

# U4 Helpdesk Answer

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U4 Helpdesk Answer 2023

## The contribution of anti-corruption measures for the prevention and countering of violent extremism

Corruption undermines state authority, erodes state legitimacy and generates popular grievances, thereby fueling demand for alternatives, including violent extremism. Well-planned and designed anti-corruption measures can strengthen the social contract between citizens and states, thus reducing the appeal of violent extremism.

Potential anti-corruption measures that can be used to prevent or counter violent extremist political projects are measures that improve access to justice, create more accountable security forces or engage citizens in public policy processes meant to improve general service delivery. Related measures, such as anti-money laundering policies, can potentially also disrupt the illicit financial flows that support violent extremist projects.

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# Query

Please provide an overview of how anti-corruption measures can contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).

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## MAIN POINTS

- Efforts to prevent violent extremism must look to provide solutions that tackle the root causes of the phenomenon, including underlying popular grievances that facilitate violent extremists' recruitment, as well as targeting the symptoms such as acts of violence or insurrection.
- Corruption is a significant grievance that undermines state authority and legitimacy, as well as the social contract between state and citizen.
- Anti-corruption initiatives can strengthen citizenship engagement, accountability and help rebuild trust between authorities and communities.
- Anti-corruption measures designed to reduce violent extremism should address hostility towards state authorities generated by corrupt abuses of power.

## Caveat

This paper is the second of a two-part series of Helpdesk Answers on corruption and violent extremism, the first of which examined how violent extremist groups use narratives of corruption to recruit members.

# Corruption as a driver of conflict and violent extremism

Corruption – defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain – has strong conceptual links with violent extremism.

First, corruption generates popular grievances that can make alternative political projects, including those advanced by violent extremist groups, more attractive. Second, by eroding the legitimacy, capacity and authority of a state, corruption may facilitate the rise of groups contesting the state’s monopoly on violence.

Various definitions of violent extremism have been proposed, which typically seek to distinguish the phenomenon from terms such as “radicalisation” (a mental process) and “terrorism” (a specific act). One of the most prominent definitions has been offered by Berger (2018: 46):

*the belief that an in-group’s success or survival can never be separated from the need for violent action against an out-group (as opposed to less harmful acts such as discrimination or shunning).*

This Helpdesk Answer adopts a similar working definition initially proposed by Bak et al. (2019: 8):

*a violent type of mobilisation that aims to elevate the status of one group, while excluding or dominating its “others” based on markers, such as gender, religion, culture and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organisations destroy existing political and cultural institutions and supplant them with alternative governance structures that work according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology.*

The preference for the version proposed by Bak et al. (2019) is twofold. First, its operational focus on mobilisation rather than intangible beliefs, which makes it more straightforward to consider potential policy responses. Second, its emphasis on alternative governance structures designed to challenge and ultimately replace existing power arrangements. This allows a tighter focus on how corruption in extant political systems stimulates the growth of violent extremism and, by extension, how anti-corruption measures may help to reduce the incidence of violent extremism.

Indeed, given that the literature suggests there is good reason to believe that virtually all forms of corruption can exacerbate the risk of violent extremism, it follows that a large range of anti-corruption policies, programmes and instruments may, indirectly, contribute to preventing and countering violent extremism. As such, it is worth noting that this paper does not attempt to provide an exhaustive overview of anti-corruption measures and how they could curb violent extremism. Rather, this Helpdesk Answer explores some of the major approaches to tackling certain types of corruption that have clear links to the growth of violent extremism.

While violent extremism comes in numerous different forms, many recent scholarly attempts at understanding the links between corruption and violent extremism have considered one particular manifestation of the phenomenon: Islamist violent extremism. As such, while acknowledging that violent extremism is by no means limited to Islamist groups,<sup>1</sup> many of the examples included in this paper relate to Islamist violent extremism.

Before proceeding, it is also worth drawing a distinction between strategies designed to “prevent” and “counter” violent extremism. These two types of intervention are often lumped together

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<sup>1</sup> Violent extremist organisations may be religious in nature, or rather based on non-religious identities and ideologies. In fact, violent extremism intersects in complex ways with philosophies on both the left and right of politics. While

violent ideologies in different parts of the world are rooted in distinct historical and cultural traditions, according to Spach (2018), they tend to be authoritarian and supremacist in nature and rely on a politics of victimhood.

under the rubric of “preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE)”, and there is limited consensus about which strategies amount to “preventing” and which relate to “countering” (Stephens et al. 2021; UNODC 2018).

While pointing out that the range of policy options that can prevent and counter violent extremism are “potentially unlimited”, Neumann (2013) identifies several common interventions such as community outreach and engagement, education and training initiatives, as well as capacity building targeted at disaffected youth.

Furthermore, while acknowledging that there is a continuum between the two approaches, Transparency Maldives (2022: 5-6) proposes that:

*preventive work targets the ‘vulnerabilities’ to violent extremism that individuals, groups or communities may have. In concrete terms, such efforts aim at increasing community awareness, addressing grievances, and improving educational and socio-economic opportunities [...] On the other hand, countering work often targets the radicalisation and recruitment efforts by violent extremist groups and target[s] individuals and groups who are at-risk or on the path of radicalisation or are already radicalised. Such work therefore may include counter-narratives, tackling online or offline violent extremist propaganda, as well as targeted interventions such as psycho-social and peer support, disengagement, de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes.*

Broadly speaking, preventive approaches require authorities to analyse the root causes of violent extremism and prioritise efforts to address its key drivers (UNODC 2018).

Thus, while this distinction is somewhat artificial, it is useful when considering whether anti-corruption measures are designed to alleviate the root causes of violent extremism, or if they are primarily

intended to improve the efficacy of state authorities in targeting its symptoms, such as terrorist financing and acts of violence. This paper uses the terms “preventing” and “countering” to frame anti-corruption measures accordingly.

