responsible for 48% of attacks and half (51%) of civilian fatalities. Some incidents documented by ACLED with unknown perpetrators may have been committed by VEOs, since extremist groups sometimes decline to take credit for attacks. But it is clear that globally and within individual countries, →

FIGURE 1:

Violent Events by Year (2017-2021)

Attacks on Civilians (in Thousands)

— VEO   — — Non–VEO   ⋯⋯ Unknown
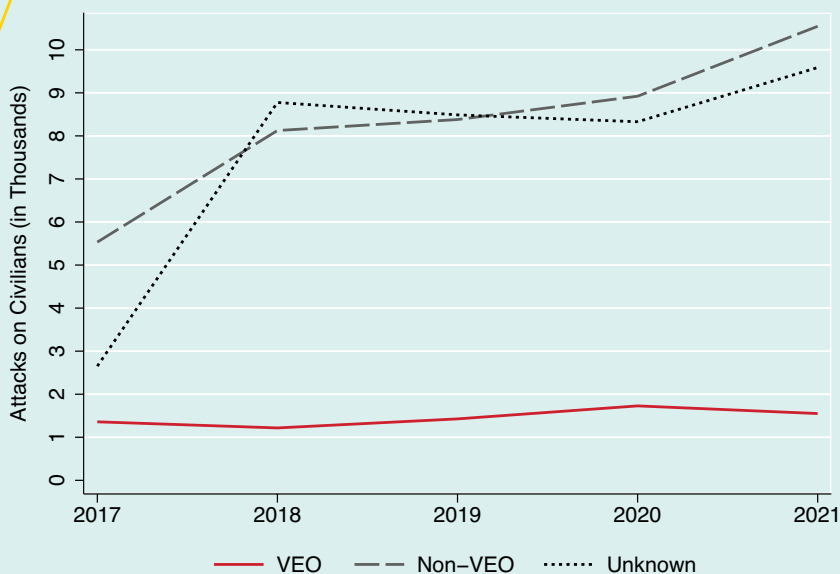
SOURCE: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, www.acleddata.com

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1   We identified VEOs based on the U.S. State Department list of Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations; the Counter Extremism Project's list of Extremist Groups, and the Director of National Intelligence's list of Terrorist Groups.

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VEOs are often not the primary perpetrators of violence. In Nigeria, for example, conflict between farmers and herders has killed more people than Boko Haram. Among SPCPS priority countries—Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, and Togo—nearly 60% of attacks, and three-quarters of fatalities, were perpetrated by non-VEOs from 2017-2021. Even in countries with active VEO activity (e.g., Libya and Mozambique), most violence was committed by non-VEOs. The extent to which violent extremism is targeted by the SPCPS should therefore reflect the actual threat it poses in a particular country or region.

Economic interventions are not enough to combat VE.

GFA implementers and other observers continue to implicate poverty and unemployment as key drivers of violent extremism. While a lack of economic opportunities can play a role, the evidence suggests that political and social factors—such as limited social networks and grievances against government negligence, marginalization, and abuse—are more prominent sources of risk. Thus improving people's economic prospects alone is less likely to reduce vulnerability to VE than focusing on governance and psychosocial dynamics, particularly among high-risk individuals. Country plans under the SPCPS should combine and sequence initiatives at the group, community, and elite levels to address multi-faceted drivers of VE.

Making P/CVE a discrete aim in active conflict contexts can overlook other complex dynamics.

In places experiencing active armed conflict, decoupling the drivers and dynamics of violent extremism from other types of violence may be impractical or of limited utility. In countries like Libya, which continues to endure multiple overlapping conflicts related to insurgent, intercommunal, and criminal dynamics, isolating vulnerability and risk factors for VE can be very difficult. The SPCPS should ensure country strategies maintain a broad focus and seek to reduce participation in a range of violent activities, including violent extremism. This is particularly important when different types of violence share similar drivers.

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Demonstrating progress on P/CVE requires clear and reliable metrics.

Despite the uptick in P/CVE programming over the past two decades, evidence of impact is thin. This is partly due to the challenges of measuring violent extremism. It is nearly impossible to safely and reliably collect data on the most obvious indicators, such as the number of people recruited into VEOs or the incidence of radicalization. Mercy Corps and other organizations have therefore relied on proxy measures, some attitudinal (e.g., support for the use of violence) and some behavioral (e.g., anti-social conduct). Yet the impact of P/CVE programs on these indicators can diverge, and different measures of VE do not always correlate with each other. To show success and achieve a core aim of the GFA—promoting learning across the U.S. government about how to reduce conflict and fragility—policymakers and practitioners need to invest in better conceptualization and measurement of P/CVE pathways and outcomes.