Conflict and Islamist Violent Extremism

Summary Paper

Andrew Glazzard
Sasha Jesperson
Tom Maguire
Emily Winterbotham
Royal United Services Institute
www.rusi.org
29 January 2016

Royal United Services Institute

Key Points

- Violent Islamists show many similarities with other conflict actors, and are as much a symptom of governance failure as other violent groups. However, **ideology influences how Islamist groups frame their scope, aims, tactics and recruitment strategies**.
- **Violent Islamists are particularly associated with certain strategies and tactics, such as the recruitment of foreign fighters and suicide bombing**. These strategies and tactics are not unprecedented, and not all Islamist groups employ them. But **groups aligned to Al Qaida and ISIL – Salafi-jihadists – have significantly increased their scale and scope, and use them *expressively* as well as *instrumentally***.
- Although violent Islamist groups are strong where governance is weak or repressive, **state building efforts by themselves are unlikely to resolve the conflicts** they are involved in. Such efforts can, however, constrain their operations and limit their capacity to gain public support.
- All conflicts are local. Even those framed by Salafi-jihadists as part of a global war are deeply rooted in their countries and regions. Responses require deep contextual knowledge which identifies actions that can help **prevent** or **ameliorate** conflicts involving violent Islamists.
- Salafi-jihadist ideology is absolute and utopian, and promotes war as a route to a better world. This would appear to make negotiation impossible or futile. However, ideology is also contested between and within groups, which are as a result prone to splintering, potentially opening opportunities for dialogue with more tractable elements. Also, while groups such as Al Qaida in Iraq/Daesh have become even more extreme under the pressure of war, other groups have moderated their programmes. Although difficult and risky, such responses have the potential to **transform** conflicts for the better.

Introduction

This paper summaries the findings of 'Conflict and Islamist Violent Extremism', a research project conducted by RUSI for the Department for International Development in 2015. The project examined the similarities and differences between IVE groups and other conflict actors, and what this means for development, state building and peace building responses. This summary follows the structure of the project's main outputs: a theoretical paper examining what is distinctive about violent Islamists in conflict situations, based on a broad review of the literature on Islamism, violent extremism and conflict; a set of case histories (covering Kenya, Nigeria, and Syria/Iraq) examining whether Islamist groups behave differently from other types of conflict actors; and a paper addressing what approaches are effective in dealing with conflicts involving violent Islamists and the implications for state building and peace building.

A   What is distinctive about violent Islamist extremism in conflict situations, and what features does it share with other ideologies or movements involved in conflicts?

Islamist violent extremist (IVE) groups are symptoms of failures of governance.
IVE groups often emerge from circumstances of civil conflict, state failure, or disenfranchisement of minorities (or even of majorities). They often recruit from the economically or politically marginalised and they usually aim to maximise power and influence, whether by acquiring territory or influencing political decisions. In these respects, IVE groups may not appear to differ significantly from other types of conflict actor. However, the **ideology of *some* IVE groups is a major differentiating factor from other types of conflict participant – *including other Islamist ones***. A particular strain within Islamism has emerged in recent decades which, following others, we have labelled Salafi-jihadism, and which has developed an ideology that can be characterised as 'cosmic' and 'utopian': these groups see war in terms of an eternal battle of good versus evil, and seek to remake the world through violence. Salafi-jihadist groups thus represent a fundamental challenge to conventional notions of how civil conflicts work. While governance failures are necessary for these groups to emerge, once they have done so the framing of the conflict in ideological terms has consequences for the scale and nature of violent tactics, and recruitment strategies. In other words, **these groups can frame conflicts so that they become more violent and more intractable**.

However, the consequences of ideological differences are not always what might be expected, demonstrating a need for a deep, contextual understanding of each country and region where IVE groups are active. Ideology determines the stated aims of any group, and hence influences its openness to negotiation and willingness to play a constructive role. The most problematic groups are those whose ideology appears to preclude negotiation and compromise. However, although it is usually seen as a source of strength, **ideology can also be a strategic weakness, fragmenting groups and providing opportunities for negotiation, delegitimization, or undermining hardliners**. Interventions at this level, while enormously challenging and potentially risky, have the potential to transform conflicts for the better.