Finally, while this Helpdesk Answer primarily considers the impact of (anti-)corruption on violent extremism, it is important to note that the relationship between the two phenomena is symbiotic.

The high levels of conflict associated with the activities of violent extremist groups can also create dynamics that encourage further corruption. To give just one example, armed insurgencies frequently lead to the proclamation of a state of emergency such as martial law, which comes with significant institutional uncertainty. Standard operating procedures are often disregarded during armed conflict, and funds are diverted from social services to war efforts. These funding streams can be difficult to monitor and may not be subject to the same checks. States can struggle to track their resources, and anti-corruption safeguards in areas such as procurement are often loosened. This can create an enabling environment for higher levels of corruption on the part of public officials (Chigas & Scharbatke-Church 2023b).

## The role of corruption in generating grievances and undermining state legitimacy

### Corruption and popular grievances

Violent extremists typically seek to exploit underlying grievances and societal conflicts to recruit new members (Bak 2023; UNDP 2023: 77). ISIS, for example, was able to capitalise on inter-communal frictions within the Iraqi state (Al-Nidawi 2014; Haddad 2016).

Any individual’s decision to join a violent extremist group will likely be multicausal and complex, and

corruption is only one of many factors that can drive people into violent extremist groups. Several reports, for instance, point to a sense of injustice and insecurity being key in motivating people to join armed movements (UNDP 2017; Thérroux-Bénoni and Assanvo 2016).

Nonetheless, there are strong indications that corruption fuels many of the grievances that drive violent extremism (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a). Even where corruption is not the primary cause of strife or discontent, imbalanced political settlements that generate popular antagonism towards the state may be sustained by corruption or patronage networks.

In Mali, Benjaminsen and Ba (2019: 1) have shown how “rent-seeking by government officials...in conflicts over pastoral land” led some pastoralists to “support the jihadist take-over”. Another study by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (2021: 20) found that in eastern Burkina Faso and northern Benin, corruption on the part of water officials and forestry agents engendered dissatisfaction among local communities that jihadists have been quick to exploit.

Reitano, Clarke and Adal (2017: 26) note that marginalised groups are more likely to consider joining a violent extremist group an attractive option when their opportunities in the legitimate economy are curtailed and the potential for social advancement is frustrated.

Previous reviews of the literature have made it clear that high-level collusive corruption restricts socio-economic opportunities for those at the margins of society (Chêne 2014). For instance, corruption can increase horizontal (group based) inequality by enabling one group to benefit disproportionately from public resources. This can happen when dominant groups capture public goods at the expense of other groups, leading to a sense of exclusion and a widespread perception of unfairness and marginalisation (Stewart 2008).

As such, significant economic and political inequalities between different groups (often delineated along cultural, ethnic or religious lines),

can be a significant underlying driver of violence (Stewart 2008) and increase the appeal of extremist groups promising a more “just” society (Bak 2023).

UNDP (2023: 77) recognises that corruption, elite impunity and “flagrant display[s] of wealth” by the powerful are particularly salient grievances for violent extremist groups looking to attract disaffected people. This suggests that even in settings without entrenched inter-group rivalries, patterns of grand corruption and state capture, in which a small kleptocratic elite siphons off public resources with impunity, can also make the apparently utopian visions offered by extremist groups seem more attractive (Reitano, Clarke, and Adal 2017: 26).

Routine acts of petty corruption can also serve to reassert the gulf in social status between individuals from dominant and marginalised communities and leave those targeted feeling humiliated (McDonald, Jenkins, Fitzgerald 2021: 16). Indeed, marginalised groups may be disproportionately victimised by public officials perpetrating predatory forms of corruption such as extortion (McDonald, Jenkins, Fitzgerald 2021: 79).

For instance, researchers have shown that, in the Central African Republic, minorities are more prone to having to pay bribes to navigate the justice system. This reportedly heightens inequalities between different groups and generates grievances that contributed to violence in the region (Scharbatke-Church 2017).

The proceeds of corruption can also allow perpetrators to purchase impunity. For instance, illicit funds can be used to buy favours from judges or law enforcement agents, which in turn allow those actors who obtain illicit funds to capture ever more (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a). For senior officials or powerful figures, undue influence can also be used to exert pressure on oversight bodies and enforcement agencies to avoid being held to account. The perception that people who have illicitly enriched themselves are not facing justice can foster the wider public’s alienation from the state and its institutions.

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At the same time, a lack of public accountability may facilitate abuses by those actors that enjoy impunity, such as corrupt elements in the security sector. Krause (2023) demonstrates that al-Qaeda and ISIS are significantly more likely to successfully mobilise in a conflict if the de-jure state and its forces engage in human rights violations, such as arbitrarily arresting, extorting or torturing people. Such abuses fuel anger and can lead some individuals to seek either protection or vengeance by joining insurgent groups, including those that can be characterised as violent extremists (UNDP 2017: 73). Chayes (2016), for instance, shows how Boko Haram has sought to project an image of itself as a platform for revenge against a system it portrays as inherently predatory (Chayes 2016).

## Corruption erodes the social contract

UNDP (2023: 17) contends that one of the primary drivers of violent extremism is the breakdown of the social contract between state and citizen. Violent extremism grows when there is widespread distrust in government and when its legitimacy and authority is fundamentally in question (UNDP 2023).

A major consequence of widespread corruption is that it undermines the state's capacity to deliver high quality public services, which is at the core of the social contract between state and citizens. By diverting resources away from their intended purpose, corruption thus erodes state legitimacy and its ability to exercise its authority (Chêne and Ardigo 2017).

Low state capacity to provide public services often correlates with low availability of social security. In such cases, access to social security is likely to be provided in a particularistic manner. In other words, specifically defined communities will often be prioritised during the distribution of public goods not according to need but rather according to the logics of power and patronage (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a). This, in turn, strengthens allegiances to one's own community at the expense of a larger national identity.

