When Barack Obama spoke at the UN General Assembly in September 2014, he identified two ‘defining’ questions that he said lay ‘at the root of many of our challenges’: ‘whether the nations here today will be able to renew the purpose of the UN’s founding; and whether we will come together to reject the cancer of violent extremism’.1 Hours later, Obama personally presided over a Security Council summit where he tabled Resolution 2178, urging member states to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters and calling upon them—for the first time in the Council’s history—to ‘counter violent extremism’, so as to fight terrorism in a more comprehensive and sustainable manner.2

This was the autumn of 2014. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had just made dramatic gains in both Syria and Iraq, and its online propaganda was attracting thousands of young people from the West, Africa and Asia to fight for its newly established ‘caliphate’.3 Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and other groups with links to Al-Qaeda, in Yemen, Mali and beyond, raised the spectre of a global Islamist challenge. For the United States, a major test for the UN was its ability to foster a global response.

A key component of that response would be an effort to ‘prevent violent extremism’. Following close engagement with the United States, in January 2016 the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, published a Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). With explicit reference to Resolution 2178, and with a heavy intellectual debt to US terms and ideas, the plan was designed to ‘take a more comprehensive approach which encompasses not only ongoing, essential security-based counter-terrorism measures, but also systematic preventive measures which directly address the drivers of violent extremism’. Thus, member
states were to ‘consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism’.4

There are many reasons to celebrate this shift; yet, while well intended and justifiable in theory, the introduction of PVE as a UN priority has suffered several setbacks. Errors committed in the Plan of Action’s rollout made the new approach hostage to the very limitations and tensions it was intended to resolve: between North and South, between security and development actors, and between the West and Muslim-majority countries. PVE also rests on a shaky conceptual foundation and is extremely difficult to do right, and it is almost impossible to measure its effectiveness. Because successful PVE asks states to engage productively with civil society, or to refrain from conflict-generating behaviour, it touches upon politically sensitive areas where policy is typically determined by entrenched conceptions of interest and fear—not by the entreaties of international action plans. This is not to say that PVE is without merit, or that it has had no effect on multilateral counterterrorism—quite the contrary. However, the divisions and resistance it has uncovered are necessary reminders of the politically fraught nature of counterterrorism at the UN, regardless of the terms and theories used. In such a context, good intentions can easily go awry.

This article evaluates the possibilities and limits of the PVE agenda, and by extension, of counterterrorism at the UN. The argument proceeds in four stages. The first sets out the history of and rationale for PVE. The second comments on the potential contribution of this approach to UN counterterrorism. The third discusses the largely unforced errors committed as the PVE Plan of Action was rolled out, errors that diminished its impact. The fourth step illustrates how, regardless of presentation, matters of counterterrorism are subverted by the political realities of national interest at the UN, resulting in distortion and misuse. Such realities, the article concludes, must inform and temper the expectations of multilateral counterterrorism. Against transnational threats, the UN’s contribution is both invaluable and indispensable. There is no other world body with the same convening capacity, normative power and, despite everything, legitimacy. However, the effectiveness of sensitive political work such as counterterrorism and PVE requires bridge-building, diplomacy, and realism in assessing what, finally, can be done.

History

The United Nations has a checkered history with counterterrorism. During the Cold War, the General Assembly moved to condemn various practices associated with terrorism—hijackings, hostage-taking, assassinations and so forth—but struggled to define the term itself.5 Within the fraught context of decolonization,
terrorism came to be seen as a stigmatizing frame deployed by the strong to delegitimize the national liberation struggles of the weak. Objections were particularly forceful given the term’s intended application exclusively to non-state groups, while all the greatest violations of human rights were committed by states. Though both of these arguments are flawed, attempts to resolve the tension and move on—even long after the Cold War—have failed to gain traction.\(^6\) Thus, although ‘legally, virtually all forms of terrorism are prohibited by one of 12 [now 16] international counterterrorism conventions, international customary law, the Geneva Conventions or the Rome Statutes’, in practice the UN still lacks the ‘compelling normative framework, understood by all, that should surround the question of terrorism’.\(^7\)

Whereas the politically sensitive conversation on defining terrorism never bore fruit, the UN’s work in countering this form of violence continued to evolve. With the passing of the Cold War and the breaking of the logjam at the Security Council, the United States used the forum to impose sanctions on state sponsors of terrorism, the Taliban and, later, Al-Qaeda. Following the 9/11 attacks, these efforts gained momentum, as the Security Council extended its purview through various resolutions—most of them binding—to strengthen member state counterterrorism legislation and address terrorist financing, incitement of terrorism, terroristic use of weapons of mass destruction, foreign fighters, black-market trading and money-laundering.

Concomitantly, a cluster of structures sprang up, starting with sanctions committees created before 9/11, the Counterterrorism Committee (CTC) formed at the Security Council in 2001 and the Counterterrorism Executive Directorate (CTED) created in 2004 in support of the CTC. The following year, Secretary-General Kofi Annan established the Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force to coordinate the UN’s response to terrorism. In 2006 the General Assembly produced a global counterterrorism strategy that, while non-binding, achieved universal support on a deeply divisive topic. In 2011 Saudi Arabia helped fund the creation of the Center for Counterterrorism, which is supposed to build member state capability and UN expertise on counterterrorism. Most recently, in 2017, an Office of Counterterrorism was set up under the Secretary-General to oversee all but the Security Council’s efforts on this front.\(^8\)

Through this process, the UN scored some impressive advances, particularly in the years immediately after 9/11. The United States used the Security Council to compel member states to pass counterterrorism legislation and to list groups

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\(^6\) As an example, the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, set up by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in September 2003, argued persuasively that ‘the legal and normative framework against State violations is far stronger than in the case of non-State actors and we do not find this objection to be compelling’, and that while ‘the right to resistance is contested by some … the central point is that there is nothing in the fact of occupation that justifies the targeting and killing of civilians’. See High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A more secure world: our shared responsibility* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2004), para 160.

