

Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism: Implications



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Key Points

- Building or rebuilding state capacity is an essential pre-requisite for managing many Islamist violent extremist problems.
- Security sector reform (SSR) can promote a less violent response, and hence reduce the risk of Islamist extremist violence increasing or recurring
- Religion in general and Islamism in particular does not make violent groups automatically intractable. They should not, therefore, be excluded from negotiating table just because they are Islamists who use violence.
- 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.
- Addressing grievances will not necessarily resolve conflicts. However, addressing grievances may contain groups and, in time, reduce their support.
- Development practitioners should work in an 'IVE-sensitive' manner even when not directly addressing extremist violence.
- The most problematic Islamist groups will work to impede the core aims of statebuilding – creating inclusive political settlements, developing core state functions and responding to public expectations – because increasingly they are seeking to do the same themselves.

Recommendations

Preventative

- Adopt an 'IVE-sensitive' approach from the outset of an intervention:
 - Identify the context, causes and operational focus of violent Islamist groups
 - Ensure that development does not inadvertently support the activities of violent groups
 - Be responsive to addressing the negative impact of Islamist violent extremism on development

- Focus on reducing support for the most problematic violent groups:
 - Prioritise interventions that promote good governance, state capacity through build/rebuilding government institutions
 - Where possible, address grievances identified as driving the conflict
 - Focus development and educational activities in IDP/refugee camps

Ameliorative

- Focus on reducing the appeal of violent Islamist groups:
 - Seek to strengthen delivery of public services including in opposition-controlled areas
 - Implement programmes that address the social and economic conditions created by violence
 - Prioritise activities focused on building and restoring the governance vacuum including in opposition-controlled areas, especially those that are threatened by IVE expansion
 - Reduce the risk of counter-productive governmental/military responses through security sector reform

Transformative

- Focus efforts at the societal level and not at the leadership level:
 - Look for rival or potential breakaway groups that may be open to negotiations

- Identify groups/factions which reject the Al Qaida doctrine and remain responsive to any moves on their part to consider negotiations
- Include civil society and wider society in consultations and discussions.

Analysis

Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen an increase in civil conflicts involving non-state actors and a decline in international, conventional wars (Kaldor, 2001). With the recognition that fragility and underdevelopment can contribute to conflict, development practitioners since the late 1980s have argued that peace and development go together (Hansen, 1987). Former UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali's frequently quoted statement that "[t]here can be no peace without economic and social development, just as development is not possible in the absence of peace" was a powerful and early articulation of the concept of peacebuilding that gained widespread acceptance in academic and political circles. Development agencies could therefore claim they were already engaged in conflict prevention work (Uvin 2002). When conflict did break out it was viewed as unfortunate but unconnected; development workers would switch with humanitarian workers and return once the conflict ended (Uvin 2002). However, this view was shattered by the Rwandan genocide. Rwanda had been widely viewed as a development success following high economic growth (Krause and Jutersonke 2005), but once the genocide began in 1994 the development community began to recognise that development assistance could reinforce social cleavages and actually cause conflict if poorly distributed (Krause and Jutersonke 2005).

Development practitioners have since become involved in conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction. As they began linking their initiatives to conflict, scholars have grappled with the emerging connections. 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 different, 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).

These categories have been applied to the new challenges development agencies face in fragile and conflict affected states, such as organised crime (Jespersion, 2015), and they can help to consider and identify what approaches are effective in addressing violent extremism, particularly the implications for conflict resolution, peacebuilding and statebuilding. As ‘working around’ war is not especially relevant here, this paper focuses on approaches to ‘working in’ and working on’ war.

‘Working In’ War

Many responses to violent extremism are based on the assumption that development is necessary to tackle the drivers of radicalisation and recruitment. EU programming to strengthen resilience to violent extremism, for example, 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). 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. In Kenya, the direct targeting of Al Shabaab is further complicated as its main base is Somalia, and Kenyan affiliates such as Al-Hijra are underground networks in the community, which makes them difficult to identify and access.