Differentiate, don't conflate: the importance of context and nuance.
'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, transnational terrorist groups such as Al Qaida. **The majority of Sunni Islamists are non-violent**. Sunni Islamism in the MENA region, for instance, is usually more political than violent. Those at the violent end of the spectrum have been divided into strategic (or nationalist) and utopian groups/movements. The former are territorially focused groups with Islamic values and identity. The latter seek to transform the world through violence, and draw on notions of sacredness and prophecy to frame conflicts as 'cosmic war'. Although some groups are both strategic and utopian, this is a helpful approach to conceptualising the range of and differences between Islamist violent groups.

Salafi-jihadists are in many ways different from – and more threatening than – other violent groups, including other Islamist militants, in particular because of their belief that **political transformation is best achieved on the battlefield.** This not only prevents any form of political settlement, but incentivises them to continue and aggravate conflicts. Nevertheless, groups which identify themselves as Salafi-jihadists are not necessarily as transnationally ambitious as ISIL: we judge Al Shabaab in particular to be more locally focused than its rhetoric might suggest.

Ideology is important – but its importance varies, and it is not the whole story.
Ideology remains a major differentiator of IVE groups from other types of conflict actor – but not always in the way we would expect. **Ideology is important for leaders especially** as they use it to justify their actions and mobilise supporters. Ideology influences not only which tactics are selected, but what those tactics are designed to communicate. The impact of Salafi-jihadists in particular arises not simply from the fact that they use suicide bombing and recruit foreign fighters (neither of which are new, though they are evident now at a far greater scale). For Salafi-jihadists, these tactics are not merely instrumental (a means to an end), but are expressive: they are ends in themselves, as Salafi-jihadists seek to project the wars they fight in as 'cosmic' conflicts.

Ideology can be a motivational 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.

Religious ideology affects how IVE groups are perceived, with their actions often viewed as irrational as their motivations are not clearly understood through a secular lens. For utopian IVE groups, this influences their openness to negotiation. When a group aims to create a Caliphate or radically new state structures, nothing offered by the host state will satisfy their aims. However, some strategic groups may also be reluctant to negotiate, and frame their reluctance in ideological terms, even though they are motivated by more rational disincentives. Moreover, because ideology can be interpreted in different ways, it can also have a **fragmenting effect** as group members may derive different aims and tactics from the core beliefs.

B   Do groups motivated by an Islamist extremist ideology and using tactics of terror act in a distinct way from other armed groups in the impact and role that they play?

From the literature we theorised that conflict actors in this study could be situated along a spectrum with strategic groups (nationalist in orientation, materialistic/political in aims, instrumentalist in tactics, and recruiting rather than radicalising followers) at one end of the spectrum to 'cosmic' groups (with transnational orientation, ideological aims, expressive tactics, radicalising or attracting followers through proselytisation) at the other. Figure 1 shows this theory in schematic form.

To test the theory, we examined three case studies, comparing different groups active in the country.

Kenya: More Local than Global
The Kenyan case compares the operations and supporters of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (Al Shabaab) in Kenya and affiliated or sympathetic groups like Al Hijra – with two contemporary groups (the armed wing of the Mombasa Republic Council (MRC) and the Mungiki) as well as a historical group (the Mau Mau movement).

Islamist violent extremism in Kenya cannot be understood without taking into account the dynamics in neighbouring Somalia, where Al Shabaab has been conducting an Islamist insurgency for several years. Ideologically, there are clear differences between the Salafi-jihadist leaders of Al Shabaab on the one hand and the aims of the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), Mungiki and Mau Mau movement on the other. However, in Kenya these differences may be more superficial than fundamental: **there are strong similarities in the motivations and behaviour of Islamist and non-Islamist conflict groups**. Islamist leaders, for example, seek traditional power objectives like control of territory. Moreover, in Kenya at least, Al Shabaab's Salafi-jihadist

programme has not been manifest in especially unique behaviour, such as significant 'foreign fighter' contingents or use of suicide attacks.