Moreover, limited public service capacity can also allow armed groups to position themselves as more effective providers of basic services than the state, lending them popular support and a veneer of legitimacy (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a).

Haysom (2018a) has documented how in northern Mozambique, the exclusion of the local community from the "benefits of formal investment and economic growth" allowed extremists to appeal to the population by "offering opportunities for study and capital, and mobilising their recruits to challenge violently the existing power relations". Rampant high-level corruption by local political elites engaged in the illicit extraction of natural resources reportedly "allowed the insurgency to establish itself locally" (Haysom 2018b).

Based on a cross-sectional quantitative study of factors associated with the risk of al-Qaeda or ISIS entering a local conflict, Krause (2023) has argued that when the state is effective in providing public services, grievances against the government are reduced and violent extremist organisations are less able to mobilise local support.

Overall, then, endemic corruption can lend credibility to narratives propagated by violent extremist organisations about the unjust nature of the socio-political status quo. Moreover, by undermining the legitimacy, capacity and authority of state institutions, corruption acts as a powerful rallying cry for extremist groups who claim to provide an alternative form of order and justice (Timilsina and Okeke 2018).

## Corruption as an operational enabler for violent extremist groups

As well as undermining the legitimacy of and trust in the state, corruption and the inconsistent rule of law provides an enabling environment for organised crime and violent extremist groups (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a).

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Reitano, Clarke and Adal (2017: 5) note that organised criminal groups are known to intentionally pursue a strategy of neutering law enforcement through a deliberate strategy of co-optation involving corruption and patronage networks. Indeed, Shelley (2005: 103) has argued that violent extremist groups are “most lethal” in regions in which there is a toxic “mix of transnational crime and corruption”, where “law enforcement and border control agencies are both corrupt” and members of the security forces collude with organised crime groups that may have been infiltrated by violent extremists.

According to Reitano, Clarke and Adal (2017: 3), this is the case in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where corruption and a weak rule of law “created an environment in which criminals and terrorists can engage in [kidnapping], drug trafficking and extortion to finance their organisations and networks”.

In addition, corruption directly weakens the operational capacity of those institutions that are meant to guarantee security, such as armed forces and law enforcement bodies.

In Iraq, Mali, and Afghanistan the international community witnessed how high rates of corruption affected the efficacy of the state’s professional armed forces. When funds are embezzled by senior officials and officers, experience shows that soldiers are often ill-equipped, unmotivated and ill-prepared to contain violent extremists (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a).

In Mali, for instance, it has been argued that corruption in the army undermined its ability to conduct effective counter-insurgency operations (TI-DS 2020). One problem was that many Malian reserves turned out to be ghost soldiers<sup>2</sup> (TI-DS 2020: 2). Another was that recruits often had to pay bribes to be accepted into the army. A Malian police recruit interviewed by the French newspaper *Le Monde* claimed that the price for his job was

equivalent to €760 (Le Cam 2019). Such an investment would need a return, which reportedly was typically ensured through corrupt means such as extorting citizens (TI-DS 2020: 3).

In other countries in the region, combat efficiency has also been hampered by ghost salaries, rent seeking and nepotism within the army. In 2013, Nigerian soldiers claimed that half their salaries were stolen by higher-ranking officers, resulting in issues such as disruptions to the provision of basic gear, medical services and even ammunition (TI-DS 2020: 3). In the years preceding the Taliban’s assumption of power in Afghanistan in 2021, there were widespread reports of the national security forces selling off arms to third parties, including insurgents and militias (Bodetti 2018).

## The role of illicit financial flows

There is no universally accepted definition of the term illicit financial flows (IFFs), but Global Financial Integrity, which has provided the most widely accepted definition, defines IFFs as “money that is illegally earned, used or moved and which crosses an international border” (Solomon 2019). This definition means IFFs encompass proceeds of corruption, but also include many other forms of illegally earned funds.

Cobham (2016) argues that illicit financial flows generate two distinct vicious cycles: the cycle of the absence of positive security (the provision of the conditions necessary for security) and the cycle of absence of negative security (preventing forms of insecurity). Both of these deficits produce an enabling environment for violent extremism.

In the vicious cycle of positive security, capital outflows hollow out the state, reducing its ability to invest in public goods, provide basic services or improve livelihoods. The state is thus less able to offer viable alternatives to armed struggle or create

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<sup>2</sup> Soldiers who only exist on paper for high-ranking officials to embezzle the funds allocated to their salaries.

the conditions for a peaceful settlement, such as prosperity. Similarly, in the vicious cycle of negative security, the profits gained through IFFs increase the rate of criminality while the outflows simultaneously decrease the state's capacity to counteract it (Cobham 2016).

Cobham (2016) has further argued that illicit financial flows distort incentives within the legitimate economy and can lead to the emergence of a rent seeking economy, in which economic activities that are characterised by their extractive potential (as opposed to productivity) are prioritised, resulting in a more clientelistic, patrimonial and violent form of politics.

Illicit financial flows can also directly finance operations by armed extremists. In the area of Lake Chad, for instance, violent extremist groups reportedly received regular financial assistance from ISIS, delivered via transfers to Nigerian individuals and companies or through the use of Nigerian couriers who collected cash from ISIS representatives in the Gulf states (Foucher 2020).

Funding for violent extremist organisations can come from a wide range of sources, including money laundered after being donated to non-profit organisations or religious foundations. However, a great deal of violent extremists' revenue is believed to be generated from illicit or criminal activities (UNODC nd).

Chelin (2018: 2) has referred to the involvement of violent extremist groups in criminal markets as the crime-terror nexus.<sup>3</sup> Profit, material wealth and ideological objectives are not mutually exclusive for many armed groups. In the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime's attempt to map global illicit flows, Nellemann et al. (2018:9), estimate that seven violent extremist organisations make between US\$1 billion and US\$1.39 billion a

year through illicit activities such as drugs, illegal mining, oil and gas smuggling and looting.

