## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Islamist Violent Extremism: A New Form of Conflict or Business as Usual?

Andrew Glazzard*, Sasha Jesperson†, Thomas Maguire‡ and
Emily Winterbotham*

Islamist violent extremist (IVE) groups are frequently involved in civil conflicts. Indeed, some groups owe their origins to conflict, and tens of thousands of Islamists have chosen to participate in conflicts taking place in foreign countries in the past 35 years. Increasingly, IVE groups appear to have the capacity to influence the conflicts they are involved in, and are influenced in turn by their experiences. As a result, for those working on conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, the involvement of IVE groups raises questions of whether traditional responses remain adequate. Drawing on three country case studies – Nigeria, Kenya and Iraq/Syria, this article examines the similarities and differences between IVE groups and other conflict actors, and what this means for development, state-building and peacebuilding responses.

Responses to conflict, particularly by development actors, have become increasingly sophisticated since the post-Cold War interventionist phase of the 1990s. A substantial toolkit has been developed with the UK Department for International Development (DfID), often at the forefront of these advances. Over this period however, conflict has evolved significantly, with non-state actors growing in importance. The most recent evolution is the emergence of Islamist violent extremist (IVE) groups. In contrast to other conflict actors, their nature and aims appear to be qualitatively different. This raises the question of whether the tools that have been

developed in recent decades to prevent and resolve conflict are still relevant or if new tools need to be developed. This article assesses the aims and objectives, 'factors' for involvement, social/cultural identity pull factors, organisational structure and demographics, tactics and methods of IVE groups in three case studies – Kenya, Nigeria and Iraq/Syria. These groups are compared to non-Islamist groups in the same country to consider just how different they are, and what this means for development actors that are responding to conflict.

'Islamist Violent Extremism' is a broad label that includes a wide range of disparate groups and movements, ranging from Shia revolutionaries to popular militias to cell-based terrorist groups such as Al Qaida. The motives, targets, demands, structures and arenas of operations vary significantly amongst different groups and may also change over time (Glazzard et al. 2015). The article draws on debates in conflict studies,

* Royal United Services Institute, GB

† St Mary's University, Twickenham, GB

‡ Kings College London, GB

Corresponding author: Sasha Jesperson
(sasha.jesperson@stmarys.ac.uk)

terrorism studies and development studies in order to understand these factors. By focusing on three diverse case studies, this article engages with the diversity of IVE.

In Kenya, this article engages with the operations and supporters of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (Al Shabaab) and affiliated or sympathetic groups like Al Hijra, comparing them to two contemporary non-Islamist groups (the armed wing of the Mombasa Republic Council (MRC) and the Mungiki) as well as a historical group (the Mau Mau movement). The Nigeria case study compares Boko Haram with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Boko Haram and MEND are both violent movements that originated in socially and economically marginalised regions of Nigeria, with a similar approach despite apparent ideological differences. The Iraq/Syria case study focuses on three Sunni Islamist groups: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Jabhat Al Nusra (JaN), and Ahrar al-Sham (AaS) and compares them with each other and with Shia militant groups such as the Badr Organisation in Iraq.

By comparing IVE groups with non-Islamist groups in these three case studies, key similarities and differences have emerged in the areas of consideration that have implications for how development actors respond to conflict involving IVE groups. These areas are outlined below, followed by a discussion of what this means for development actors.

## Aims and Objectives

In contrast to conflict studies, much terrorism research argues, or assumes, a sharp distinction between nationalist groups and ideological groups: ideological terrorists seek to transform global society rather than establish a separate homeland. Islamist extremists may desire a new Caliphate but do not seem to be motivated by any particular nationalist or ethnic identity (Fettweis 2009: 270; Piazza 2009).

Salafi-jihadism is framed in religious terms. However, Ranstorp (1998) and Gerges (2009) argue that this should be seen as a modern movement emerging in the 1990s when Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Usama bin Ladin articulated the doctrine of the 'far enemy' – the United States as hidden hand behind Arab autocracy and the oppression of Muslims. Al Qaida's worldview is reduced to a 'single narrative' presenting a long history of conflicts involving Muslims across the world as evidence of the West's war against Islam stemming from its implacable fear and hatred. The overarching aim of Al Qaida (and now ISIL) and others is therefore presented as the continuation of a 1,400 year struggle (Kepel and Milelli 2008) or a 'clash of civilisations' (Funck and Said 2004), a perception which differs from other conflicts. Contemporary violent Islamists have extended the semantic scope of jihad beyond 'just war theory' in order to legitimise terrorist violence, revolutionary violence, and insurgency, while promoting jihad as Islam's 'sixth pillar' or 'forgotten obligation', and hence an individual rather than collective duty for Muslims (Brahimi 2010; Van de Voorde 2011).

ISIL's principal aim, the expansion of the Caliphate, is therefore presented as a state for 'true' Muslims and a bulwark against the enemy reflecting the eschatological as well as the geopolitical significance of the Levant (Filiu 2011). Its mission statement – 'remaining and expanding' – appears to encapsulate this aim, while the character of the state is implicit in al-Baghdadi's division of humanity into 'the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin' and 'the camp of the Jews, the Crusaders, their allies' (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 1).

The stated aims of Boko Haram were also initially entrenched in religious ideology. Boko Haram was founded as a rejection of the social vices of the Nigerian state, as 'the best thing for a devout Muslim to do was to "migrate" from the morally bankrupt society to a secluded place and establish an ideal Islamic society devoid of political corruption and moral deprivation' (Onuoha 2010: 2). Since 2011, Al Shabaab's operations in Kenya's North–East and coast regions have

been aimed at forming part of a broader jihadist project of 'liberating' surrounding Muslim lands from non-Muslim 'occupation' and avenging historical injustices (Botha 2014; Anderson and McKnight 2015). In contrast, religious ideology has not featured nearly as prominently in the planning or rhetoric of the leaders of the MRC, Mau Mau or Mungiki in Kenya, or MEND in Nigeria.