Recruitment narratives and motivations for followers to join are also similar across the groups. The **plethora of non-religious motives for Kenyans joining Al Shabaab** and its affiliates make these groups comparable to the fragmented, heterogeneous Mau Mau and Mungiki, although motives and ambitions to join the MRC have generally been more homogeneous. Islamist groups in Kenya have certainly been able to recruit from a wider geographic and ethnic profile than non-Islamist groups, but this probably reflects grievances associated with Muslim identity, rather than ideology.

These similarities therefore suggest **that the behaviour of violent groups in Kenya is shaped more by local conditions, history and grievances, and less by transnational ideologies**.
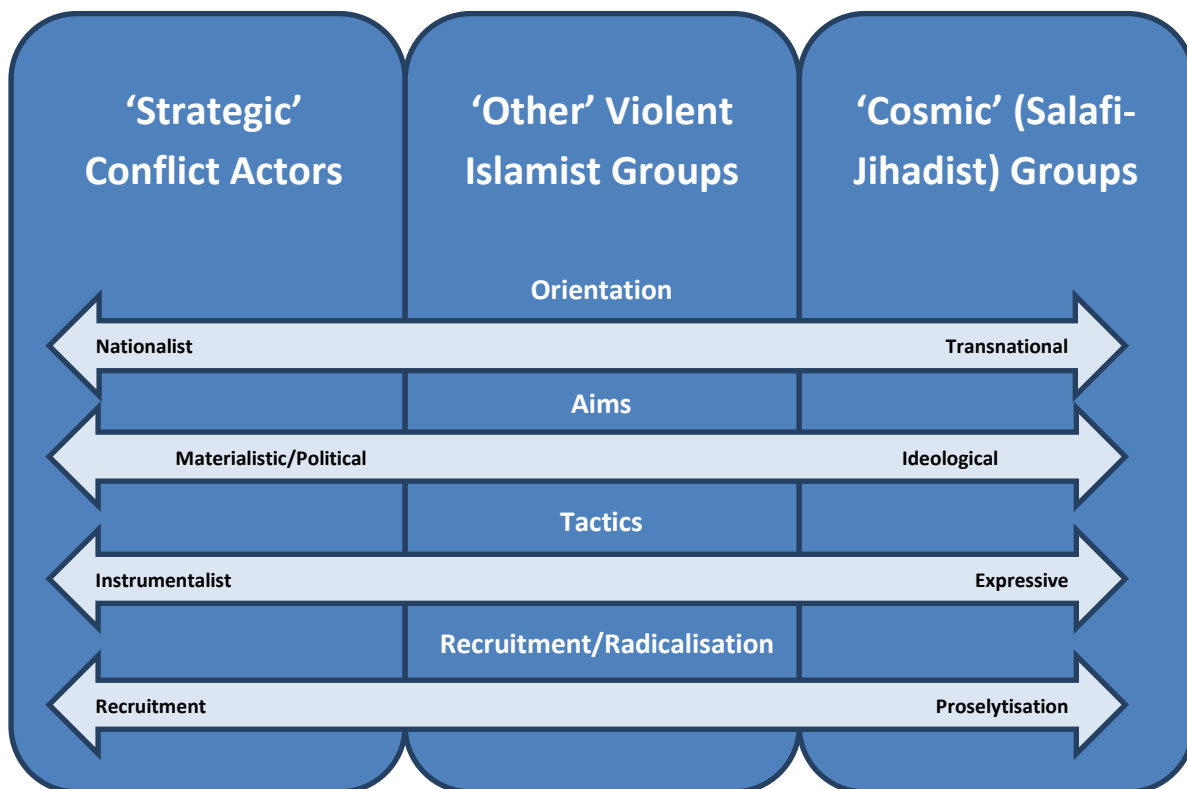

'Strategic' Conflict Actors	'Other' Violent Islamist Groups	'Cosmic' (Salafi-Jihadist) Groups
	Orientation	
Nationalist		Transnational
	Aims	
Materialistic/Political		Ideological
	Tactics	
Instrumentalist		Expressive
	Recruitment/Radicalisation	
Recruitment		Proselytisation