The literature contains many examples of how violent extremist groups operate in illicit markets.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Assanvo et al. (2019) demonstrates how violent extremist and other conflict actors that operate in the Liptako-Gourma region of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are engaged, either directly or indirectly, in criminal markets (2019: 21).

Similarly, analysing the case of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Chelin (2018) claims that, over time, the group has been less involved in acts of terrorism and, instead, has become more involved in profit-making activity such as kidnappings-for-ransom and various forms of trafficking (Chelin 2018: 2, 12).

Sharifi (2023) has shown how even after the Taliban take-over, many of the more than 20 terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan continue to engage in "large-scale organised criminal activity to finance their own operations", notably drug trafficking, mineral extraction, illicit logging and people smuggling.

Several cases in recent years have also demonstrated how both local and multinational companies can be a source of revenue for violent extremists. For instance, in October 2022, the French building materials manufacturer Lafarge was subjected to over US\$770 in fines for paying fees to both ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front to keep its cement operations running in Syria (US DOJ 2022).

Indeed, illicit wealth generated during conflict can be a major reason for armed actors to prolong conflict because violence allows them to control money flows, strategic resources or other means of generating revenue (Le Billon 2001; Collier and Hoeffler 2004). The money generated by these strategic resources can, in addition to enriching

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<sup>3</sup> Criminal networks and violent extremist organisations overlap in complex ways (for further discussion of this topic, see Alda and Sala 2014: 1; Kiepe 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Criminal markets include markets for drugs, trafficked humans, human smuggling, trafficking in contraband, illegally obtained licit goods (such as cigarettes), natural resources (oil, minerals, wood) or arms.



those controlling it, be reinvested in weapons, allowing armed groups to defend and capture other markets or more market share (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023a). Often, these illicit economies exist for years beyond the end of conflict (Chigas and Scharbatke-Church 2023b).

Violent extremist organisations may rely on some of the same money laundering and sanctions evasion techniques that corrupt actors and criminal enterprises use. A key method used by many violent extremist organisations is non-banking financial methods, such as the Hawala system. The Hawala system lacks supervision, operates largely outside of the regulated financial system and, as a result, it is easy for bad actors to mingle funds of licit and illicit origin (FATF 2013: 9). In a detailed case study of the financial flows related to the trade of small arms between Yemen and Somalia, Bahadur (2020: 1) demonstrates how simple it is for organisations involved in arms trafficking to circumvent the rudimentary know your customer (KYC) checks enforced by Hawala money transfer operators.

While non-banking settlement methods may be one of the preferred options for many violent extremist organisations, formal financial systems can also be vulnerable. In one illustrative high-profile case, the Cyprus-based bank, FBME Bank, was able to process transactions through Deutsche Bank to several sanctioned and terrorist-designated entities, including an ISIS-affiliated trader (Warren and Campbell 2017).

Real estate markets have also increasingly come under scrutiny as potential key avenues for evading sanctions and laundering proceeds of illicit activity. For instance, evidence has shown the relative ease with which the Dubai real estate markets have been accessed by violent extremist groups (C4ADS 2018: 3). In recent years, more attention has also fallen on the global markets for cultural artefacts such as antiquities and art objects, in which third parties can avoid KYC and due diligence checks with relative ease (FATF 2023).

## The role of anti-corruption measures in the prevention and countering of violent extremism

Preventing and countering violent extremism requires a suite of policy responses to uphold the physical safety and integrity of citizens and the state, which can range from education initiatives and labour market reform to the training of counter-terrorism units.

Yet anti-corruption efforts have an important role to play in both prevention and countering of violent extremism, because governance deficits are key to explaining the phenomenon (UNDP 2023). The remainder of this Helpdesk Answer therefore considers how anti-corruption interventions can contribute to preventing the emergence and consolidation of violent extremist movements, as well as how anti-corruption measures can enhance the ability of a state to contain and counter violent extremist groups that are more established.

Efforts to curb violent extremism must provide solutions that tackle the root causes of the phenomenon, including underlying popular grievances that facilitate violent extremists' recruitment as well as targeting the symptoms, such as acts of violence or insurrection. This also applies to anti-corruption measures designed to reduce violent extremism, which should address hostility towards state authorities generated by corrupt abuses of power.

Therefore, interventions to improve accountability to citizens, reduce abuse of power and distribute public goods in a more equitable manner need to accompany any technocratic measures to increase the capacity of law enforcement agencies and the security forces to crack down on violent extremists by stamping out inefficiencies and corruption in the security apparatus.

Indeed, much of the literature on anti-corruption approaches in fragile settings emphasises the need

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to build citizen trust in state structures (Johnston 2011; Jenkins, Kukutschka and Zuniga 2020). This trust – and ultimately popular legitimacy – has to be earned by state authorities through upholding their duties and obligations to citizens rights.

The final section of the paper considers the role of anti-corruption efforts in post-conflict settings, during peacebuilding processes that may involve violent extremist groups that previously fought state authorities.

## Anti-corruption measures with the potential to prevent violent extremism

UNDP (2023: 23) argues that sustainable peace in areas affected by violent extremism requires measures that restore the social contract between state and citizen. Effective anti-corruption measures can demonstrate to communities that the state is committed to upholding justice, protecting its citizens and improving their lives. By building accountability and trust in the state, anti-corruption interventions and programming can counteract the appeal of extremist movements as “proto-state competitors” (UNDP 2023: 23).