\(^7\) High-level Panel, *A more secure world*, para. 150.

and individuals identified as terrorist accomplices. Whereas in 2001 only two member states were party to all international terrorism treaties, by 2006 121 had either ratified or acceded to at least ten of the then 13 instruments, and all had either signed or become a party to at least one. Meanwhile, through the 1267 Committee, targeting Al-Qaeda and Taliban funds, 35 member states had by July 2006 frozen US$91.4 million, not including non-monetary assets or unreported freezing.

And yet the UN’s counterterrorism agenda soon lost steam. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and other unpopular policies of the ‘war on terror’ cost the United States the sympathy it had attracted through the 9/11 attacks and made counterterrorism a more contested priority at the UN, particularly within the General Assembly. Sections of the international community and civil society were specifically opposed to the top-down, security-oriented approach of the Security Council, which was seen as unaccountable and dangerously susceptible to abuse. Notably, whereas the General Assembly’s Global Counterterrorism Strategy had devoted two of four ‘pillars’ to ‘addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism’ and ‘ensuring human rights and the rule of law’, these concerns were in practice eclipsed by more traditional and hard-nosed counterterrorism matters. Seeking to rebalance, the Council moved in the late 2000s to add transparency to the listing process and focus more on the building of member states’ capacity for counterterrorism, rather than on their compliance with existing laws. Even so, there was a sense that UN counterterrorism, having seized the low-hanging fruits, had lost momentum.

Against this backdrop, the inauguration of Barack Obama as US president in January 2009 provided an opportunity for renewal. As a self-declared multilateralist who wished to ‘write a new chapter in our response to 9/11’, Obama—to many—represented a break from the alienating ‘war on terror’ of the Bush era. In this respect, an important innovation would be the introduction of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) as an alternative paradigm of counterterrorism. Its contribution would be to balance the security-driven, top-down measures of

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14 Though the Bush administration appeared to have some awareness of the need to shift focus and had during its second term introduced various counter-radicalization programmes, the term ‘war on terror’ and the strong emphasis on ‘terrorism’ (instead of ‘insurgency’ or ‘violent extremism’) made it politically difficult to reform. See Jeffrey H. Michaels, The discourse trap and the US military: from the war on terror to the surge, 1st edn (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 37–9.
the ‘war on terror’ by addressing also the ‘drivers believed to create an enabling
environment for mobilization to violence’. Because UN counterterrorism had
hitherto been so strongly driven by an American demand signal, this change in
framing was likely to have knock-on effects within the multilateral forum as well.

It should be said that while the specific initialization ‘CVE’ was ‘made in the
USA’ the concept had longer roots, particularly in Europe. Indeed, much of what
the United States saw in CVE had already been theorized and implemented in the
United Kingdom as part of its counterterrorist strategy CONTEST. Specifically,
the focus on ‘Prevent’ within that strategy reflected the government’s concern to
engage with civil society to identify and address in a non-prosecutorial manner
the factors leading to radicalization, and thereby to pre-empt domestic attacks.

Prevent’s reputation, if not necessarily its results, had spread to the United
States, with key UK-based counterterrorism experts advocating US adoption of
a similar approach.

Though initial attempts at CVE within the United States were small scale and
ad hoc, the agenda soon gained momentum as a result of the escalating use of
internet-based recruitment by Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Specifically, the use by ISIS
of social media to radicalize followers, draw in fighters and encourage attacks
across the world made it critically important for governments to design a counter-
strategy. Following a deadly ISIS attack in Paris, the US government convened
a high-level summit at the White House in February 2015 dedicated to CVE, ‘to
focus on how we can empower communities to protect their families and friends
and neighbors from violent ideologies and recruitment’. The summit gathered
together national and international representatives, including—notably—
UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. In his address, Ban lauded the American
initiative and suggested that the UN take a similar direction. To that end, and
to flesh out his presentation, he committed himself to a ‘comprehensive multi-
stakeholder plan of action to prevent violent extremism’. PVE was born.

Almost a year later, Ban presented his PVE Plan of Action to the General
Assembly. The intellectual foundation was borrowed from Obama’s CVE summit,

17For one official elaboration of this strategy, see Home Office, Prevent Strategy (Norwich: Stationery Office, 2011).
18For some examples of the criticism received, see Kris Christmann, Preventing religious radicalisation and violent extremism: a systematic review of the research evidence (London: Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2012); Arun Kundnani, Spooked! How not to prevent violent extremism (London: Institute of Race Relations, 2009).
20Programmes focused disproportionately on Minneapolis, the location of a large Somali community thought
vulnerable to recruitment by Al-Shabaab.
21The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Remarks by the President at the summit on countering
22UN Secretary-General, ‘Secretary-General’s remarks at summit for countering violent extremism’, 19 Feb.
its several regional follow-on summits and the recommendations of the White House Summit Action Agenda.\textsuperscript{23} Specifically, the UN Plan presented seven priority areas: dialogue and conflict prevention; strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law; engaging communities; empowering youth; gender equality and empowering women; education, skill development and employment facilitation; and strategic communications, including through the internet and social media.\textsuperscript{24} In none of these areas did the Plan actually present a plan. Instead, the document provided recommendations and urged member states to draw up national strategies to address the drivers of violent extremism most germane to their context—those factors that compel individual mobilization into violence.