Figure 1: Theoretical Scheme of Conflict Actors

Nigeria: Religious Framing of Grievances

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. Boko Haram was originally a mostly non-violent religious revivalist group seeking to establish a purer alternative to Christian-dominated Nigerian society. However, **Boko Haram was radicalised by a combination of excessive, militarised responses from the Nigerian state and internal changes** of which the most important was Abubakar Shekau's accession to the leadership after the death in police custody of the movement's founder. Under

the pressure of conflict, **Boko Haram became progressively more violent and indiscriminate** so that it is now, along with ISIL, one of the most lethal terrorist groups in the world. It also holds sway over large areas of north-eastern Nigeria, although it has also lost territory to a multi-national regional force.

Both groups attract recruits by exploiting socio-economic and political grievances, but **Boko Haram's religious framing of these grievances creates space for internal divergence and contestation**. Beneath the religious framing, **Boko Haram is, like MEND, a response to and sustained by chronic governance failures in Nigeria**. These failures will need to be addressed for Boko Haram to be neutralised. However, the fundamental nature of Boko Haram's challenge to the Nigerian state means its leadership is unlikely to be prepared to negotiate on its sacred aims and values. **Its lack of cohesion may however present entry points to weaken the group**. In contrast to MEND's cohesion and focus, Boko Haram is fractious and its religiously framed ideology may be as much a source of weakness as of strength. Boko Haram has already suffered one significant splintering: more may be possible.

Iraq/Syria: Complex, Dynamic, and Divided – But Salafi-Jihadists Are Different from Others

This case study focuses on three Sunni Islamist groups: ISIL, Jabhat Al Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham and compares them with each other and with Shia militant groups such as the Badr Organisation in Iraq.

Iraq and Syria illustrate most clearly our finding that Salafi-jihadists **are different from other conflict actors in their global ambitions, transnational participation in conflict, cosmic framing of the conflicts, and record of entering these conflicts from overseas and radicalising them**. 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.

The conflicts in both countries are the result of catastrophic **governance failures** as brutally repressive regimes were either removed or came under unprecedented popular pressure. **Salafi-jihadist groups have thrived in the environments created by these failures**. Most **Islamist militant groups have changed under the pressure of conflict, but some (notably ISIL) have become even more excessive while others (notably Ahrar al-Sham) have become more pragmatic**. The conflicts in both countries are characterised by extraordinary complexity, in which Shia militias – some of which are also Islamist and extremely brutal – are often overlooked. ISIL in particular has sought to simplify matters by attacking rival opposition and especially jihadist groups, but there remains significant contention, especially in Syria. But the complexity shows that **violent Islamist groups do not have the same aims or use the same tactics**: even the Salafi-jihadists are divided with respect to strategy.

A Complex Picture

Analysis of the case studies showed a more complex picture than the theory suggested. We have tried to capture this complexity in figure 2, which, although simplified and covering only Sunni Islamist groups, illustrates the difference between how violent Islamists might be expected to behave, and how (broadly) they behave in actuality. Three important observations emerge from this analysis:

- Violent Islamists do not sit neatly at the 'cosmic' end of the spectrum. For example, Boko Haram and Al Shabaab have quite nationalist aims even if their rhetoric suggests they subscribe to a transnational, Al Qaida or ISIL-inspired ideology;