Despite the broad consensus that the breakdown of the social contract is a significant driver of violent extremism, donor funded P/CVE interventions have tended to be communication based measures, such as counter-narrative campaigns and short-term socio-economic interventions including the provision of micro-finance opportunities to local businesses or “mentorship schemes” that teach skills to groups at risk of violent extremist recruitment (Jones et al. 2021: 8). Such programmes may have been well-executed but appear to have had limited impact because they have not comprehensively addressed the root causes of violent extremism (Jones et al. 2021: 8). On a more positive note, more sustained impact can be seen when P/CVE programmes have been integrated with other development interventions

(Jones et al. 2021: 9), which could include anti-corruption and rule of law based initiatives.

The following section explores a few of the possible ways in which anti-corruption measures can strengthen the social contract between state institutions and citizens, thereby reducing the appeal of violent extremist political projects.

### Programming to strengthen justice and rule of law

One of the types of services that most mature violent extremist groups provide soon after wresting control of an area is an alternative structure to deliver justice, such as the courts established by ISIS and Al-Qaeda in areas they controlled (International Crisis Group 2016). Cafferky et al. (2017) point out that a wide range of violent extremist groups have tried to position themselves as more effective providers of justice than the states that came before them.

Although this literature review could identify no studies that explicitly and systematically assess the links between anti-corruption reforms in the judiciary and the P/CVE agenda, the link between the two is conceptually solid. Research shows that the perception that corrupt individuals enjoy impunity is a significant driver of violent extremism and that marginalised groups in particular suffer from an inability to receive fair judicial services in highly corrupt settings (IRI 2016: 11). P/CVE researchers also highlight that impunity and inequality before the law lead people to search for alternative providers of justice, which could include violent extremist groups (IRI 2016: 11; Chayes 2016).

The justice sector is a significant entry point for countering the impunity enjoyed by corrupt actors, which, as discussed, can lead to further abuses and a feeling of alienation that violent extremist groups exploit for support. Specific anti-corruption interventions targeting impunity include training law enforcement, prosecutors and judges on the prosecution of corruption cases to address the

factors leading to impunity by, for example, building capacities to collect and present admissible evidence in legal proceedings.

Furthermore, in cases where conventional courts fail to deliver justice, a specialised independent anti-corruption court may be established. In 2018, Madagascar established such a court – the Pôle Anti-Corruption – as a way of tackling impunity, although its efficacy was reportedly limited by a lack of adequate financing (Schatz 2019)

Additionally, judicial reform, including measures designed to reduce the incidence of corruption within the justice system, is another potential avenue to address underlying grievances by improving the integrity and efficiency of the justice sector. Reforms instigated to tackle judicial corruption include strengthening control or oversight mechanisms for the judiciary, introducing court monitoring programmes, and undertaking measures to strengthen judicial independence, such as security of tenure (Jennett 2014).

Yet, despite evidence of the importance of rule of law programming to both P/CVE and the larger stabilisation and peacebuilding agenda, an analysis of donor funded programmes shows that justice oriented programming tends to be a relatively low priority among OECD donors, with just 1.4% of total aid funding to justice sector interventions<sup>5</sup> (Manuel and Manuel 2022: 1).

The largest proportion of this programming consists of institutional reform and capacity building in the justice sector to align national or local systems to global norms of rule of law (Manuel and Manuel 2022: 1). This is typically done via capacity building and training programmes, as well as technical interventions such as supporting case management, e-justice development assistance or policy-based support.

According to Manuel and Manuel (2022: 14), objectives tend to be informed by top-down assumptions, such as the notion that institutional or policy reforms or greater capacity will translate into improved justice service provisions for citizens. An example of this logic can be found in Transparency International's topic guide on curbing judicial corruption, which advocates for mechanisms such as stronger sanctions, oversight mechanisms, training and monitoring (see Jennett 2014: 6).

At the same time, evidence suggests that justice programmes with more localised and specific objectives have tended to be more demonstrably successful (Manuel and Manuel 2022: 20). Manuel and Manuel (2022: 7) recommend that donors concentrate not only on strengthening rule of law norms and supporting institutional reform but also on the provision of justice services that prioritise local needs (so-called people-centred justice). These could include land tenure litigation, access to entitlements, dispute resolution, free legal assistance or any other legal issue that is widespread in a specific location.

In such programmes, donors tend to engage justice sector actors more directly at the local level and target specific communities. The objective is more often to expand the availability and accessibility of justice services so that people can resolve disputes fairly and effectively locally. For instance, there are cases from Bangladesh and Lebanon where UN projects were successful in enhancing local-level access to justice by working with (in the case of Lebanon) municipal police or (in the case of Bangladesh) with local councils (Manuel and Manuel 2022: 22). Encouragingly, the authors argue that basic justice services can be scaled up in low-income countries at a relatively low cost (Manuel and Manuel 2022: 7).

In principle, local-level people-centred justice interventions could make a positive contribution to preventing violent extremism by providing effective

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<sup>5</sup> This figure relates to OECD-DAC code 15130, "aid for legal and judicial development". Notably, funding aligned to code 15130 has fallen 32% since 2011-2013.

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official channels for people to seek redress or conflict resolution. Where state-run justice systems treat people with dignity and provide them with an opportunity to exercise agency, the appeal of violent extremists positioning themselves as arbiters of justice is likely to be diminished.

## Programming to prevent corruption in service delivery

As discussed, high quality public services are at the core of the social contract between state and citizens, meaning that endemic corruption in service delivery can cause a fundamental breakdown in the social contract and erode state legitimacy. It follows, therefore, that improving integrity standards across service providers could lead to more efficient and inclusive service delivery, which may weaken violent extremist groups' offer of alternative public services as means of attracting support.

Furthermore, considering how integral public services are for the protection of basic needs and rights, improved services with reduced levels of corruption can better address the unmet needs that can act as drivers towards violent extremism. UNDP (2021) recommends that community assessments determining the risk of violent extremism take into account the perception of threat to livelihoods and the level of service delivery.