\textbf{The good …}

Much as CVE emerged in the United States as a counterweight to an earlier, militarized approach, within the UN it offered an opportunity to mend the fissures created by its counterterrorism work since 9/11. Specifically, through PVE, Ban Ki-moon sought to use an American concept to challenge the exclusively security-oriented approach to counterterrorism that America had itself, under a previous administration, helped develop.\textsuperscript{25} Herein lay a chance to rebalance the Security Council’s efforts by reinvigorating the neglected Pillars 1 and 4 of the General Assembly’s Global Counterterrorism Strategy, those that spoke of addressing ‘conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism’ and ‘ensuring human rights and the rule of law’. Such a reboot was sorely needed, given the evolution of the terrorist threat, the rifts in the international community on this issue and the diminishing returns on the UN’s response.\textsuperscript{26}

The diagnosis and prescriptions of the PVE Plan of Action were also fundamentally sound, if necessarily broad. It recognized that there is no one driver for radicalization but suggested instead several possibilities, including a lack of socio-economic opportunities; marginalization and discrimination; poor governance, and violations of human rights and the rule of law; prolonged and unresolved conflict; and radicalization in prison.\textsuperscript{27} A cursory glance at the areas of the world most affected by terrorism reveals the presence of these very factors, in various combinations. The normative understanding promoted by the PVE agenda suggested that if these drivers were addressed—if governments governed in a more inclusive and even-handed manner—the threat of violent extremism would subside. In urging member states to draw up national PVE plans, the document gave this hypothesis momentum.

\textsuperscript{23} Author’s telephone interview with Eric Rosand, former senior State Department counterterrorism official, 9 Sept. 2016.
\textsuperscript{24} UN General Assembly, \textit{Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism}.
\textsuperscript{25} UN General Assembly, \textit{Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism}, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{27} UN General Assembly, \textit{Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism}, pp. 6–8.
The Plan of Action also dovetailed with ongoing initiatives within the UN. First, by framing economic and social factors as relevant to countering terrorism, the document implied a need for closer integration of the UN’s work on development, peace and security. Such integration is a longstanding goal at the UN yet, despite innovations such as ‘integrated missions’ and the Peacebuilding Commission, progress has been limited. With the PVE Plan of Action, Ban Ki-moon again stoked the fire, pointing to inextricable links between the Sustainable Development Goals and the effort to prevent terrorism, and highlighting the deleterious effects of terrorism on the UN’s work. This framing has had some effect, as actors traditionally hesitant to engage with ‘security’ issues have become deeply involved with PVE, the chief participants being UNESCO, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Women, the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI) and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) within the UN Secretariat.

Meanwhile, more security-oriented actors, such as the CTED, saw in PVE a ‘meeting point within the UN’: ‘It created a situation where we have to speak to one another, to recognize that a broader approach is needed, and that it [counterterrorism] isn’t just about what the Security Council can do.’

Second, the PVE agenda also promised to deepen UN engagement with civil society. A key lesson from the UN’s work on peacebuilding is that there are limits to what governments can do by themselves, and that civil society must be included as a critical interlocutor in identifying and responding to popular demands and aspirations. PVE similarly relies upon engagement with civil society, in that governments must empower and support partners at the local level who have the legitimacy, reach and understanding necessary for effective interventions. Thus, only one year in, the PVE Plan of Action had encouraged a rapid expansion of civil society organizations (CSOs) participating in the relevant plans. In late 2016, citing an incomplete dataset, Eric Rosand pointed to over 850 CSOs internationally implementing around 1,000 PVE and PVE-relevant projects, including early-stage prevention, intervention, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of returning foreign fighters and terrorist defectors. This is the type of partnership that the UN has long sought but struggled to achieve. To Rosand, the momentum had produced a shift in culture.

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31 Interview with Elizabeth Joyce, Chief of Section, CTED, UN, New York, 9 Sept. 2016.


33 International Peace Institute, Preventing violent extremism: the challenges ahead (New York, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IQu0I7wK5w. See also Rosand, Communities first, appendix.

34 Author’s telephone interview with Eric Rosand, 9 Sept. 2016.
Third, the PVE agenda also played to the UN’s longstanding focus on prevention. Indeed, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon no doubt welcomed the adaptation from ‘CVE’ to ‘PVE’—a move emanating from the US State Department—as it helped nest the new concept within the UN push to prevent conflicts and crises rather than merely react to their eruption. UN engagements of this type have been limited, mostly because, before a crisis, member states chafe at the international attention and the exposure of their domestic affairs. In this context, PVE posited prevention as a way of combating terrorism and therefore again encouraged member states to concern themselves with such work. And because the Plan framed good governance, anti-corruption, equality and human rights as antidotes to terrorism and insurgency, rather than as goods in themselves, in theory it was more likely that preventive work might be broached. Meanwhile, within the UN system, ‘PVE’, superseding ‘CVE’, smoothed engagement with the development community, which had already made headway with the conflict-prevention agenda but would resist a role in anything more explicitly counterterrorism-related.