- Some violent Islamist groups, including Salafi-jihadist ones such as ISIL and JaN, are situated very broadly on the spectrum between 'strategic' and 'cosmic' groups. This does not invalidate that distinction, but shows that the same group can be both;
- This is a dynamic picture, as groups can shift from one end of the spectrum to the other. Several of the groups we studies are in the process of significant change in orientation, aims, and choice of tactics (with Boko Haram, for example, becoming more ideological in its aims and expressive in its tactics, and projecting a more transnational orientation, even though it remains so far exclusively West African).
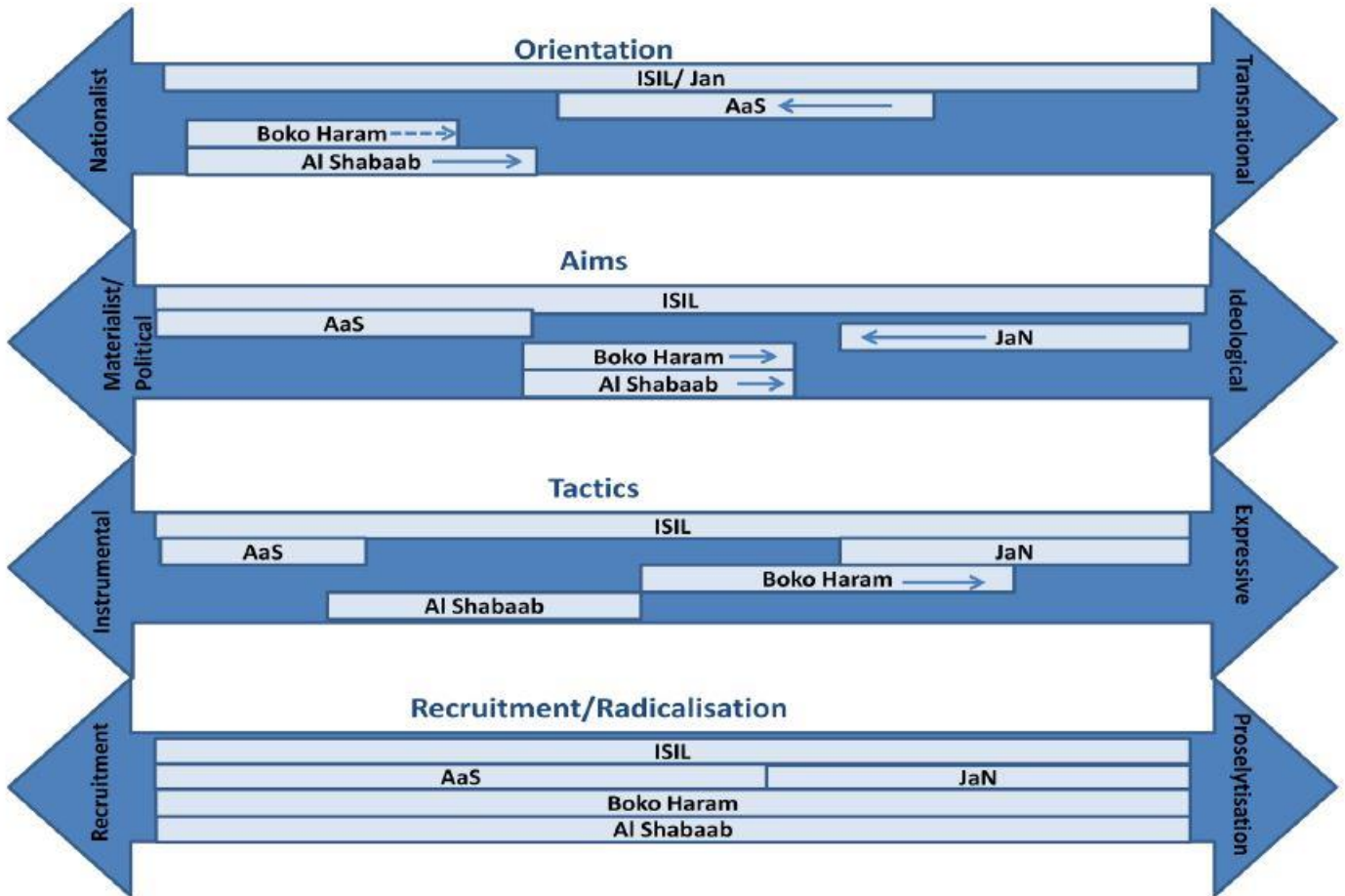

Figure 2: Schematic Analysis of Sunni Islamist Groups

C   What approaches are effective in addressing Islamist violent extremism? What are the implications for conflict resolution, peace building, and state building?

The response of development actors to violent extremism has so far focused on tackling the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment. Countering violent extremism (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".[1] These programmes aim to prevent involvement in violent extremist groups (and their effectiveness is, therefore, difficult to measure). Prevention is seen to be particularly important in countries such as Kenya, where violent extremism has not so far escalated into war. In this context, **CVE programming can limit escalation by undermining support for violent extremist groups**. It aims, however, to reduce vulnerability to radicalisation and recruitment among those who are not yet involved; **CVE therefore tends to address communities viewed as being 'at risk', rather than the violent groups themselves**.