In countries where violent extremism is part of a wider conflict, CVE strategies can theoretically play a role in addressing further radicalisation, but implementation is constrained by the security situation caused by the conflict itself. As a result, CVE interventions in conflict-afflicted countries may be displaced to neighbouring areas (such as Somaliland and Puntland in the case of the EU's STRIVE Horn of Africa programme) or it may be ameliorative rather than preventative. Important areas of focus might include internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and refugee camps, marginalised communities that may be vulnerable to radicalisation. In this context, CVE programmes may be beneficial. For example, Martin-Rayo (2013) contends that the provision of quality education in camps is essential in countering the risk of radicalisation. This form of programming fits within the 'working in' category, as it engages with the potential impact development can have on conflict by seeking to prevent further involvement, but it does not directly address violent extremism as it does not engage with the groups themselves.

There are a number of other strategies that fit within this category. 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. In Nigeria, atrocities committed by government forces are well publicised, with films of military killings being widely circulated. In one instance, the Nigerian military responded to a Boko Haram attack on Giwa military barracks in Maiduguri in March 2014 by killing over 600 people, including civilians with no link to Boko Haram, and dumping bodies in mass graves (Amnesty International, 2014). Some experts consider such atrocities to be a key driver of support for Boko Haram which can thereby represent itself as an alternative to the government and government forces.¹ In Kenya, many in the country's more marginalised communities, especially the Somalis of the North-East Province and Swahili Muslims of the Coast, view the security forces (especially the US-

¹ Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria, 10 September 2015.

trained Anti-Terrorist Police Unit) with distrust and fear. The indiscriminate hard security response to the 2014 Mpeketoni attacks in Lamu County and the ‘enforced disappearances’ of radical Islamist clerics in Mombasa led to violent demonstrations and supported the grievance narratives promoted by Al Shabaab, building on decades of repression or neglect of these communities by the government in Nairobi (CGCC, 2013; TJRC, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Iraq provides a more extreme instance of the problem. After 2003, the absorption and covert infiltration of Shia militias into the Iraqi security forces meant not only that those forces lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni population, but were perceived – with justification – to be active participants in the civil conflict that raged in 2005-07 and has been reignited by the emergence of ISIL in 2013. With elements of the security forces acting effectively as sectarian paramilitaries, ISIL has increasingly been seen as both legitimate and necessary by some among the Sunni population. SSR is an immense challenge in Iraq, but it is necessary.

While reform of the armed forces may be beyond the remit 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.

‘Working On’ War

To directly address violent extremism through statebuilding or peacebuilding measures requires strategies that are contextually specific and which engage with the dynamics of particular groups. This section examines in the light of our findings the four objectives of DfID’s Building Peaceful States and Societies practice paper (BPSS): three statebuilding objectives (the promotion of inclusive

political settlements, the development of core state functions, and responding to public expectations) and the overarching peacebuilding objective (addressing the causes and consequences of conflict). (For a critical evaluation of the strategy, see also Zaum, Gippert and Heaven, 2015).

Promoting Inclusive Political Settlements

The aim here is to include competing elites into a political settlement in order to provide a role in shaping the rules governing economic relations and resource allocation. However, with some Islamist violent groups, a negotiated political settlement is not an aspiration. Boko Haram, for instance, is opposed to the Nigerian state and seeks to create an alternative that is far removed from the current state's perceived moral and political corruptness. Although this aspiration is not necessarily within reach, it suggests that the group is not at present open to negotiation with the Nigerian state. While some elements of the group may be open to negotiation, the group's current leader, Shekau is not, and would wilfully block any attempt to negotiate.² 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).

ISIL and Al Qaida-linked groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) have shown themselves to be even more uncompromising. These Salafist-jihadist groups – but not, importantly, others in the conflict – are distinguished by their global ambitions, transnational organisation, cosmic framing of the conflicts they are involved in, and deliberate strategy of entering those conflicts from overseas and radicalizing them. They pursue an Al Qaida-inspired programme that assumes that the only language

² Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria, 10 September 2015.

its opponents understand is force. All of these features mean that these groups are unlikely to be interested in contributing to an inclusive political settlement and ISIL in particular has invested heavily in projecting its power and crafting a narrative that places it above and beyond conventional politics and negotiation. Although it has, in fact, frequently demonstrated a surprising degree of pragmatism (for example by covertly entered into tactical agreements with the Syrian regime), its core messages and appeal are utopian, sacred, and therefore non-negotiable.