Some argue that religion is by its nature irrational, and therefore religiously motivated violence must also be irrational (Smilansky 2004). Stern (2003) argues that religiously inspired violent groups consistently begin with utopian aspirations, even if that is not often where they end. While the goal of 'purifying the world of injustice, cruelty, and all that is anti-human' is not in itself irrational, Stern (2003: 281) argues it may be motivated or accompanied by a 'spiritual calling', which is irrational.

Comparing MEND and Boko Haram in Nigeria is a good illustration of this argument. Although not religious, MEND had a firm ideology with well defined and localised aims based on a common desire for equality and social justice. MEND's violent strategy was consistent with its aims, resulting in the loss of a quarter of Nigeria's daily oil exports (Courson 2009). Its political strategy was equally consistent, as it began to articulate its demands to the Nigerian government for resource control, constitutional rights, and measures to mitigate social marginalisation, political repression and environmental degradation. The demands of MEND were supported by international advocacy on the damage caused by the oil industry, so their demands were seen by many as justified and their tactics as rational – even if there was strong disapproval of the latter. In contrast, because Boko Haram frames its programme in religious and cultural terms, it tends to be perceived as irrational, uncompromising, or even psychopathic (Comolli 2015).

Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler (2006: 295–6) challenge these claims emphasising that this ignores the importance of beliefs and ideology in individual utility calculations,

'where individuals believe that the spiritual payoffs outweigh the negative consequences of strategies in the here and now, high-cost/risk activism is intelligible as a rational choice'. Moving on from this, rather than seeing Islamists as grievance-stricken reactionaries, recent research has reconceptualised Islamist extremists as strategic thinkers engaged in cost-benefit calculations. Ultra-violence and religious and cultural framing of activities do not necessarily mean irrationality. Indeed, in some respects Boko Haram's violence has been successful, enabling it to conquer territory with excessive security-force responses aiding recruitment.

Religiously focused pronouncements may therefore be committed objectives, or simply rational framing devices for recruitment. Some literature draws a differentiation between jihadists and Islamist revolutionaries and terrorists such as those fighting in Afghanistan and Bosnia which followed a defensive, territorial programme that was predicated on the belief that Muslims were under attack or occupation (Hegghammer 2010, 2010/11). Piazza (2009) helpfully disaggregates Islamist terrorists into 'strategic groups' such as Hamas, which despite claiming to be motivated by religious aims, have similar aims to nationalist-separatist groups and 'abstract/universal' groups such as utopian Al Qaida and its affiliates. A recent example is AaS; although cosmic in ideology, the group is adopting a 'Syrian nationalist' programme as evidenced by its signing of a 'covenant of honour' in late 2014 where it disavowed any global-jihadist pretensions. AaS' leaders now condemn ISIL and Al Qaida for embracing fighters from a diversity of traditions, but the group remains part of the broader jihadist movement (Weiss and Hassan 2015: 162). Even Al Qaida affiliates, with the exception of Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and now ISIS, do not in reality share the same global aims.

In other respects however, participants in these conflicts, whether Islamist or not, appear to be broadly similar – they are concerned with defending their constituencies,

controlling populations, acquiring resources, recruiting troops and projecting their power militarily and through propaganda. Looking closely at ISIS, the group's real aims – to obtain and project power – are more mundane than its 'cosmic ideology' might suggest. JaN also aspires to govern territory in order to create a safe haven for attacking the West (Lister 2015). In contrast to ISIL, it does not aspire to govern a full Caliphate but a more modest emirate (Turkmani 2015). Moreover, at a leadership level, the aims of the Shia militias in Syria and Iraq are at least partly geopolitical. Both the Sadrist movement and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq have aggressively asserted Shia identity, while many have been responsible for persecuting Sunni Muslim civilians.

The aims of a group can also change with time. The aims of Al Shabaab's leaders and its affiliates, while not entirely clear or explicit, appear to be influenced by a regional Salafi-jihadist agenda and part of a broader jihadist project. Indeed, Kenya's 2011 incursion into Somalia, and battlefield successes by the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) forces, appear to have played a large part in hastening a shift within Al Shabaab's leadership from a predominantly Somali nationalist to a more internationalist jihadist orientation, which has had significant implications in terms of the tactics and operations used by the group (Bruton and Williams 2014; Bryden 2014; Menkhaus 2014; Hansen 2014; Anderson and McKnight 2015). AaS has also been shaped by the violence of the Syrian battlefield so that it has withdrawn from its initial belief in a 'cosmic' global-jihadist solution. In contrast to ISIL, its battlefield jurisprudence has progressively moderated. That it has done so while maintaining its religious authenticity, albeit in a more pluralist form than other groups, shows that religion can be a dynamic force in conflict.

The aims even within a group at a given time may not be consistent. While the leaders may have one set of goals, different motivating factors often drive their followers. Ideology is important for leaders especially;

some are ideological entrepreneurs who seek to mobilise followers behind a cause. Ideology can be a factor for followers, but people in conflict situations join violent groups for a wide range of reasons – social, psychological and practical, as well as political. For example, in Nigeria it is unclear how many actively support ideals such as an Islamic Caliphate propagated by the leaders when at the root of the conflict and public support for Boko Haram, just as it was with MEND, is a response to deprivation and lack of access to state services.