Existing tools designed 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 and provocative 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, programmes that draw on **demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) principles can disengage violent extremists and reintegrate them into mainstream society**. This approach adapts 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 ones featuring 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 addressing violent extremism is much more difficult. The differences outlined in figure 2 create difficulties for the core elements of the peace building and state building strategy, as discussed below.

Promoting Inclusive Political Settlements

A main aim of state building is the promotion of inclusive political settlements, where competing elites are brought into decision-making on governance and economics. **For the leaders of Islamist violent groups with a utopian agenda, a negotiated political settlement is not an aspiration.** The political settlement aspect of state building is therefore exceptionally challenging and any intervention is unlikely to reconcile the leaders of global, Salafi-jihadist groups and their franchises. A complicating factor is the diversity even 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.

The fact that Salafi-jihadists are generally irreconcilable does not however mean that promoting inclusive settlements to conflicts where they are active is futile. First, **the lack of cohesion within IVE groups may in fact provide an opportunity for negotiation with splinter groups** that do not subscribe to doctrine of the parent group or may have changed their position over time, thereby reducing the power of the most problematic Islamist groups by undermining their legitimacy and fragmenting the extremists' support base. As such, promoting inclusive

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[1] European Union (2015). Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (European Commission internal document)

political settlements should be prioritised. Second, even 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. Third, Islamist violent extremism is far from being a monolithic and stable movement, and within its broad scope 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. Finally, over time, even the core of Salafi-jihadist movements can start to change their position and appear less intractable. Though not the focus of this study, the Afghan Taliban after nearly fifteen years of war are discussing engagement in negotiations, although a coherent peace process remains as elusive as ever.**

Developing Core State Functions

Another avenue for development actors is to support the development of core state functions. **Violent extremism is fundamentally a symptom of governance failures, so engaging at this level is essential**. However, the theory here 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 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 militias to Al Qaida. Although the limitations of state building should be widely acknowledged, **building or rebuilding state capacity is, we have concluded, an essential pre-requisite for managing Islamist violent extremist problems.** Despite the challenges in doing so, emphasis should be placed on restoring governance in opposition-controlled areas, especially those which are threatened by further Islamist extremist expansion.

Responding to Public Expectations

A related approach is the provision of public goods and services expected by the population to strengthen state legitimacy and reduce violent opposition. While violent extremists motivated by 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 has been to enter areas afflicted by weak governance, an active war economy, and endemic violence in order to impose control. It seeks to impose itself as the only legitimate authority ensuring that, like a state, it has a monopoly on the use of force, while its reputation for governance, centred on security provision and delivery of basic services, is crucial to 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, international organisations could promote economic measures, such as job-creation schemes and fuel distribution, in areas of Syria which can be reached. Programmes such as this are underway in particular areas, providing an avenue to reduce or at least contain support for the most problematic violent Islamists.

Addressing the Causes and Consequences of Conflict

The overarching aim of peace building is to address the causes and consequences of conflict. Achieving this requires a focus on the grievances, the fault-lines, and that opportunity-seeking that underlie the conflict. 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 become 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 failure to include Sunni Arabs in the post-2003 political settlement generated grievances which may be religiously expressed, but 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 a conflict. Even when a violent Islamist group arises in response to specific political, social and economic conditions, its existence changes those conditions and the environment in which it operates to the point that addressing them will not, in all likelihood, solve the problem. If a group sees the state as an entity 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.**

A Hierarchy of Interventions

Analysis of how development actors can engage with IVE points to a hierarchy of interventions (see figure 3). 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. Achieving effects at the top of the hierarchy is more difficult and relies on careful timing. As discussed above, negotiating with strategic groups, diminishing support for utopian groups and catching breakaway groups have the greatest potential for transformation.