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 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. This has occurred primarily between leaders with a more Somali nationalist focus, leaders with a more global jihadist agenda, and foreign fighters of both extractions, many of whom have felt increasingly mistreated and isolated. Those with a more regional jihadist orientation ostensibly succeeded in taking full control following a purge in 2013 that has led to several rival nationalist leaders disengaging, but ructions have continued since the death of emir Abdul Ahmed Godane in 2014. Not only has this had implications for Al Shabaab's more frequent and aggressive operations in Kenya, but the situation is further complicated by a poor understanding of where Al-Shabaab's several IVE affiliates are orientating themselves in this context. In Syria, ISIL has become estranged not only from its Syrian sibling but also from its Al Qaida parent. Such splits can weaken violent groups – or make them more uncompromising.

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. This may be easier said than done: repeated attempts to bring peace to Afghanistan, including the latest attempt in the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP), failed to make any significant impact on the insurgency since the Taliban leadership strongly rejected the process.

However, Gerges's point is that Western states and their allies have failed to seize the opportunity of contention within the broad jihad movement: instead of separating Al Qaida from the mainstream, policy and practice have tended to see them as all manifestations of the same, unacceptable phenomenon, and thereby, in some cases, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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 prioritized. 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. The clearest example of an Islamist extremist group entering a political process is the MILF in the Philippines, while the Taliban in Afghanistan, which has since its foundation in the 1990s worked on a political as well as military track, has been on the verge of entering negotiations for some time, driven largely by its political leadership. Within our case studies, there are groups that are clearly Islamist, and violent, but which reject the uncompromising ideology of Al Qaida and ISIL, with Ahrar al-Sham in Syria being a particularly strong example of a group that has compromised and worked with others which do not share its ideology. In short, religion in general and Islamism in particular does not make violent groups automatically intractable. They should not, therefore, be excluded from negotiating table just because they are Islamists who use violence.

Developing Core State Functions

This aspect of statebuilding 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 which are threatened by further Islamist extremist expansion. For Boko Haram, which is essentially two-tiered, this approach could influence the lower levels of the group. Enhanced state functions could also limit the potential of groups to exploit grievances to bolster support.

In Kenya, the vacuum created by the lack of central state legitimacy – on the grounds of identity, its repressive actions and its poor provision of security and services – has produced an enabling environment for violent Islamists in the North-East and Coast provinces but also for other extremist groups such as the MRC's militant wing and many of Kenya's organised crime groups such as Mungiki. Rectifying this governance vacuum and enabling environment is DfID's long-term goal for conflict reduction in Kenya and interventions have the potential to reduce radicalisation and recruitment if benefits accrue from constitutional devolution. However, deep-seated tensions on security remain between the national and county governments which is likely to impede progress.³

The Syrian and Iraqi states have failed on such a catastrophic scale that rebuilding their institutions is likely to be a generational task. However, substantial progress in managing Islamist violent extremism is unlikely to be possible without effective state capabilities which are able to command assent of the majority population and of minorities. This is especially the case with the security sectors in both

³ Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Kenya, Old Admiralty Building-Nairobi, 29 Sep 2015.

countries which, with their records of abuses and sectarian preferences, are currently a (major) part of the problem: they cannot be part of the solution without fundamental reform.

Responding to Public Expectations

This aspect of statebuilding provides 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 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 key to recruiting supporters and ensuring assent (Turkmani, 2015).

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's (2015) recommends that international organisations promote economic measures, such as job-creation schemes and fuel distribution, in areas of Syria which 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.

Addressing the causes and consequences of conflict

This is the overarching peacebuilding goal of the BPSS. 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 become a threat to security, which requires an examination of the root causes and an effort to address some of the most pertinent (ESRC, 2015). 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 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.

Conclusion

The case studies have drawn out some of the differences between Islamist violent extremist groups and other conflict participants, and also – equally importantly – the differences among Islamist violent groups. Our analysis suggests there is scope for preventative and restorative activities that seek to limit individuals becoming drawn into violent Islamist groups, and for programmes that ameliorate the conditions created by the and hence reduce recruitment. These activities fall within Goodhand's 'working in' category, where development practitioners work in an 'IVE-sensitive' manner by analysing the nature of the violent extremist problem, seeking to ensure that development activities do not inadvertently increase support for violent groups, and addressing the negative impact that Islamist extremist violence has on development, such as economic disruption in

the areas they are operating in. Of course, this approach is not always possible, particularly when IVE becomes entrenched in active conflict, but we propose it as a general aim.