In terms of output, the PVE Plan of Action has triggered significant international activity, at both state and non-state levels. National PVE strategies have been elaborated by a growing number of countries, including Finland, Jordan, Kenya, Nigeria, Norway, Somalia, Switzerland and the United States. The UNDP and others are involved in assisting states as they draft these plans, producing valuable dialogues on terrorism with actors outside the security apparatus, including within civil society. Similarly, the European Commission has declared an interest in aiding EU member states in preventing radicalization online, in prisons, in education and in other contexts. These efforts complement global, regional and country-specific research and practical initiatives aimed at identifying and countering the drivers of mobilization into violence. The RESOLVE network, for example, acts as a global consortium conducting case-specific analysis of both vulnerabilities to and sources of resilience against violent social movements. In Asia, the Asian Muslim Action Network brings together Muslim individuals and groups with members of other faiths to promote peaceful efforts at improving justice and human rights. In Uganda, the African Prisons Project supports prisoners with reintegration and rehabilitation, and in the United States groups such as EXIT USA provide support for members of violent hate groups who want to change their ways. Many of these sorts of initiatives predate the PVE Plan of Action,

35 Chandra Lekha Sriram and Karin Wermester, eds, From promise to practice: strengthening UN capacities for the prevention of violent conflict (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003). Prevention was also supposed to have been one of the key functions of the Peacebuilding Commission and its Support Office, though such hopes were quickly dashed. See Berdal, ‘The UN Peacebuilding Commission’, pp. 362–3.
36 The P was substituted for the C as a result of bureaucratic forces within the US Department of State, where different tribes were seeking to put their imprimatur on the new project (author’s interview with key officials working on this issue within the State Department at this time).
38 Author’s interview with US government official working on UN affairs, 28 July 2017.
39 Rosand, Communities first, pp. 3–4.
41 For a list of PVE-relevant initiatives, see Rosand, Communities first, pp. 26–32.
but it has strengthened state support for such efforts and incorporated them as a separate yet complementary approach to countering the threat of terrorism.

... the bad ...

Though the PVE Plan of Action is compelling in both its theory and its potential, it has faced resistance within sections of the Secretariat and among some key member states. In reacting to the Plan of Action, the General Assembly merely ‘noted’ its existence and asked for more time for review—a diplomatic way of registering discontent. When it later gave the Plan further consideration, as part of its ten-year review of its own Global Counterterrorism Strategy, its support was articulated in exceedingly qualified and uncertain terms. Member states, it suggested, might want to ‘consider’ the Plan ‘in accordance with their priorities’.

Resistance stemmed from a perception on the part of some member states that the Secretary-General had forced PVE through without adequately capturing their concerns. The global South tends to see the UN as dominated by the West (which holds three out of five permanent seats on the Security Council) and its work with counterterrorism as answering to a distinctly American call. This tension between the General Assembly and the United States can be traced to the growing number of member states in the 1950s and their use of the UN, from the 1960s onwards, to challenge superpower preferences—both those of the United States and those of the USSR. Having played an instrumental role in founding the UN, America deeply resented the objections it came to face within the organization’s largest body on issues ranging from the Vietnam War, the Israeli–Palestinian question, South Africa and world economics. The ensuing American rejection of the General Assembly as a ‘dangerous place’ did not help matters, with the body instead relishing its power to denounce US policy.

44 An editorial in the New York Times commented on the destructive habits of ‘the new African and Asian nations’: ‘they stage illegal boycotts and seek illegal expulsion of members which, if successful, could wreck the entire organization. They jam through unrealistic “anti-colonial” resolutions that handicap their own cause. They undermine the United Nations in its paramount task of keeping the peace and suppressing aggression by opening threatening hostilities and organizing armed forces for racial “wars of liberation”’. As the UN looks ahead, New York Times, 22 Dec. 1963. It should be noted that rather than being irredeemably anti-American, the General Assembly in many cases worked or sided with the US, revealing common ground that could have enabled further engagement. See Inis L. Claude, ‘Collective legitimization as a political function of the United Nations’, International Organization 20: 3, 1966, pp. 367–79; Donald J. Puchala, ‘US national interests and the United Nations’, in Toby Trister Gati, ed., The US, the UN, and the management of global change (New York and London: New York University Press, 1983), pp. 348–9. Even so, the instances of disagreement were sufficient to impair the relationship profoundly for much of the Cold War.
45 For an excellent analysis of US–UN relations, see Thomas M. Franck, Nation against nation: what happened to the UN dream and what the US can do about it (New York: Oxford University, 1983), pp. 184–269.
Given this backdrop, which survived the passing of the Cold War, the passage of conventions and treaties—particularly if they appear to serve superpower interests—requires fine-tuned diplomacy and a careful process of ensuring buy-in. Notably, to ensure the success of the 2006 counterterrorism strategy, the then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, appointed a commission of experts to study the subject and then gave the task of selling it to the General Assembly to skilled operators who among them enjoyed credibility with both the global North and the global South. Buttressed by the diplomatic acumen of the then president of the Assembly, this team was able to push through a counterterrorism strategy that, presented as a package, included both its softer and harder parts.47

The PVE Plan of Action, in contrast, suffered from a lack of similar legwork. Indeed, Ban Ki-moon overestimated the political momentum behind PVE and underestimated the ability of a few countries to block its endorsement at the UN. Back at the White House summit, government spokespersons had all spoken favourably of CVE, giving an impression of broad support. Yet, as would become clear, the diplomatic niceties of the Washington summit, born of a desire to assuage its host, did not fare well when transposed to the intensely political confines of the UN. At its headquarters in New York, governments and NGOs alike greeted PVE with caution and fell back, once more, on old talking points. PVE’s thinly concealed American provenance, alongside the unchanged structural inequities of the UN, raised legitimacy problems, particularly for those who felt most slighted by the UN’s earlier work on counterterrorism, specifically Muslim-majority countries. Others, including China and Russia, resisted the PVE’s elevation to prominence of civil society and human rights, and worked hard to limit the effect of such language.48 Despite Obama’s relatively high credibility in multilateral forums, critics resented what they saw as Ban’s leapfrogging of his own organization and the spoon-feeding of a new American approach to the broader UN membership.49

To succeed, the PVE Plan of Action needed to pre-empt the largely predictable arguments mounted against it, and yet on this front it failed spectacularly. Seeking consensus, its drafters never addressed the underlying concerns that had limited progress on counterterrorism and, as a result, the final document ended up producing continued suspicion and defensiveness rather than change. As one observer of the drafting process put it: ‘The people behind it were so afraid of opening cans of worms, that they ended up opening an even bigger one.’50

First, the Plan of Action never defined ‘violent extremism’, noting merely that it ‘encompasses a wider category of manifestations’ than terrorist acts. If making definitions ‘the prerogative of Member states’ was meant to avoid an endless, and perhaps fruitless, discussion of terminology, this so-called ‘practical approach’ also had the effect of creating ambiguity, which greatly undermined

47 I am grateful to Alistair Millar for this insight.
48 Telephone interview with a UN employee involved in the drafting process, 7 Sept. 2016.

