



Hedayah

CVE RESEARCH BRIEF 4

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Contributing
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Risks, Challenges and Future Research in South and Southeast Asia

About Hedayah

Hedayah is the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi through the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Hedayah was established to serve as the premier international institution for training and capacity building, dialogue and collaboration, and research and analysis to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations, in support of long-term, global efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.

Introduction

The contents of this brief are based on the discussions that occurred from 3-4 November at an expert workshop on Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism hosted by Hedayah in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this 2-day expert roundtable was to bring together 20-25 researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a closed discussion of the current trends in CVE research. The goals at the meeting were to 1) address the current research outcomes in countering violent extremism; 2) determine the critical gaps in research on CVE; 3) identify the new and emerging threats of violent extremism; and 4) establish a recommended research agenda for Hedayah and CVE researchers in the coming 2 years.

This Research Brief is a quick-reference guide for researchers, practitioners and policymakers interested in learning more about the current research and future needs and gaps in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) on the regions of South and Southeast Asia. This report reflects the discussions of the participants at the expert workshop, and does not represent the opinion of Hedayah.

In preparation for the meeting, Hedayah worked with Curtin University to map the existing CVE literature and assess the CVE research landscape across four themes: 1) social media and CVE, 2) education and CVE, 3) narratives of victims, survivors and formers for CVE, and 4) Disengagement and De-radicalization.¹ Meeting attendees utilized this literature review as a baseline for the discussions. Participants were also invited to prepare short research proposals prior to the meeting for review and discussion by other participants.

In addition to the discussions that occurred at the expert workshop on *Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism*, this brief also draws from findings of the literature review conducted by Hedayah and Curtin University, the research proposals that were submitted by the participants, and independent research conducted by the authors.

¹ For an electronic version of the mapping activity, please visit www.hedayah.ae.

Current Risk Factors in the Region

In both South and Southeast Asia, participants noted that one of the main risk factors is the existence of various forms of “non-violent extremism” (not yet a threat), and should be monitored closely in terms of potential emergence as violent strands. Participants also mentioned that there is a large number of violent extremist offenders who have been released from prison, and developing effective rehabilitation and reintegration programs to reduce the chances of these individuals re-committing acts of terrorism or violence is one of the main challenges the region is facing currently.

For Southeast Asia in particular, one of the main risk factors in the region is returning foreign fighters, both those who fought in Afghanistan and those potentially returning from Iraq and Syria. For example, there is little known about the fighters currently traveling from the Philippines and Indonesia to Iraq and Syria, and it was mentioned that some Malaysian families, are supportive to their family members who are travelling to fight in Iraq and Syria.

In South Asia, one of the main concerns is the troop drawback at the end of 2015. The main challenge is how to balance the reconciliation process for top leaders and with the successful reintegration for foot soldiers carrying out their orders. The main risk factor for potential future recruitment lies within the lack of cohesive strategy for providing senior jobs to former Taliban leaders so that they feel part of Afghan society, as well as employment opportunities for foot soldiers, who joined the ranks of the Taliban mainly for income or economic gain.

Another major risk factor in the region is the growing number of individuals and violent extremist organizations that are pledging allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS). For example, a major Pakistani Taliban spokesperson pledged allegiance to ISIS in October 2014, sparking concern that others would soon follow.²

Gaps and Needs

The participants identified several gaps and needs for future research in the region for the purposes of preventing and countering violent extremism. The main gaps and needs are described in more detail below:

1. Mapping studies and data collection to understand the threats and trigger points.

The pull or push factors that affect individuals joining violent extremist groups differ from one state to another, from one local area to another in the same country, and even vary within the same village. There is also a big need to collect reliable data from the field to know who is being targeted with respect to recruitment into Iraq and Syria, how the radicalization process is being carried out, who has joined ISIS, and what their profiles are, in order to better understand every aspect of the problem.

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-pakistani-taliban-feels-jilted-after-spokesman-defects-to-isis/381721/>.

2. Supporting the actors who are relevant to support CVE effort and designing relevant training programs to the region.

Credible messengers in the region have a strategic role, and they should be identified first and then supported with tailor-made training programs. One group of strategic messengers is prison officers—there is a need to design more and/or better training courses to instruct them on successful approaches to rehabilitating violent extremist prisoners. It was also mentioned that there are a number of individuals who should be incorporated into rehabilitation programs, but there is not always the local capacity to support these types of programs.

3. Developing necessary legal regulations for returning foreign fighters.

Participants indicated that when the individuals who fought for ISIS return to their home country, there are some ambiguities in terms of accepting them back to society and rehabilitate them in a proper way. There is also a need in terms of developing appropriate legislation that deals with the uniqueness of foreign fighters.

4. Evaluating how online radicalization occurs that is region-specific.

Participants noted that the internet and online radicalization, particularly in South-east Asia, is a growing phenomenon, and not enough is known about everyday usage of the internet, or the processes of radicalization occurring in the region.

Challenges to Countering Violent Extremism Research in South and Southeast Asia

A number of challenges arise when conducting research in the region related to violent extremists and incarcerated violent extremists.

1. Challenges related to the fluidity of violent extremism in the region.

It was noted by participants that one of the main challenges that researchers might face is the mobility of insurgents and violent extremist groups and the flexibility and fluidity of their members among the groups in some countries. In other words, the makeup of the organizations in the region are constantly morphing and changing, making it difficult to assess how radicalization and recruitment is occurring at any given time. Another related challenge is the constantly changing and complex geo-political context of South and Southeast Asia.

2. Challenges at the governmental level.

Due to the complex and fluid nature of violent extremism in South and Southeast Asia, participants recommended that governments in the region be open to the idea to support dialogue with people who are vulnerable to radicalization or recruitment. Being open to these discussions may help the governments address push and pull factors based on grievances that the governments have the authority to control.

3. Challenges to research methods and conceptual frameworks.

Participants mentioned that specifically in the South and Southeast Asia regions, the scale of the research is a challenge—relevant field data is not always accessible or reliable. With the region being incredibly diverse in terms of local push and pull factors related to radicalization and recruitment, determining the scope of relevant research is also a challenge (national, local or ultra-local).

Ongoing and Future Programs and Projects

Participants at the Expert Workshop debated a number of research programs and projects that were both ongoing and proposed. One potential follow-up project related to South Asia is listed below. The below description is paraphrased from a proposal submitted to Hedayah, so please respect the intellectual property rights of those conducting the research. If you would like more information, or if you have a partnership or funding opportunity available, please contact info@hedayah.ae.

1. CVE in Countries in Transition: The case of Afghanistan (Proposed)

Primary Research Question: How is CVE applicable in countries transitioning from war-time to peace-time?

Description: There is little research that has been conducted comparing the effects of CVE programming in countries in transition from war-time to peace time. This project will use the case study of Afghanistan to evaluate if and how CVE programs are most effective, and if and how CVE programming in this environment is different than CVE programming in more stable countries.

Other Research Questions for Consideration in South and Southeast Asia

- How do CVE-relevant programs affect attempts to counter violent extremism in South and Southeast Asia?
- What is the relationship of migration, peace and reconciliation and violent extremism?
- What is the role of religious arguments and religion (as such) in radicalization process in South and Southeast Asia?
- What is the relationship between violent extremism and grey and black market activities? What are the links between crime and terrorism in South and Southeast Asia?