Direct involvement, in line with Goodhand's 'working on' category is much more difficult – but may be more productive in the long-term. The most problematic Islamist groups will work to impede the core aims of statebuilding – creating inclusive political settlements, developing core state functions and responding to public expectations – because increasingly they are seeking to do the same themselves. These strategies are not, however, redundant. They can play a major role in addressing the grievances of those at the lower levels of IVE groups. However, they have limited effect with the leadership and with the most ideological followers. As we have argued, ideology does distinguish some violent Islamist groups – the Salafi-jihadists – from other types of conflict participants, and these groups will obstruct attempts to address the causes if not the consequences of conflict. However, even these most problematic groups are not monolithic and there is scope at lower levels for reconciliation through addressing grievances, while violent Islamists who reject the Al Qaida worldview may be susceptible to negotiation.

Figure 1 illustrates a hierarchical approach to intervening against violent Islamist extremists in conflict or potential conflict situations. The lower level is the easiest, and requires less contextual understanding of IVE groups and the environments they operate in. As we move higher, the interventions become more challenging, and to be effective require a detailed contextual understanding and knowledge of specific groups, but have greater potential to resolve conflict and reduce the impact of violent Islamist groups.

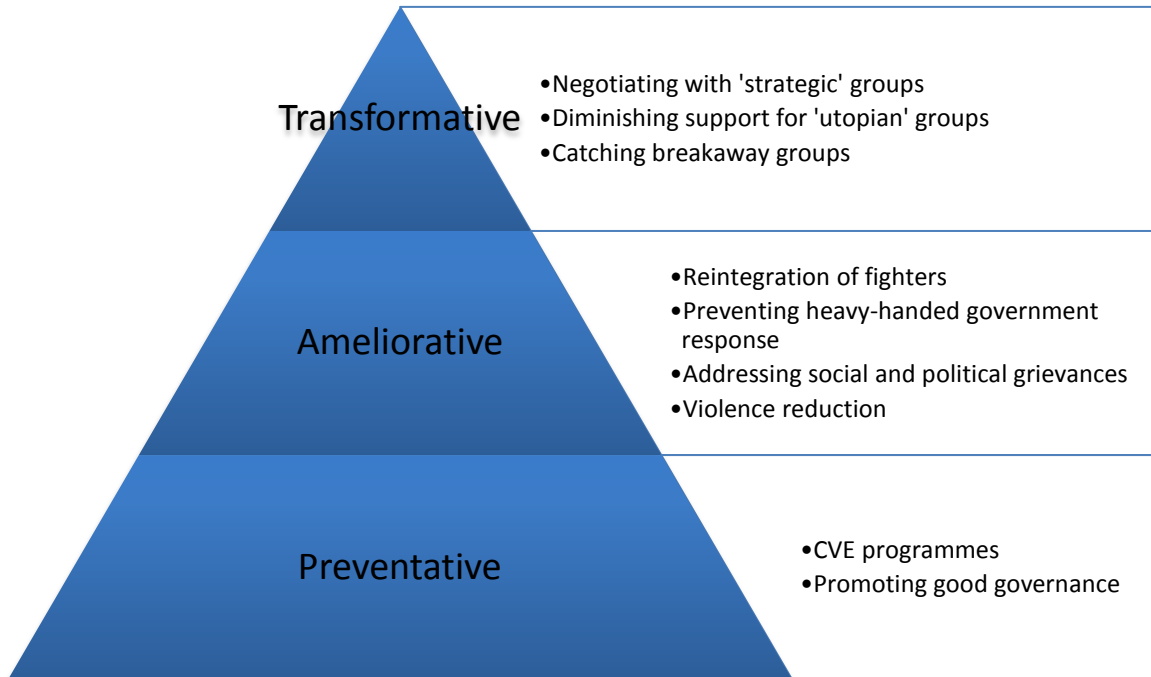


Figure 1: Hierarchy of Interventions in Conflicts Involving violent Islamists

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