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the new concept. In the absence of definitions of violent extremism, member states looked to the examples provided in the Plan, nearly all of which cited groups that self-identify as Islamic: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and so on. A singular reference in the Plan to the Norwegian far right terrorist Anders Breivik was no doubt intended to illustrate that violent extremism is not ‘exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief’, yet it largely failed to convince. Instead, Egypt, Pakistan and other members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation felt targeted and, in discussing the plan, repeatedly stressed the need to distance Islam from the conversation. In fact, the Plan of Action never mentions Islam or the Muslim religion, and yet ‘Islam’ appeared more than 40 times in the related GA discussion. In terms of achieving buy-in with the countries at the front line of the counter-ideological struggle against violent Islamism, this was an own goal.

Some UN insiders argue that the Plan’s failure to define its terms ought not to surprise, given the UN’s longstanding inability to define terrorism. However, most member states have signed up to and implemented several counterterrorist conventions that provide examples of, or even an outline of, the concept. Though some would wish to include state actors in the discussion and others want to exclude cases of national liberation, ‘terrorism’ benefits from an established aetiology and associated literature, all of which contributes to a shared understanding of the term. By contrast, ‘violent extremism’ lacks any such aetiology; and in failing to produce a definition or a typology, the Plan of Action invited uncertainty and suspicion, and therefore also resistance.

Later independent works on the topic have sought to fill the definitional void by advancing three criteria for what constitutes a violent extremist actor: (1) transnational reach; (2) decentralized operations; and (3) ideological opposition to the very values and structures of international society. Had criteria of this kind featured in the actual Plan, they would not only have delimited the use of the term, but also helped to decouple it from any one religion or creed. Adding a handful of examples of non-Islamist violent extremist groups—the neo-Nazi movement in the West, transnational criminal gangs in North and Central America, or the Lord’s Resistance Army in Africa—might also have helped.

Second, in elaborating on the factors that lead to violent extremism, the Plan appeared to put the emphasis on the ills and sensitivities affecting the global South while letting the West largely off the hook. Early in the Plan, the Secretary-General stated: ‘I am convinced that the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the full respect of human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism.’ The sentiment is difficult to fault, but its placement and

56 UN General Assembly, *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, p. 3.
repeated emphasis in the text appeared to suggest that countries with more developed democratic systems and cleaner human rights records—largely ‘the West’—need not worry. This was not the intended message of the Plan, which, obliquely, does allude to western problems of integration and social equality as factors in radicalization. Still, critics from the global South and Muslim-majority countries grew defensive and, in their response, repeatedly emphasized the role of the West’s past colonialism, of occupation—particularly by Israel—and of Islamophobia in fostering violent extremism.56

To some degree these are simply the ‘old talking points’ to which the global South will revert whenever put on the spot. However, such sensitivities must be taken seriously if new multilateral initiatives are to be effective: squabbling is not a good place to begin. Furthermore, there is evidence for the role of Islamophobia, racism and western foreign policy in driving recruitment for both Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and yet the Plan is relatively silent or at best circumspect on these points.57 PVE therefore came to be seen as artificially decoupling specific reasons for radicalization from the discussion, reinforcing suspicion of the new initiative as another stick with which the West could beat the rest. To many, it read as an American call, filtered through an all too US-friendly Secretary-General, for others to reform.58

Not only did the PVE Plan’s presentation fail to convince at the General Assembly, it also unnecessarily created enemies within the UN Secretariat and specialized agencies. A main source of resistance was the aid and humanitarian community, sections of which saw PVE as politicizing the ‘humanitarian space’.59 By emphasizing, for example, the role of aid and development in staving off radicalization, the Plan of Action seemed to ask humanitarian actors to become political agents or to assist on the basis of threat rather than need. Particularly in authoritarian or conflict settings, the notion of instrumentalizing aid as a form of counterterrorism raises alarming implications for the meaning and credibility of such work.60

Operating within the political confines of counterterrorism also goes against the principles of the development community, as it impairs the ability to reach populations across the political spectrum, to engage impartially with non-state armed groups, and to work apolitically without fear of reprisal. In Somalia, for example, a 2014 report describes the expulsion by Al-Shabaab of all UN agencies deemed political, including the UNDP, and its insistence on dealing only with organizations ‘resolute in defending their neutrality and impartiality as core

58 As Richard Gowan notes, Ban Ki-moon ‘could be almost slavishly loyal to Washington, undermining his credibility with other countries’. See Richard Gowan, ‘The UN is giving up on Trump’, Politico, 27 June 2017, http://politi.co/2sJPNAD.
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operational principles’. In Pakistan, the American use of an aid initiative to collect intelligence resulted in the expulsion and harassment of other aid groups in the country. Some feared that, with PVE, the neutrality of aid would be further compromised.