## 'Factors' for Involvement

Although religion is important, it is often used as a rational framing device for recruitment. Indeed, many followers are driven by grievance and may not even understand the religious ideology propagated by the leadership. Grievances – individual and group, personal and vicarious – are important drivers of Islamist violence. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2011: 13) includes discrimination, political marginalisation, a sense of 'anger at the perceived victimisation of fellow Muslims around the globe', repression of human rights, and foreign occupation' as pertinent grievances.

While it is widely supported that there is a strong relationship between perceived grievances and violent extremism (see Allen et al. 2015), debate continues over the nature of the relationship, particularly whether grievances are the root cause of violence or are simply a mechanism to justify that violence. For Gupta (2005), grievances are a necessary factor[1] in violent extremism, but they need to be instrumentalised by charismatic individuals, labelled as 'political entrepreneurs', and linked to social and psychological factors. Gurr's (1970) Relative Deprivation Theory, however, predicts that when there is frustration about the relative position of individuals in terms of what they have and their perceptions of what they ought to have, the likelihood of violence increases.

Research in conflict studies increasingly points to grievances stemming from failures of governance as a primary driver of violence (Howard 2014). State instability is frequently identified as 'the most consistent predictor of country-level terrorist attacks' (Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey et al. 2013; see also Piazza, 2007). When the state fails to provide human security, there are many examples where religion fills the void (Ganiel 2014). In situations of conflict and insecurity, populations are willing to engage with any entity that provides stability and security, at least in the short term. As a result, many failed or failing states have become hubs for extremist activity.

In Nigeria, while MEND's narrative was explicitly based on grievances and Boko Haram has subordinated grievances to religious and cultural opposition to the state, both groups have responded to and seek to correct social, political and economic grievances in marginalised regions far removed from the centres of power. In fact, Boko Haram's evolution into an ultra-violent ideology is also the product of governance failure, as the group was radicalised by a combination of Nigeria's excessive militarised responses and the failure to respond to the marginalisation of the northeast (Comolli 2015).

Flanagan (2008) and Grynkewich (2008) find that Islamist and non-Islamist groups alike are strengthened by state failures to provide basic services including security and justice. ISIL has exploited areas with weak governance, an active war economy and ongoing conflict, seeking to improve the situation and take control (Weiss and Hassan 2015). While this has benefits for the population, the ultimate aim is to support ISIL dominance in the region. ISIL has shown competence in providing security and governance in the areas it controls. Its leaders have skilfully navigated Sunni culture in Iraq and increasingly in Syria, providing security through a combination of repression, effective bureaucracy, and uncompromising law enforcement (Turkmani 2015). Yet

ISIL's competence goes beyond its capacity to provide security: utilities, hospitals, food distribution and other services are reported to have improved rapidly in areas under its control. While JaN does not match ISIL's ambitions to control all aspects of military and civil activity and JaN-administered areas in Syria do not have the 'police state' atmosphere of ISIL-controlled areas, JaN does aspire to control the courts and judiciary (Turkmani 2015).

When violent extremist groups operate locally, particularly in conflict situations, socio-economic discrimination and marginalisations appears to play a major role in recruitment. For instance, Islamist violent extremism in Kenya – including locally recruited Al Shabaab fighters, and Al Muhajiroun – is linked to the economic situation of Muslim's in Kenya, particularly in the Coast and North–East provinces that are majority Muslim. Socio-economic grievances, land-use rights, a lack of opportunities for youth, and ethnic or religious hostility towards a politically and economically dominant group in addition to repressive and discriminatory state policies and actions rather than ideology, may be more influential with many Kenyan followers of Al Shabaab and affiliates (Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Botha 2014, 2015; ICG 2012; Rift Valley Institute 2013; Botha 2014; Thompson 2015). Similarly, the most deprived regions of Nigeria, such as Borno and Kano States, have become Boko Haram's strongholds (Uzodike and Maiangwa 2012). Although the leadership of Boko Haram has been drawn from Islamic clerics and students, professionals and students of tertiary institutions, many recruits join for money or a lack of other opportunities. In Iraq, Shia militias are effectively in competition with the Iraqi army, and appear to be winning – militias offer better weapons and more generous pay, though they are also in competition with each other (Dodge 2012: 104; George 2014).

While the expanding reach of violence by militant Islamic organisations are often viewed through the prism of international

concerns about terrorism, the root causes are more often historical grievances, the state's failure to address deeply-rooted marginalisation and insecurity, and its use of repressive machinery to respond to insurgencies (Ganiel 2014; Lind and Dowd 2015).

What is significant is that Islamist extremism is not especially different from other religiously motivated or structured extremism. Economic and governance crises are fundamental causes of violence and conflict in general; Muslim-majority countries tend to be particularly vulnerable because their states are either often failing (or have failed), are corrupt and/or repressively governed, and are afflicted by falling living standards (Stern, 2003). For example, beyond religious ideology, there are other drivers of Al Shabaab and affiliates' recruitment practices at individual, communal and structural levels that are consistent with those that have encouraged participation in the MRC, Mungiki and Mau Mau.

### Social/Cultural Identity Pull Factors

The grievances outlined above are often framed in social or cultural terms and become a component of identity politics. For example, community grievances in Kenya are politicised due to the fractured nature of Kenyan politics along ethnic and religious lines, corruption and other systemic facilitators (Ndungu 2010; Oloo 2010; Kenya Transitional Justice Network 2013). These grievances and perceived victimisation can therefore be manipulated by leaders, which is what proponents of the terrorism school more strongly believe. Leaders of Islamist violent extremist groups can instrumentalise the perceived victimisation of fellow Muslims as a justification for extremist violence, although the use of a narrative of oppression to justify violence and recruit and motivate supporters is near-universal among violent extremist groups (Allan et al. 2015).

