

Preventing Violent Extremism and Tackling Corruption Through Citizen-Centered Government

By Eguiar Lizundia and Luke Waggoner

Introduction

Preventing violent extremism has become a top priority for national governments and the international community alike. Following the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in early 2015, the US State Department and USAID published the [Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism](#) (CVE), and numerous countries have formalized, updated, or created national CVE strategies that have sought to formulate a response to the growing threat of violent extremism. Multilateral development organizations including the UNDP, UNESCO and the OSCE have also increasingly prioritized this complex phenomenon. While violent extremism is certainly the result of the interplay of numerous factors, the importance of diminished citizen trust in government institutions remains insufficiently understood as a driver of terrorism. And even though corruption is widely seen as one of the chief causes of the crisis of legitimacy of democratic authority, the linkage between corruption and violent extremism is often not fully explored.

Research by the International Republican Institute (IRI) suggests that violent extremism and corruption have a symbiotic relationship. The insidious connection between corruption and violent extremism operates in a feedback loop: as violent extremism rises, governments with questionable democratic credentials often opt to maintain the status quo rather than undertake necessary democratic and anti-corruption reforms, on the grounds of shoring up state-level "stability." Likewise, public opinion research by IRI suggests that corruption fuels the discontent and hopelessness preyed upon by terrorist recruiters around the world.

Violent Extremism and Corruption: A Symbiotic Relationship

The global spread of violent extremism is often predicated on local dynamics requiring a contextualized understanding and response. The appeal of violent extremism is not easily attributable to simple factors such as socioeconomic, educational or cultural background. However, dissatisfaction with the existing political order is one of the most common and consistent preconditions for individuals who embrace violent extremism.

IRI has found that when neglected or marginalized groups become convinced that they cannot change their fate within the existing power structure they become susceptible to the appeal to direct action and the promise of a clear and defining purpose offered by violent extremism. Terrorist organizations have become adept at exploiting this commonality in societies all over the world.

IRI's mixed-methods local drivers of violent extremism (LDVE) research in places like [Tunisia](#) and [Kosovo](#) illustrates the direct connections between corruption and vulnerabilities to violent extremism in very different geographical and cultural contexts. Both countries have a [relatively high](#) percentage of citizens who have travelled abroad to join violent extremist organizations such as ISIS, and in both countries, corruption emerged as a [common grievance](#) among the segments of the population judged to be most vulnerable to violent extremism.

In addition to breeding the frustration and sense of powerlessness that drives people to violent extremism, corruption enables violent extremism by buttressing the legitimizing narrative that radical groups utilize to recruit supporters. Recent [research](#) by Transparency International indicates that the Taliban were more successful in attracting support by denouncing corruption than appealing to religion. From a practical perspective, systematic corruption also undermines law enforcement and makes it easier for extremists to operate through the payment of bribes and other measures to evade scrutiny: according to Transparency International, ISIS relies on corrupt officials to smuggle weapons and people into Iraq and Syria.

As states continue to transition and seek to shore up their defenses against violent extremism, it is essential that transparency and responsive government are treated as prerequisites for all policies and institutions. Given the intertwined nature and highly localized manifestations of violent extremism and corruption, any attempts to address these mutually-reinforcing challenges must start by understanding the local context through a vulnerabilities lens.

In order to facilitate these targeted policy responses, IRI's Vulnerabilities to Corruption Approach (VCA) starts by identifying government processes that are susceptible to graft and mismanagement. IRI then engages both government officials and citizens around a shared action plan aimed at improving the transparency of the processes identified and creating or enhancing accountability mechanisms. In Tunisia, IRI is piloting this two-pronged strategy in partnership with national and local level institutions. Although it is early to evaluate the impact of the program, the results from prior interventions focused on understanding and addressing violent extremism and corruption separately suggest that an integrated approach might be helpful in achieving synergies and fostering multiplying effects. This includes supporting communities where corruption and other drivers of violent extremism are particularly prevalent, and implementing a repertoire of open government tools that target at-risk individuals.

Conclusion

Corruption is by no means the only factor that explains why individuals join an extremist group. However, research indicates that there is a clear link between corruption and the conditions in which terrorist recruitment thrives—suggesting that interventions to address corruption are a vital component of any holistic effort to mitigate violent extremism.

Improvements to citizen-centered governance can be expected to have two key effects. Greater government responsiveness helps to undermine the appeal of the extremist argument that the existing political order is irretrievably broken. Additionally, seeking feedback directly from citizens creates avenues for otherwise disenfranchised youth to participate in civic affairs, making them less likely to resort to alternative methods for redressing their grievances. Furthermore, addressing societal vulnerabilities to corruption creates the condition for better public services and the effective application of the rule of law—features that are critical to building more resilient communities.

International platforms like the Open Government Partners have a vital role to play in promoting interventions that address the intersection of corruption and violent extremism. In the absence of

community-level initiatives that address the numerous manifestations of corruption, the problem of violent extremism will continue to spread.

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