Similar issues fuelled resistance among those engaged in mediation and negotiation. In recognition of the need for a political process that peacebuilding efforts can support, the UN has since 2006 developed a growing role in and capacity for mediation, with political missions deployed to locations including Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In 2006, the DPA established a mediation support unit and a standby team of senior mediation advisers ready to facilitate talks in war-torn states. Given the increased emphasis on this type of work, it was feared that the labelling of certain individuals and groups as ‘violent extremists’ would have a ‘chilling effect’ on diplomatic engagement with opposition movements and armed groups, or even make mediators hesitant about the public-diplomatic optics of remaining engaged. In Afghanistan, where the United States was relying on various UN and quasi-UN channels to engage diplomatically with the Taliban, elements within the UN grew highly concerned, almost to the point of denial, about the possible exposure of its links with the group and the damage such revelations might cause both to its access and its activities. Further stigmatization of non-state armed groups as ‘violent extremists’ was thought to exacerbate such concerns.

Finally, within the field of peace operations the emergence of PVE has caused further division in a ‘team’ already fractured between the Security Council, troop-contributing countries and local governments. When Ban Ki-moon commissioned a high-level panel to review UN peace operations, one of the more forceful and unambiguous recommendations of its report was that ‘UN troops should not undertake military counterterrorism operations’. This finding rests in part on the capability shortfalls of the UN’s ‘blue helmet’ operations, but also on the related, yet more principled, insistence of many major troop-contributing countries that peacekeeping should not be turned into something more akin to war-fighting—an evolution for which the United States and other western members of the Security Council have been pressing. When, in presenting the PVE Plan of Action, Ban Ki-moon proposed integrating PVE ‘into relevant activities of United Nations peacekeeping operations’, he pressed buttons sure to spark anger in those already actively resisting any counterterrorism role for deployed peacekeepers.


Author’s interview with senior UN officials, New York, Sept. 2016.


UN General Assembly, Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, p. 21.
Like the hostile reception from the General Assembly, these reactions to the Plan of Action stem in large part from its own lack of clarity and could therefore have been avoided, or at least mitigated. Within the peacekeeping community, efforts to draw a clear distinction between military engagement in counterterrorism and non-coercive involvement in PVE might have allayed the worst concerns of the peacekeeping traditionalists; instead, as Boutellis and Fink point out, the two terms ‘have often been used interchangeably’.\(^{67}\) Moreover, there is reason to highlight the overlap between PVE and certain tasks that have now become standard within peace operation mandates, such as security sector reform, human rights monitoring, and the protection of vulnerable populations. Clearly, questions remain about these missions’ capacity, strategy and political purpose, but in failing to communicate clearly the terms of debate, those seeking to integrate PVE within peace operations made their task unduly difficult.

For negotiators and mediators, a narrow definition of PVE could have clarified that nothing within the term implies irreconcilability with, or a dead end for, engagement. Indeed, the point of introducing the terminology of ‘violent extremism’ at the UN was precisely to remove the strictures that come with the language of ‘terrorism’ and thereby to enable dialogue with vulnerable individuals and communities.\(^{68}\) Since this distinction was not made, and no clear daylight was created between a terrorist and a violent extremist, the PVE agenda was easily mistaken for, or deliberately perverted as, another coercive instrument in the state’s toolbox, camouflaged by a gentler vocabulary and, for that reason, perhaps all the more sinister.\(^{69}\)

More careful framing of PVE would also have addressed the aid community’s concern with impartiality. First, given that the state is often responsible for patterns of radicalization, engagement in PVE cannot possibly mean unquestioningly siding with it against would-be terrorists. Rather, PVE would involve finding ways to reform those state policies that inform and enable extremist narratives. Second, as Fink points out, ‘the United Nations is not value neutral’: it operates on the invitation of states, it defends the conventions of states, and it is therefore seen as—and indeed, is attacked for—serving a very particular agenda.\(^{70}\) It is unclear how exactly greater participation in PVE would alter this situation. Third, if PVE were defined more narrowly to concern only those actors with millenarian or eschatological tendencies—ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram—the operational costs of ‘picking a side’, even for aid communities, would be significantly reduced (indeed, such criteria would also obviate concerns about maintaining open channels for negotiations).

Instead of clarity and criteria, however, the failure to define terms led to an easy criticism that states—particularly authoritarian and anocratic regimes—

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\(^{67}\) Boutellis and Fink, *Waging peace*, p. 5. The authors also provide a helpful delineation of the two terms.  
\(^{68}\) Author’s interview with Alistair Millar, 14 Feb. 2017.  
\(^{69}\) On the basis of interviews on the PVE Plan of Action, Boutellis and Fink note a widespread tendency of respondents to conflate counterterrorism and PVE, demonstrating again the Plan’s failure to clarify its terms. See Boutellis and Fink, *Waging peace*, p. 12.  
\(^{70}\) Author’s interview with Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Global Center on Cooperative Security, New York, 15 Sept. 2016.
would now foist the label of ‘violent extremist’ on any and all legitimate resistance movements. The fear is not unfounded. By characterizing dissenting domestic groups as violent extremists, these states could present as PVE, and thereby legitimize, any measure taken to stem such groups’ recruitment, messaging or outreach. State abuse of the term ‘terrorist’ is already a familiar problem, yet at least terrorism is an observable tactic—the violent targeting of civilians for the sake of political communication. The problem with violent extremism is that its focus is on precursors, vulnerabilities or recruitment into terrorism, and the term therefore has far broader applicability. Within autocratic and authoritarian settings in particular, abuse of the term can sink a final nail in the coffin of civil society or subvert necessary contestation of the state, seemingly with the full backing of the UN and the PVE agenda—the very polar opposite of its intent.