A component of this is ideology. When it comes to Islamist violent extremism specifically, how important ideology is has also become contested and politicised. Islamist

violent extremists have been inspired by an ideology developed in the 1980s for a specific purpose – defending Muslims from oppression and occupation – and which, under the pressure of repeated participation in conflicts, its adherents have adapted and made more extreme. Some terrorism studies assume that ideology is a simple motivating factor with some scholars going as far as asserting (controversially) that Islam, or at least Islamism, is inherently violent (e.g. Lewis 2002; Pipes 1989). Some political science scholars (such as Neumann 2013; Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler 2006) offer ideology as a causal explanation for the onset of Islamist extremist violence and its persistence – how else can we explain why some groups resort to violence while others do not?

However, ideology does not explain everything and there is much work that casts doubt on the importance of ideology in both terrorism and conflict. Conflict studies is particularly revealing here, with Kaldor (2006: 73) notoriously arguing that conflicts 'may take the guise of traditional nationalism, tribalism or religious fundamentalism', but are actually the result of the disintegration of states and structures under the pressures of globalisation. Though Kaldor's 'new wars' thesis has been criticised as misrepresenting 'small wars' as 'new wars', and assuming that her main case (the 1992–95 Bosnian War) is representative, her conclusions are nonetheless recognisable in some current conflicts, including in Iraq and Syria as she suggests that new wars are most likely to arise when centralised, authoritarian states lose legitimacy or begin to collapse. In this reading, religion is important not in terms of its contribution to ideology, but as a marker of social and political identity in the resulting struggles for resources or survival. Participants may frame conflicts in religious (and ethnic and national) terms but they are actually manifestations of some other historical force or process – which may not even be understood by participants themselves.

At the meso-level, which primarily affects smaller communities and identity groups, social and cultural factors are the most prevalent, described by USAID (2011) as 'pull' factors that encourage involvement in violent extremism. Those with the strongest 'pull' are linked to identity, whether this is religious, ethnic or group identity. Individual and group identity has been found to be most strongly expressed in religious or ethnic terms. Much literature outlines how important identity is for individuals to become involved in violent movements, particularly because radicalisation is a social process (Al Raffie 2013; Vidino 2011). Humans are capable of extraordinary feats, creative and destructive, if motivated by feelings of kinship, real or imagined – 'people don't simply die and kill for a cause. They die and kill for each other' (Atran 2011: ix).

Community also extends to the 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1982) of large identity groups such as nations or the umma (the global community of Muslims) that the violent group claims to represent. Several scholars (e.g. Gleave 2014; Hegghammer 2010/11; Maher 2015) examine this 'imagined community' in the context of Islamist violent extremism, and agree that what emerged from the 1990s was an idea of transnational Muslim identity that at least on the surface displaced alternative notions of identity centred on specific ethnic, cultural or geographical factors. In the 1980s and 1990s, this transnational identity was mobilised for defensive purposes, but it was not long before Al Qaeda and other groups transformed it into a doctrine of global terrorism and revolution. Psychological research has found that appeals to identity are essential for encouraging, legitimising and supporting involvement in violent extremist groups. ISIL gave new impetus to this apocalyptic strain within jihadism, naming its English language magazine *Dabiq*, after the site of one of the most important battles in the prophecies. This 'cosmic ideology' has enhanced ISIL's ability to recruit in Syria and Iraq, in the wider MENA region and in Western Europe through a sophisticated propaganda machine. In Kenya, a small number of radical Kenyan clerics propagating such messages have been the primary recruiting channel since the mid-2000s for mobilising Kenyans to travel and fight in Somalia. What remains unclear, however, is whether followers are attracted more by this ideological rhetoric or are attracted on identity grounds to the duty to defend fellow Muslims (ICG 2012; Botha 2014; Botha 2015).

Religious identity is too vague to meaningfully separate from other equally significant identity markers such as ethno/nationalist identity (Juergensmeyer 2003). Both religious ideologues and politically-motivated ethnic elites are able to capitalise on and engender shared identity by promoting transnational networks to support insurgents in the homeland (Kaldor 2007; Yadav 2010). It is also important to note that while the focus is currently on Salafi-jihadists, Shias in Syria and Iraq employ a similar narrative to recruit people relying on religious but also on sectarian divides between the Sunni and Shia communities. The Shia militia movement received a major boost with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's June 2014 fatwa encouraging Shia to fight a 'righteous jihad' against ISIL (Stansfield 2015). Following this, many Shia militias formed into the Hashd Shaabi – people's militias – to combat ISIL, revealing the extent to which sectarian politics have become entrenched in the conflict. 'Not only does Daesh [ISIL] fight as Sunnis rather than Iraqis, but the Hashd is equally sectarian, fighting ISIL as Shi'as rather than Iraqis' (Stansfield 2015). In conflict, the tactics of the Shia militias supports ISIL's narrative that the Iraqi government represents an existential threat to Sunnis. The militias themselves have been extensively accused of abuses and atrocities, most recently against Sunnis believed to have collaborated with ISIL (Human Rights Watch 2015). In parallel, their success in placing officials in positions of responsibility (George 2014; Dodge 2012: 63) supports ISIL's argument that the government and its security forces are not Iraqi but Shia.