The forms of corruption present in service delivery range from the embezzlement of allocated government funding to the prevalence of petty bribery at the user-provider level. Anti-corruption interventions include the introduction of top-down and bottom-up transparency mechanisms, including through open data and e-procurement systems to make information accessible to citizens and irregularities more detectable. Complaint and grievance mechanisms can be established to tackle petty bribery and provide support to victims forced to pay bribes (Chêne and Ardigo 2017: 13). Corruption risk assessments can identify weaknesses within a specific sector in which corruption can occur and to inform the design of risk reduction measures.

As part of social audits, citizens evaluate the delivery of public services in the hope that this will lead to better service provision and less wasteful spending. Alternatively, citizens can provide feedback via community score cards, where they express their level of (dis)satisfaction with the delivery of basic services to public officials in the expectation that these take any necessary corrective actions (Khadkar and Bhattarai 2012: 51).

## Programming to strengthen anti-corruption in security sector reform

Corruption in the security sector creates conditions in which violent extremism can take root. Corruption among security forces has been shown to undermine the state's legitimacy, exacerbate the marginalisation of certain ethnic groups and lead to the illicit proliferation of small arms (TI-DS 2020: 2).

In security services where corruption or mismanagement leads to personnel missing salaries or enduring hardship can result in security officials resorting to the illicit sale of materiel and even predatory behaviour to extract resources from citizens. As such, corruption in the security sector weakens operational capacity while also stoking distrust and fear among communities (TI-DS 2020: 4). Revealingly, survey data shows that the security sector is the most widely distrusted sector by individuals who are recruited into violent extremist organisations (UNDP 2017: 65).

Security sector reform (SSR) has been a staple of stabilisation programmes across the world for decades. However, in practice, transparency and anti-corruption have often been marginal or neglected elements in many SSR initiatives (Cohen 2012). Cohen (2012) suggests that this is due to anti-corruption being viewed as too 'political' a topic for SSR, the fact that the security sector requires secrecy for operational security, as well as the fear of upsetting powerful armed actors (Cohen 2012).

As a result, Eckhard (2016: 23) argues that many SSR interventions have increased rather than

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reduced corruption in the sector. Eckhard (2016: 1) points to the default focus of much SSR programming on “functional capacity building” of security officials and armed forces personnel (“train-and-equip”) and the limited attention paid to establishing robust accountability structures in these organisations. As such, the added value of an anti-corruption component in SSR initiatives is that it forces due consideration of how to curb corrupt abuses of power by security forces that ferment resentment and sympathy for violent extremists.

Another lesson learned from decades of security sector assistance is that enhancing the capacity of a military or police force is not the same as building peace, guaranteeing the safety of citizens or ensuring accountability. This is particularly the case when elites are able to misuse these security forces to secure and protect private gains, such as by deploying these forces in favour of certain groups or to extort businesses and obtain market monopolies, as well as to repress legitimate opposition (United States Institute for Peace 2023).

Although there is broad agreement about the central importance of security forces in efforts to counter violent extremism, they have rarely been included in preventive efforts such as community outreach and grievance redressal. Generally speaking, most security forces receive little training in how to engage with civilians in dialogue (Mottet and Inkesha 2022). Nonetheless, Mottet and Inkesha (2022: 68) point to a number of positive examples of military-civilian cooperation and local dialogue mechanisms between security forces and civil society groups that have helped overcome suspicion and mistrust.

Participatory civil-military dialogue can be constructed in numerous ways and include different kinds of stakeholders (Mottet and Inkesha 2022: 69). As such, these outreach and consultative mechanisms could potentially include actors who advocate for good governance, accountability and potentially even anti-corruption.

This is unlikely to be straightforward, but experience from Transparency International’s

Defence and Security programme shows that military-to-military dialogue is a strong place to start when military corruption is taboo (Cohen 2012). Cohen (2012) suggests that SSR programmes engaging with security forces consider hiring former high-ranking security sector officials as senior advisers as a means of opening doors, initiating difficult conversations and putting anti-corruption on the agenda. Part of this could involve emphasising how unchecked corruption undermines operational capacity and reduces the force’s ability to meet its mandate (Cohen 2012).

There are a number of resources for stakeholders working on reducing corruption and increasing the accountability of security forces. Transparency International’s Defence and Security Programme has created a planning toolkit on integrating anti-corruption measures into military operations. A previous Helpdesk Answer also covered lessons from anti-corruption reforms in the police sector in Asia. Several organisations work explicitly on the topic of security sector governance, including the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance. Finally, the United States Institute for Peace (2023) has issued a number of high-level principles to reduce the risk of elite capture of security sector reform and security sector governance programming.

## Community engagement approaches

Resilience to violent extremism cannot solely be imposed from above through technocratic measures, capacity building and institutional reform; in the long run, broad-based community repudiation of violent extremism is a prerequisite for peaceful societies.

Indeed, research shows that, if they are to be effective, P/CVE interventions need coordination between formal and informal institutions at different levels and must be responsive to the needs of communities to make their members feel heard and respected (PAVE 2022). Civil society is often adept at understanding the needs and grievances of communities, as well as sources of resilience to violent extremism, and is therefore well placed to

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support preventive efforts in particular (PAVE 2022).

An increasing number of organisations are promoting social accountability mechanisms that provide opportunities for affected communities to get involved in local policy processes or monitor the quality of service delivery. The principle behind such strategies is to give citizens an active role in evaluating the performance of local governance and holding service providers to account (Baez Camargo and Jacobs 2019: 7).

By enabling the exercise of citizenship, such mechanisms can enhance participation, provide opportunities for the local authorities to receive direct feedback from beneficiaries and use better evidence for policies and governance (Schwarz nd). Proponents of social accountability also argue that improving service delivery will strengthen the social contract between state and citizen (Schwarz nd).<sup>6</sup>

The promise of such an approach appears to be particularly relevant in contexts affected by conflict and fragility (Thindwa 2017). Some of the social accountability tools that could support PVE efforts include participatory planning, which refers to the involvement of citizens in the drafting and/or implementation of a specific policy, large project, initiative or campaign (Khadkar and Bhattarai 2012: 87).