As this hierarchy brings together a range of strategies that are currently applied towards conflict actors, it might suggest that there is no fundamental difference in how development actors should respond to IVE groups. However, there are important differences in how these strategies should be applied. Preventative and ameliorative strategies engage with the precursors and consequences of violent extremism respectively and therefore require an understanding of an intervention's social impact. Transformative strategies are much more difficult and **rely on a deep, contextual understanding of the groups involved to identify opportunities for engagement**. While this is necessary for other conflict actors also, the difference here is the need to engage with how ideology influences the aims, motivations, drivers, enablers and tactics of specific IVE groups.

State or multilateral-led ideological work – often labelled as 'counter-narrative' or 'counter-messaging' – may seem a striking omission from this hierarchy. Such interventions could be seen as preventative or transformative, depending on the scope of their ambition. However, we remain unconvinced by the claims made for such interventions by their proponents, not least as ideological warfare is an explicit aim of the most problematic groups, and there is a risk of unintentionally fuelling their claims to be engaged in a cosmic or global battle. There are other problems too, such as the credibility of governments as communicators (especially on theological issues), the risk of amplifying the extremists' propaganda, and the limited evidence of the psychological effect on individuals of such interventions. However, a more detailed examination of this complex topic is beyond the scope of this project.
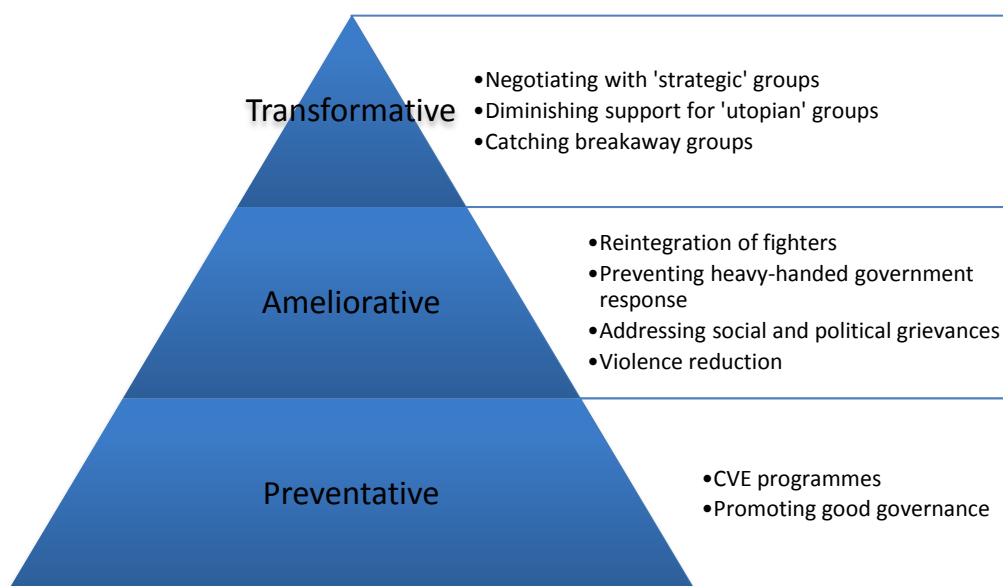

Transformative
- Negotiating with 'strategic' groups
- Diminishing support for 'utopian' groups
- Catching breakaway groups

Ameliorative
- Reintegration of fighters
- Preventing heavy-handed government response
- Addressing social and political grievances
- Violence reduction

Preventative
- CVE programmes
- Promoting good governance

Figure 3: Hierarchy of Interventions in Conflicts Involving violent Islamists

Which intervention might be the most appropriate will depend on the specific circumstances of each case. As Kenya is not experiencing full-scale conflict, preventative programming (such as the European Union's CVE intervention in the Horn of Africa) make sense. CVE interventions are also underway in some areas of Nigeria where the conflict is much localised. However, in areas where conflict is ongoing, ameliorative programming may be the only possibility. In Syria and Iraq, very little is possible from a development standpoint beyond waiting for and identifying opportunities for transformation. Ultimately, there is no universal pathway to resolving conflicts involving violent Islamists. The focus needs to be on identifying and maximising opportunities in each case, while ensuring coordination and coherence across all activities.