## Organisational structure and demographics

Aggregating diverse movements, groups and activities under the single heading of terrorism is, according to Neumann (2013), the 'cardinal sin' of terrorism studies. However, even contributions such as Neumann's own, which recognise the diversity of what we categorise as terrorism or violent extremism, are apt to conflate its Islamist manifestations into a single phenomenon. For instance, Berman (2009) conflates Hamas, Hizbollah and Al Qaida as Islamist terrorism without acknowledging that one is Shia and the others are Sunni; two function as active political parties and one as popular social movements; one is backed by Iran, the other two by Syria; one is a nationalist group focused solely on Israel/Palestine while the others have global ambitions and reach. With the religious inspiration discussed above, this section considers the importance of organisational structure and demographics.

There is little research that specifically addresses the question of the range and diversity of Islamist violent extremist groups. However, there are studies of specific groups, such as Hansen (2013) on Al Shabaab and Comolli (2015) on Boko Haram, and many on Al Qaida (Wright 2006 and Burke 2007 are journalistic accounts but among the most solid). These provide fine-grained accounts of how each group developed in its own specific historical and socio-political milieu, and taken together provide a corrective to simplistic, totalising explanations which present Islamist violent extremism as monolithic or homogenous. Scholars focusing on specific groups make particular reference to the risks of aggregation. Holbrook (2014) is cautious of over-simplification of the wide range and developing nature of ideological and theoretical perspectives amongst 'jihadist' movements (29–39). He suggests that the reductive term 'single narrative' simplistically combines a diverse and dynamic set of phenomena into a single analytical construct. This can also lead to errors in counter-terrorism by failing to appreciate that radical Islamism is a

highly contested arena, and overlooking the decision to renounce violence on the part of influential ideologues in Egypt, Western governments missed opportunities to delegitimise Al Qaida in the eyes of its global support base (Gerges 2005).

The Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIL have refocused attention on foreign fighters, which is perceived to be a largely recent phenomenon and associated especially with Islamist violent extremism (Hegghammer 2010). This can be attributed to both the emergence of an ideology of transnational participation in Islamist thinking in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, and the growing number of conflicts in failed, post-colonial states with Muslim majorities or significant minorities. The effect of Islamist foreign fighters on the post-2003 insurgency in Iraq is of particular note. The leader of what became Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI), which ultimately mutated into ISIL, was Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, better known as al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who had operated his own militant training camp in Afghanistan before 9/11. After the 2003 invasion al-Zarqawi found refuge in Iraq and, with his group of mostly non-Iraqi militants, sought to change the environment to suit them and recruited additional foreign fighters (Hafez 2014: 443). Al-Zarqawi's strategy was to attack Shia populations and monuments to promote sectarian warfare, and to use suicide bombing strategically, not just tactically, in order to move the conflict from classic insurgency to 'global jihad'. Instead of the usual pattern of fighters being forced out of the territories they had fought for (as in Afghanistan or Bosnia), a sectarian jihad would create the conditions of security for the mujahideen (Al-Zarqawi's ultimate objective) and insecurity for everyone else.

However, while the scale of the phenomenon may be unprecedented, it is not in itself new. Malet (2013) shows that foreign fighters have existed since at least the mid-nineteenth century, if not longer, and they are by no means confined to Islamists. Indeed, while foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq may now have passed the 20,000 believed to have

joined the conflict in Afghanistan during the 1980s (Neumann 2015), approximately 32,000 foreigners fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). This however is neither new nor unique to Muslim diaspora communities. For example, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka was sustained by financial support from Tamil diaspora channelled through the radical World Tamil Movement (Bell 2009).

Meanwhile, not all Islamist violent extremist groups attract foreign fighters. While over a thousand are believed to have fought with Al Shabaab in Somalia since the mid-2000s (in declining numbers since 2012), mainly from the Somali diaspora, far fewer are thought to have fought within Kenya (Ford 2010; Meleagrou-Hitchens, Maher, and Sheehan 2012; Pantucci 2012; Hansen 2014). Most significantly, in its embrace of decentralised guerrilla warfare and cellular terrorism in Kenya (unlike its more bureaucratic military operations in Somalia), Al Shabaab have come to more closely resemble Mau Mau and Mungiki's loose structures and roving independent bands. This reflects the different security and conflict dynamics present in Somalia relative to those in operation in Kenya – and the adaptation required of Al Shabaab to these diverse conditions (Kanogo 1987; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Rasmussen 2010; Marchal 2011; Hansen 2013; Nzes 2014; Lia 2015). Despite its origin as an offshoot of ISIL, JaN's majority Syrian makeup 'contributes to a crucial level of social grounding', while its 'strict and highly selective foreign fighter recruitment policies have ensured an ongoing supply of high-caliber muhajireen [emigrants]' (Lister 2015: 18).

## Tactics and Methods

There are assertions that ideological terrorists do not seem to be constrained by rational strategic limitations in comparison with nationalists, and search for the most destructive weapons available to cause high amount of atrocities (Fettweis 2009). The lethality of religiously inspired terrorism and Islamist extremism in particular has attracted significant attention. Terrorism studies highlighted that one of the novelties of 'new terrorism' includes its aim to commit mass-casualty attacks and contained much debate after 9/11 over whether Islamist extremists were prepared or preparing to carry out mass-casualty attacks using chemical/radiological/biological weapons. Evidence recovered from Al Qaida laboratories in Afghanistan suggested that they were actively researching unconventional weapons, and there have been periodic cases (including in the UK) of Al Qaida-affiliated groups planning to use chemical or radiological substances. There are assertions that this marks Islamist extremists out from other groups, although proponents of 'new terrorism' theories such as Hoffman (2006) also acknowledge the use of chemical weapons by groups such as Aum Shirinkyo in Japan.