The Plan of Action should have anticipated this concern, again by defining more clearly what constitutes a violent extremist or where the PVE Plan should apply. It might also have been necessary to go beyond the Plan’s bland reaffirmations of human rights and make the point forcefully that nothing in its provisions is designed to serve oppression: that this approach is not suppressive but supportive, not coercive but collaborative. Such framing might have achieved important buy-in from aid, development and humanitarian organizations, which instead reacted with suspicion and hostility. Further, it should have made clear that states intent on human rights abuses probably do not need a PVE Plan in order to proceed; indeed, by one estimate, in the years preceding the Plan of Action, more than 63 countries passed laws ‘shrinking civil society space and increasing the criminalization of and discrimination against NGOs worldwide’. It is difficult to see how or why the PVE Plan would accelerate this process, particularly as it does not, in contrast to earlier UN counterterrorism efforts, force states to report on their progress.

... and the ugly

The fumbling rollout of the Plan of Action unnecessarily created enemies and undermined its impact. Ironically, this was also the fate of the Prevent programme in the United Kingdom, and of CVE in the United States—and it appears that very few lessons were learned from these experiences. The common trajectory

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73 As Daniel Benjamin explained in testimony about CVE, ‘its tools are non-coercive and include social programs, counter-ideology initiatives, and working with civil society to delegitimize the al-Qa’ida narrative and, where possible, provide positive alternative narratives’: Daniel Benjamin, ‘US government efforts to counter violent extremism’, testimony before the Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington DC, 10 March 2010, https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/ct/rls/rm/2010/138175.htm.
74 Rebecca Wagner and Julia Dankova, The CSOs shrinking and closing space tendency: how EU institutions can support CSOs worldwide (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 7 April 2016), p. 1.
75 In both contexts, community members attacked the programme for its unclear language, its stigmatization of Muslims, its indiscriminate targeting and its endangerment of civil rights. See Stevan Weine and Ahmed Younis, ‘Developing CVE programs through building community policing capacities’, in Sara Zeiger and
in these three cases highlights both the seductive simplicity of CVE in its theory and the dilemmas and sensitivities surrounding its implementation. Just as in the United States and United Kingdom, this sub-optimal starting-point at the UN has not killed the new approach, but its influence, and even its future, have been severely jeopardized. It is a track record that should act as a cautionary precedent to other countries and organizations seeking to formulate their own PVE action plans. Indeed, it points to the need to engage early on with predictable sources of concern so as to produce and present a document that can achieve broader acceptance.

Going further, PVE at the UN also suffers from problems unrelated to its presentation, which have relegated it to a mere sideshow next to the more conventional concerns of counterterrorism. Whereas this imbalance may be rectified with time—the Plan of Action is still in its infancy—there are fundamental limitations that appear difficult to circumvent. These relate to the political realities of operating at the UN, specifically of pushing a civil society-oriented approach through a state-centred organization.

In encouraging states to formulate their own PVE strategies, the Plan of Action effectively allows national governments to decide for themselves what drivers of mobilization to address. Though the Plan offers sound recommendations and outside actors stand ready to assist with analysis, it remains all too easy for states to downplay the genuine and most sensitive political contradictions—corruption, security force abuses, violations of civil liberties, or predatory state behaviour—in favour of less controversial issues such as a lack of sporting facilities or recreational centres. The prognosis will then typically turn to various developmental or economically grounded initiatives, thereby missing the point, well established in the literature, that armed rebellion feeds on politics, not poverty. Targeting the political drivers is of course a far more delicate proposition, and it is not clear how a Plan of Action, however well crafted, will create the necessary political will where earlier it was lacking.

Indeed, it is far from likely that the median state will welcome internationally funded civil society efforts to address issues of human rights and good governance. One of the key assumptions of PVE is that states and civil society can be made to cooperate: as one observer notes, ‘CVE measures at the community level rise or fall on the basis of the vitality of prevailing state–civil society relationships onto

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Author’s interview with Alistair Millar, 14 Feb. 2017.

which CVE measures are imposed’. Yet many governments are deeply suspicious of civil society, and would actively resist any international effort to boost its power relative to the state. Even in elaborating the Plan of Action, drafters faced immediate problems with Russia wanting to downplay the role of civil society and China resisting the language of human rights. Many other states may accept the rhetoric but vigorously obstruct its implementation. This sensitivity makes meaningful engagement extremely difficult.

This complexity stems from the largely unquestioned transposition of an approach from a domestic, democratic setting—be it Prevent in the UK or CVE in the US—to a multilateral forum of sovereign states. Even in western democratic and largely peaceful contexts, practitioners have faced practical and ethical challenges in determining which local actors to empower and whom to trust as community representatives. The dilemma here is between partnering with questionable actors with greater reach and awareness and sticking with politically safer interlocutors who may have no sway over the relevant populations. Another dilemma lies in the analysis necessary to target interventions appropriately: the groupings of religion and community are too sweeping when individuals of concern are a minute minority, or not even members, of either. As one critic notes: ‘We don’t know—nor, it appears, are we ever likely to know—why some young men resort to violent extremism and others do not.’ Thus Britain has found that even if Prevent is not in itself an intelligence effort, its effectiveness depends on rigorous intelligence to identify the correct networks for engagement.