Similarly, participatory budgeting is a process where representatives of citizen groups or civil society are involved in public financial management processes, such as expressing community priorities during budget formulation or monitoring budget execution (Ardigo 2019: 15).

Finally, in addition to the consultative and participatory mechanisms already discussed, grievance redressal channels such as complaints boxes and legal aid clinics can heighten citizens' sense that their rights are respected and that they have a stake in society (Chêne 2013).

Based on the analysis of the drivers of violent extremism discussed in the first part of the paper, it is reasonable to posit that such community engagement tools can help decrease the risk of violent extremism.

As with any type of donor funded interventions, social accountability interventions must be planned carefully (Ardigo 2019: 3) and factor in the risk of doing harm, such as social accountability initiatives exposing critical voices to reprisals or inadvertently causing local tensions (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022:35).

Another challenge practitioners must navigate relates to ensuring that the demands and voices of citizens are directed to individuals who are in a position to create a change and act upon it. This can be difficult, particularly in complex bureaucratic environments (Baez Camargo and Jacobs 2019: 12).

## Anti-corruption measures with the potential to counter violent extremism

In addition to the prevention agenda, various anti-corruption measures could be taken to counter violent extremist groups that have emerged.

These steps broadly fall into two camps. First, technical interventions that focus on clamping down on corruption in security forces at the level of operational resources, particularly the management of equipment, budgets and personnel. The rationale here is that corruption undermines the operational efficacy of security services and their capacity to counter violent extremist groups.

In addition to traditional capacity building measures, steps could include interventions

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to improving service delivery, Reitano, Clarke and Adal (2017: 27) suggest that key to countering the

“allure” of extremist groups is the “provision of opportunities for economic and social advancement”.

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intended to strengthen internal integrity management controls. In principle, this could reduce the vulnerability of customs and law enforcement agencies to forms of collusive corruption with extremist groups, such as bribe taking by officials in exchange for access to key logistical hubs, such as ports and terminals, or turning a blind eye to the trade in illicit goods such as minerals, oil and gas, drugs, arms and human beings. Establishing robust oversight mechanisms, strengthening internal inspection units, launching whistleblowing channels and conducting spot checks are some potential initiatives to be considered.

Second, steps could be taken to disrupt violent extremists' financial networks. While not strictly speaking anti-corruption interventions, anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) efforts aim to limit the ability of organised criminal groups, corrupt networks and designated terrorist organisations to operate. Such measures are therefore relevant to interventions intended to counter violent extremist groups as they provide tools that enable law enforcement to crack down on the sources of extremists' revenue, whether these revenue streams originate in illicit markets, are the proceeds of corruption or supposedly legitimate funds that have been laundered.

## Stamping out corruption in law enforcement agencies and the security forces

Corruption within domestic law enforcement agencies and security forces not only erodes their legitimacy in the eyes of the public, but it also leads to operational dysfunction that undermines their ability to counter the threat of violent extremism.

For example, corruption can cause the diversion of resources so that poor quality equipment is delivered or salaries are not paid on time, which may in turn cause a drop in the level of morale among service personnel. Therefore, anti-corruption measures tailored to the security sector could lead to better management of resources and levels of

morale, thus contributing to a performance improvement in terms of eliminating the threat.

Measures can be taken to strengthen both internal integrity management controls within security forces as well as to enhance oversight of their operations by accountability actors such as parliaments, civil society organisations and independent oversight bodies (see Dixon and Nijssen 2017). Anti-corruption measures often need to work around the secrecy culture that has developed in many security circles, meaning proactive and enhanced steps may need to be taken to promote whistleblowing.

NATO and the Geneva Centre for Security Governance (DCAF) have developed the integrity self-assessment process, which serves as a diagnostic tool for national defence forces to identify and reduce their exposure to corruption risks. Transparency International's Defence and Security Programme implements a responsible defence governance programme which aims to support national actors towards improving defence governance, including through an initiative towards the development of global standards on responsible governance in the defence and security sector. It also identified a set of key mitigation measures that security actors can undertake, such as the identification of dedicated anti-corruption task forces.

To give one example, having analysed how corruption in the security sector fuels the growth of violent extremist groups in West Africa, Transparency International recommends that West African governments undertake measures such as linking payments to a biometric database to reduce the risk of ghost soldiers and introducing specific and robust protections for whistleblowers (TI-DS 2020).

## Disrupting the financial and economic networks of extremist groups

Hindering the funding of violent extremist groups can contribute materially to counter-terrorism efforts. As illustrated by a recent study by the

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Egmont Group (2022) into the financing of right-wing violent extremist groups, measures to tackle money laundering are broadly the same as those intended to counter terrorist financing.

Several case studies in the research demonstrate how robust financial investigations have uncovered funds being sent to offshore recruiters for violent extremist groups, suspected money laundering related to a violent extremist cell within the security forces themselves, as well as financial links between extremist organisations operating in multiple countries that included e-money transfers via FINTECH entities (Egmont Group 2022). The report underlines the importance of skilled and well-resourced financial intelligence units (FIUs) in efforts to counter violent extremism as well as the need for excellent coordination with other FIUs and security services both domestically and internationally (Egmont Group 2022).

Development actors have also become increasingly involved in countering illicit financial flows agenda in recent years. Donors and multilateral institutions have, for instance, funded capacity building programmes to train national law enforcement, security and/or intelligence actors in techniques to investigate and prosecute terrorist financing as well as techniques for asset seizure and asset recovery (UNODC nd). International financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, can also provide technical assistance to national authorities to strengthen their AML/CFT regimes (IMF nd).

Describing AML/CFT policies in detail goes beyond the scope of this Helpdesk Answer. However, campaigners and compliance professionals who work on the topic of illicit financial flows have called for enhancing beneficial ownership transparency, maintaining strong enforcement and oversight mechanisms in the financial industry as well as tougher regulation of so-called enablers, in particular real estate agents, lawyers and accountants.