From this perspective religious extremist groups have different value systems, mechanisms of legitimisation and justification, concepts of morality, and world-views, and are 'consequently unconstrained by the political, moral or practical constraints that may affect other terrorists' – this includes the need for popular support (Hoffman 2006: 88). The phenomenon of suicide attacks has attracted particular attention from academics, especially post-9/11, and the sharp statistical rise as a result of attacks in post-2003 Iraq. Berman (2009) argues that suicide bombing is often a marker of religious violence not because of theology but the complexity of the target: religiously inspired terrorists may be the only ones with the commitment required to survive in countries such as Israel where targets have been significantly hardened. As a result, he concludes that the 'threat from modern religious terrorist organisations is unprecedented' and that Islamist groups are far more lethal than secular ones (Berman 2009: 8). For example, in Nigeria, in comparison to Boko Haram, MEND's choice of targets has been more clearly instrumental: despite occasional bomb attacks in major cities, MEND primarily restricted its attacks

to the oil industry and the government's supporting infrastructure in the Delta. It has generally avoided targeting civilians (although has mounted occasional attacks on hotels, cargo ships, and fishing vessels). It has not embraced the tactic of suicide bombing.

This analysis has significant flaws not least the fact that it overlooks the adoption of suicide bombing by Marxist-Leninist groups, notably the LTTE in Sri Lanka (which perpetrated more suicide bombings than any other group prior to 2003) but also the PKK in Turkey. In fact, others argue that terrorism is actually becoming less lethal, as the number of fatalities per 100,000 people from the 1970s to 2005 broadly decreased (Pinker 2011), though this misses the upsurge in fatalities in Iraq in 2006–07 and the later upsurges in Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Nigeria (RAND n.d.). Tucker's (2001) 'lethality index' for international terrorism demonstrates that lethality has rested at a higher plateau since the late 1970s rather than surged ahead, adding that the 'claim that there is a tendency toward mass-casualty attacks rests, then, on a very few cases compared to the total number of international terrorist attacks.' Taking this longer view shows that the vast majority of terrorist attacks worldwide still kill few people (being mostly directed against property), and that by 2007 the most lethal terrorist groups were the Maoist Shining Path (Peru) and the Marxist-Leninist LTTE (Sri Lanka). In fact, the history of Islamist militancy since 9/11 demonstrates a relative lack of novel techniques including in comparison to other violent groups. With the exception of the planning and scale of financing required for Al Shabaab's 2013 Westgate mall attack, most attacks by Al Shabaab and affiliates in Kenya have been similar to those conducted by non-Islamist actors in their use of small arms, grenades and small IEDs.

With that being said, there does appear to be a difference in the scope and style of Salafi-jihadist violence inspired by Al Qaida. In Nigeria in 2011, Boko Haram mounted its first suicide-bomb attacks targeting the National Police Headquarters and UN Headquarters in Abuja, presumably in emulation of Al Qaida, with which Boko Haram was then in alliance. The shift has also been evident in the targets of attacks: Muslim communities were originally forewarned if attacks were planned in their areas, but after Yusuf's death attacks became more indiscriminate. In 2011 and 2012, around twenty suicide attacks were launched against religious (both Christian and Muslim), military and other government targets (Roggio 2012). Its change in strategy reflected a more militant ideology, reflected by its declarations of allegiance first to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and then to ISIL. In Iraq and Syria particularly, Al Qaida-linked groups have succeeded in their aim of radicalising these conflicts. They have made these conflicts more lethal by importing suicide attacks as a deliberate strategy. They have made them more intractable, by provoking sectarian violence on an appalling scale. ISIL's inducement of fear is useful not just in a political context (i.e. as terrorism) but also as a military strategy. It is notorious for its gross human rights abuses and performative violence, while broadcasting media of its brutal executions has helped it project military power and undertake audacious operations.

By examining three case studies of IVE, it becomes clear that there are important differences between IVE groups and other conflict actors linked to ideology. However, these differences do not always transpire the way we would expect. Ideology is important for the leaders of IVE groups especially – some are ideological entrepreneurs who seek to mobilise followers behind a cause. Ideology can be a factor for followers, but people in conflict situations join violent groups for a wide range of reasons – social, psychological and practical, as well as political. In many cases therefore, ideology can have a fragmenting effect, as the drivers differ between leaders and followers. Although Salafi-jihadists are in many ways different – and more threatening – than other violent groups, they express their worldview through a narrative that is

strikingly similar to that proposed by many other militant movements (religious and secular).

## Implications for Development Actors

The similarities and differences for development responses expands the debate that began in the 1990s on how development and conflict interact. Goodhand created a framework to map the contribution that development practitioners could make to conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. The earliest approach was conceptualised 'working around war', as development practitioners sought to continue their activities while avoiding direct involvement (Goodhand 2001a). 'Working around war' assumed conflict to be an 'impediment or negative externality that is to be avoided' (Goodhand 2001a: 61). From this perspective, development was understood to automatically contribute to peace, so that nothing additional would be required (Uvin 2002).

A later approach was 'working in war', with development agencies acknowledging a potential relationship between development and conflict and seeking to minimise their impact, but without addressing the conflict directly: 'Agencies working in areas of active violence have attempted to mitigate war-related risks and also to minimise the potential for programmes to fuel or prolong violence' (Goodhand 2006a: 264). The most recent and most proactive approach is 'working on war', where development practitioners are directly engaged in peacebuilding activities (Goodhand 2006b). Conflict prevention and resolution becomes the primary goal of development, which means that 'policies and programmes must be justified in these terms', including direct peacebuilding and statebuilding initiatives (Goodhand 2001b: 31).