A number of civil society organisations, including Open Ownership and Transparency International (2021), have advocated for a centralised, publicly

available beneficial ownership register to enable companies, investors, financial institutions, journalists, authorities and other stakeholders to conduct better due diligence, uncover financial irregularities and cooperate across jurisdictions to limit dirty money flows (Martini 2019; Transparency International 2021). While not primarily intended to counter violent extremist groups, such measures may make it harder for them to disguise illicit transactions behind layers of intermediaries as well as support the work of law enforcement. Indeed, robust public registries could help reduce the burden that financial crime, anti-corruption and compliance professionals face in their work.

Other measures that have been widely called for include addressing loopholes that allow dirty money to be laundered with relative ease. This includes the regulation around financial instruments such as bearer shares, tightening the requirements on “nominee” shareholders and directors, as well as strengthening the operational capacity and independence of authorities tasked with AML/CFT such as financial intelligence units (Transparency International 2021).

## The need for integrating anti-corruption, P/CVE and peacebuilding

Where violent extremist groups have been active in a protracted conflict, they may also form part of the negotiations intended to result in a post-conflict political settlement. As such, the role of anti-corruption measures during peacebuilding and peacekeeping initiatives should not be neglected as controlling corruption in the post-conflict environment may help to prevent the emergence of new grievances that could trigger a new cycle of violence.

Nonetheless, embedding anti-corruption into peacebuilding efforts is fraught with challenges, such as the timing and sequencing of anti-corruption measures and the potential to reignite conflict.

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Traditional scholarship on peacebuilding maintains that curbing corruption should be only a secondary consideration in the initial stages of establishing security in post-conflict settings (Kaplan 2012). In this scenario, peace mediators and peacebuilders first work to stabilise the context, seeking to reduce violence and cementing some sort of peace. Anti-corruption practitioners begin their activities at a later stage, trying to transform this “negative peace”<sup>7</sup> into a “positive peace”.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, some actors in the peacebuilding sector have even argued that, in the short term, corruption can be useful to stabilise the situation via so-called political settlements or elite bargains (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 4; see also Khan 2021 for an exploration of this debate).

Another concern is that bringing up sensitive topics such as corruption could undermine conflict actors’ willingness to engage in dialogue and/or negotiations for peace by making it clear what those who have benefitted from corruption during conflict stand to lose (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 1). In this view, peacebuilding interventions should be “apolitical” as adding anti-corruption elements would complicate high-level diplomatic negotiations (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 2).

This school of thought, that elite bargains involving a tacit acceptance of corrupt quid pro quos may help end violence, seems to have held sway during the early days of the US led reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Mac Ginty (2010) and Schmeidl (2016) explain that political backroom deals were meant to contribute to the immediate short-term stability by co-opting a series of armed actors, such as warlords.

On the other hand, most scholars on corruption have long stressed that controlling corruption is a crucial component of building a state that enjoys authority, legitimacy and the capacity to govern (Rose-Ackerman 2008; Johnston 2010; Marquette

2011). Chayes (2015: 43) in particular has shown how, in Afghanistan, the failure of international actors to grasp that corruption was a leading cause rather than merely of symptom of insecurity was an enduring strategic flaw. Unchecked corruption and a weak rule of rule created conditions in which violent extremist groups had no shortage of recruits and little difficulty funding their operations through kidnapping, drug trafficking and extortion (Reitano, Clarke and Adal 2017: 15).

Some scholars have contended that the choice between the peacebuilding and anti-corruption agendas is a false dichotomy. Fearon (2010: 27-8) finds that, with the exception of Liberia, there is little evidence that anti-corruption reforms in post-conflict settings reignited conflict, while Mathisen and Orre (2008) insist that donors must tackle corruption “head on as a key element in strategies of stabilisation and state-building”. Boucher (2007) even goes as far as stating that “the steps in a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy look very much like a comprehensive peacebuilding or state-building strategy.”

Despite the fact that it is widely accepted that peace and governance are highly interconnected, integration between practitioners working on the peacebuilding, P/CVE and anti-corruption agendas remains limited. Interventions and programmes working towards peacebuilding and anti-corruption objectives have tended to be implemented in silos (Hopp-Nishanka et al. 2022: 1).

Hopp-Nishanka et al. (2022) thus argue that peacebuilding programming needs to become more corruption sensitive, even if it does not explicitly incorporate anti-corruption elements in its objectives, to prevent the reemergence of drivers of violent extremism.

Anti-corruption practitioners, too, must take seriously the concerns of peacebuilding practitioners that anti-corruption can exacerbate tensions and implement safeguards to maintain

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<sup>7</sup> The absence of direct forms of violence

<sup>8</sup> The creation of a societal order that does not lead to “structural violence” (see Galtung 2011).

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conflict sensitivity (Nishanka-Hopp et al. 2022). Anti-corruption interventions that unevenly distribute resources or reinforce divisive messaging can cause unnecessary “stress” in a conflict context, which can have destabilising effects on social cohesion, fuelling rivalries that provide fertile ground for violent extremist recruiters (Olson 2023). Jackson and Amundsen (2022: 8), for instance, caution that practitioners should be careful of anti-corruption campaigns being weaponised and exploited by elites to target political opponents (Jackson and Amundsen 2022: 8).

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The U4 anti-corruption helpdesk is a free research service exclusively for staff from U4 partner agencies. This service is a collaboration between U4 and Transparency International (TI) in Berlin, Germany. Researchers at TI run the helpdesk.

The U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre shares research and evidence to help international development actors get sustainable results. The centre is part of Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Bergen, Norway – a research institute on global development and human rights.

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## **KEYWORDS**

Violent extremism – terrorism – justice – rule of law – security sector

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