The response of development actors to violent extremism thus far has fallen within the 'working in' category, tackling the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment. CVE programming for instance is based on the assumption that 'addressing both the manifestations of violent extremism and the conditions conducive to violent extremism is a developmental challenge. It will require strengthening the fundamental building blocks of equitable development, human rights, governance and the rule of law' (European Union 2015: 3). The result has been a burgeoning industry of CVE programming (Zeiger and Aly 2015). While there is no adequate measure for the effectiveness of these programmes (Chowdhury-Fink 2015), they aim to prevent involvement in violent extremist groups. This is seen to be particularly important in countries such as Kenya, where violent extremism has not yet escalated into all-out war. In this context, CVE programming can limit escalation by undermining support for violent extremist groups. However, it aims to reduce vulnerability to radicalisation and recruitment among those who are not yet involved; CVE therefore tends not to address communities viewed as being 'at risk', rather than the violent groups themselves.

Existing tools to engage with conflict can also be applied to IVE groups. Particularly in countries or regions where governments have tended to rely on strong, securitised responses, such as Nigeria and Kenya, security sector reform (SSR) can promote a less violent response, and hence reduce the risk of violence increasing or recurring. As the Nigeria case demonstrates, if a government's default response is to crush dissent or target whole communities in unrefined sweeps, there is potential to spark spin-off movements that may be more violent, unpredictable and strategic than their predecessors. Violent responses by the government can also increase support for violent extremist groups.

While this is unlikely to extend to reform of the armed forces, at least in the response of development agencies, O'Neill and Cockayne (2015) advocate programmes that draw on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) principles to disengage violent extremists and reintegrate them into mainstream society. Similarly, Jones, Lynch,

Marchand and Denov, and Koehler (in Zeiger and Aly 2015) examine the potential of disengaging, deradicalising and reintegrating fighters involved in violent extremism. These approaches adapt interventions designed to deal with other forms of violence, and engage with the institutions and individuals affected by violent conflict. Developed in response to the decades of civil war in the 1990s and 2000s, they have been applied to a range of conflicts, including ethnic divisions. Because they do not engage directly with violent extremist groups, they do not need to specifically focus or respond to the impact of ideology, or the other factors that may make Islamist violent extremists different from other violent extremist groups.

Directly 'working on' violent extremism is much more difficult, particularly within a peacebuilding and statebuilding framework. A key aim of statebuilding is the promotion of inclusive political settlements, where competing elites are brought into decision-making on governance and economics. However, with some Islamist violent groups, a negotiated political settlement is not an aspiration. For instance, Al Shabaab's aims in Kenya are to further destabilise state authority in Somalia's southern hinterland and move these areas into the orbit of an Islamist territory based to some extent on a historical 'Greater Somalia' project, Somali irredentism, and local pan-Muslim sentiment. Efforts to achieve a Greater Somalia have been a source of conflict with Somalia since Kenya's independence. With the more recent overlay of Islamist extremist rhetoric and practice and Al Shabaab's base being outside Kenya, achieving a political settlement with these goals at play appears highly unlikely. In the long term, political settlements linked to Kenya's recent constitutional devolution of power to the counties may redress some grievances regarding autonomy and central state overreach if implemented in a manner that empowers local communities, thereby drawing some of the venom not only from Islamist violent groups but also others, such as the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC).

The political settlement aspect of statebuilding is therefore exceptionally challenging in this context and any intervention is unlikely to reconcile global Salafi-jihadist groups and their franchises. A complicating factor is the diversity among violent Islamist groups in conflict situations and their tendency to fragment. In the Boko Haram case there have been disagreements over core beliefs, strategy, and tactics, which have resulted in splinter groups such as Ansaru. Al Shabaab in Somalia has also been host to major internal disagreements regarding similar issues since 2011. However, the lack of cohesion within IVE groups may also provide an opportunity for negotiation. For example, Gerges (2003) recommended that attempts should be made to negotiate with jihadists who do not subscribe to the Al Qaida doctrine. This strategy can reduce the power of the most problematic Islamist groups by undermining their legitimacy and fragmenting the extremists' support base.

The fact that Salafi-jihadists are irreconcilable does not mean that promoting inclusive settlements to conflicts where they are active is fruitless. In fact, our analysis suggests that such efforts should be prioritised. First, these uncompromising groups partly derive their legitimacy from socio-political grievances, as in Iraq where the post-2003 settlement has failed to include meaningfully the Sunni Arab minority, and in Syria where a minoritarian government has lost the support of large parts of the Sunni Arab majority. Addressing some of the manifold problems of governance in both countries would not bring ISIL and JaN to the negotiating table but would diminish their support among the disenfranchised Sunni Arabs. Second, as we have shown, Islamist violent extremism is far from being a monolithic and stable movement, and within the broad scope of the term are groups that are potentially interested in political settlements. Attention should therefore be paid to breakaway groups, which may perceive they have more to gain from settlement rather than conflict, especially in the

case of protracted civil conflicts in a situation of stalemate.

Another avenue for development actors to support statebuilding is in the development of core state functions. This approach assumes that increasing the capacity of the state to provide core functions such as security, rule of law and macroeconomic policies will increase trust, facilitate the provision of public services – including, crucially, law and order – and strengthen state legitimacy. This approach may have an impact on some members of violent Islamist groups that are driven to join because of grievances. Addressing historical grievances, and a state's failings to address deeply-rooted marginalisation and insecurity in these places, could reduce the ability of violent Islamist groups to mobilise and retain support. More pertinently, weak states have been shown to be more vulnerable to civil war and insurgency (Tilly 2003) and also struggle to contain violent extremist threats. The collapse of state capacity in Iraq as a result of the 2003 invasion and occupation is a particularly stark example: the sudden transformation from police state to state of anarchy created the space for a wide range of violent extremist groups to flourish, from Shia militants to Al Qaida. Building or rebuilding state capacity is, we have concluded, an essential pre-requisite for managing Islamist violent extremist problems. Emphasis should be put on restoring governance in opposition-controlled areas, especially those that are threatened by further Islamist extremist expansion.

A related strategy is the provision of public goods and services expected by the population to strengthen state legitimacy and reduce violent opposition. While those engaged in violent extremism due to grievances are likely to be somewhat appeased, it will have limited affect on the upper levels of Islamist violent groups. However, improved provision of public goods and services could have a considerable impact on the ability of leaders to recruit from or gain the passive acceptance of the wider population. Part of

ISIL's success is a combination of its presence in areas with weak governance, an active war economy and endemic violence. By bringing some form of order and control, even if violent, ISIL presents itself as the only legitimate authority, with a monopoly on the use of force. Turkmani (2015) also highlights how this reputation for governance, based on the provision of security and basic services, has played a key role in recruiting supporters and ensuring assent.

If the state is incapable or unwilling to make good these shortfalls, then there may be scope for others to step in. For example, Turkmani recommends that international organisations promote economic measures, such as job-creation schemes and fuel distribution in areas of Syria that can be reached. Interventions to promote economic security in conflict-afflicted areas have the potential to reduce or at least contain support for the most problematic violent Islamists.

The overarching aim of peacebuilding is to address the causes and consequences of conflict. Achieving this requires a focus on the grievances, fault-lines and opportunity-seeking that underlie the conflict. Zaum, Gippert and Heaven (2015) consider religion and religious extremism to be expressions of social, economic or political grievances and opportunity-seeking. This aligns with Kunovich and Hodson's (1999) findings in Croatia that religion is merely a social marker for economic, demographic and political forces. However, other studies dispute these findings and suggest instead that religion has the capacity to both stimulate and mobilise collective action and that restrictions on religion itself can make significant contributions to explaining religiously motivated violence. In this analysis, religion itself can be the source of grievance (Finke and Harris 2012, Finke and Martin 2012, Dowd 2014).

However, focusing on religion as a source of grievance leading to conflict and extremism could mean missing the underlying causes and drivers of the conflict. Since there is no

simple link between religious ideas and violent action – our analysis suggests that extremist violence results from a complex combination of situational factors, social enablers, political triggers, and individual characteristics – the problem is seeking to understand how a situation of stable coexistence breaks down to the extent that religion (or rather religious difference) can becomes a threat to security, which requires an examination of the root causes and an effort to address some of the most pertinent. In Iraq, for example, the exclusion of Sunni Arabs from the post-2003 political settlement generated grievances, which although religiously expressed, are political at source.

While all of the groups examined here show a range of drivers and motivations, each group has been influenced by grievances to some extent, particularly at the lower levels. Addressing grievances will not necessarily resolve the conflict. If a group sees the state as the problem or has global and utopian aspirations, leaders and the most committed followers are unlikely to abandon their extremist programmes. However, addressing grievances may contain groups and, in time, reduce their support.

This analysis of how development actors can engage with IVE points to a hierarchy of interventions (see **Figure 1**). The bottom layer indicates that the most significant contribution development can make is preventative, seeking to limit involvement in violent extremism by promoting good governance, human rights, development and rule of law. This overlaps with the second layer, which seeks to address both the grievances that have driven people into violent extremism, as well as the impact of violent extremism, from the violence it causes to heavy-handed government responses. The top of the hierarchy is the most difficult and relies on careful timing. As discussed above, negotiating with strategic groups, diminishing support for utopian groups and catching breakaway groups has the greatest potential for transformation.

As this hierarchy brings together a range of strategies that are currently applied towards conflict actors, it suggests that there is no difference in how development actors should respond to IVE groups. While there are many similarities, the differences between IVE groups and other conflict actors requires a contextualised approach that engages with the specific ways that groups operate, considering their aims and objectives, tactics and use of violence and recruitment and motivation strategies.
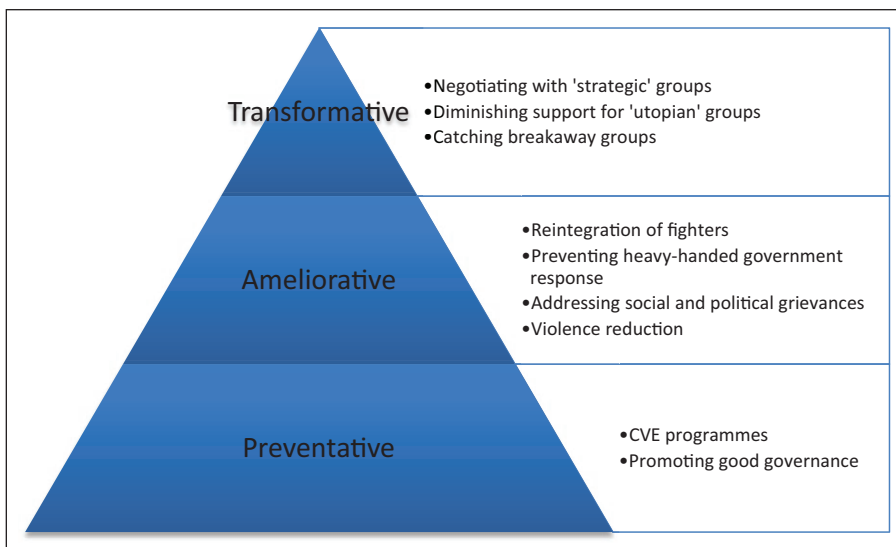


**Figure 1:** Hierarchy of Interventions.

**Note**

[1] Although the term 'drivers' is commonly used, factors' is more appropriate, as a range of situational, social/cultural and individual factors need to align.

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