These are the very real challenges of countering violent extremism in a democratic context; the problem is compounded when one is operating in a less politically open climate, in war-torn, authoritarian or anocratic states. In these contexts, radicalization is not atomized or even necessarily clandestine, but widespread and the product of deep societal and political fractures. Changing narratives or providing outlets may be a sufficient micro-level remedy to troubled youth who are visiting the wrong websites or have constructed a perverse worldview, but is unlikely to suffice in contexts such as Iraq, Mali, Syria or Yemen. In the midst of endemic conflict, addressing recruitment patterns means resolving widespread political grievances, creating new economic orders and rearranging...
societies. It means addressing forces that attract not just a scattered few but, quite often, hundreds or even thousands of followers. In such contexts, it is question-
able how or whether PVE even obtains, given the pre-existing tools of mediation, peacebuilding, security sector reform and so forth. As one report by the International Crisis Group put it, ‘preventing crises will do more to contain violent extremists than countering violent extremism will do to prevent crises’. As one report by the International Crisis Group put it, ‘preventing crises will do more to contain violent extremists than countering violent extremism will do to prevent crises’. These complexities reinforce the institutional and political tendency of states to downgrade PVE in favour of conventional counterterrorism practices and of donors to stay clear altogether. For aid agencies, the struggle to locate relevant partners, to navigate political sensibilities and to avoid fraught engagements has led many to favour traditional types of work and to abandon projects related to PVE. For states, there are simply few tangible incentives to engage with the politically and ethically delicate questions that PVE raises. There also appears to be a conviction among states that the conventional tools of counterterrorism work well enough. Even under Obama, a chief sponsor of CVE, the overall US approach to counterterrorism greatly favoured the suppressive instruments associated with the ‘war on terror’. Though other countries have implemented PVE national strategies, these tend to be resourced on an ad hoc basis or out of existing budgets, ensuring at best an adjunct status for the attendant activities. This prioritization also makes it doubtful that ‘core CVE messages about how governments treat their citizens [will] be integrated into security dialogues’. As one key proponent of CVE concludes: ‘So far, the admittedly young CVE agenda has yet to have a meaningful influence on counterterrorism.’

The lag can be ascribed to bureaucratic inertia and lack of familiarity with a new and complicated approach, but the rot goes deeper. In a world in which metrics drive investment, the problem for PVE—and for much of the UN’s work with prevention—is that demonstrating effectiveness requires proving a negative. The successful outcome of a PVE initiative is the aversion of an attack, or the prevention of radicalization—non-events whose non-occurrence is difficult to establish and, more so, to tie conclusively to the PVE intervention at hand. Partly as a result, and partly because insufficient time has elapsed, and partly because each context is sui generis, the sharing of lessons and best practices remains seriously hampered and at best anecdotal. Because results are so contestable, many counterterrorism practitioners prefer to invest in the tried and tested methods of suppression, where outputs are easily quantifiable (dollars frozen, terrorists killed or captured), even if actual outcomes remain difficult to gauge. This tendency has been on full display since the change in US administration in January 2017. Whereas Obama championed CVE, early indications suggest Donald

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85 Author’s interview with Richard Atwood, ICG, New York, 13 Sept. 2016.
86 ICG, Exploiting disorder, p. iv.
87 Rosand, Communities first, p. 7.
88 See Alistair Millar and Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Blue Sky III: Taking UN counterterrorism efforts in the next decade from plans to action (Goshen, IN: Global Center on Cooperative Security, 13 Sept. 2016).
Trump will not. Grants awarded to the Department of Homeland Security to conduct CVE-related programmes have been cut or cancelled.\(^\text{90}\) Initial speculation suggested that CVE might also be rebranded to focus exclusively on ‘countering violent Islamist extremism’, a reform likely to alienate the very Islamic CSOs on whose cooperation the entire programme relies.\(^\text{91}\) The significance for PVE at the UN lies in the pivotal role that Obama played in popularizing the new paradigm. With Trump at the helm, neglect and deliberate misuse of PVE seem more likely.

Indeed, there are signs that some states, including Russia, with its well-established opposition to civil society, are finding PVE far more palatable now under a Trump administration. At a press conference in early 2017, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commented: ‘What Donald Trump and his team are saying now shows that they have a different approach … and that they will not apply double standards in the fight against terrorism in order to achieve unrelated goals … This is exactly what our American partners lacked before him’.\(^\text{92}\) The Russian interpretation of PVE represents more than just that of one nation, given that Vladimir Ivanovich Voronkov, a Russian diplomat, will head the new senior-level UN Office on Counterterrorism. In the short term, and with this position looking all UN counterterrorism efforts, Russia will be able to shape the meaning and profile of PVE under a new Secretary-General with far less ownership and fewer stakes in the term.

Any slippage or cynical misuse of PVE as a state-owned effort to spy upon, infiltrate or quash civil society groups will do more to discredit this approach than the own goals of its initial rollout. Because the term has no aetiology, and because it lacks definition and parameters, it will be judged on the basis of its practice and results. Even with the best intentions and in ideal circumstances, identifying and addressing the specific drivers of radicalization will be extremely challenging, both analytically and strategically. Any number of projects can claim relevance by working in areas that might stem radicalization—education, employment, community relations—but to arrive at truly targeted interventions that address drivers specific to the individual case requires keen analysis and deft execution. It is through interventions such as these that violent extremism is prevented and PVE as an approach gains credibility—but these are also the most difficult to pull off, measure and reproduce. Bureaucratic forces therefore gravitate towards the

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\(^\text{90}\) ‘White House budget slashes ‘countering violent extremism’ grants’, Reuters, 23 May 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-budget-extremism-idUSKBN18J2HJ. In June 2017, the Department for Homeland Security awarded funds to ‘counter terrorist recruitment and radicalization’ in the US, yet the grant totalled only US$10 million nationwide, a sum that Eric Rosand points out is comparable to ‘what the Dutch government provides for CVE projects in a country that has 307 million fewer people’: see Eric Rosand, ‘When it comes to CVE, the United States stands to learn a lot from others. Will it?’, Lawfare, 10 Sept. 2017, https://www.lawfareblog.com/when-it-comes-cve-united-states-stands-learn-lot-others-will-it.


template approach, towards comfort zones, while political imperatives encourage short-term thinking. On this basis, even if the term PVE survives, its future looks very bleak indeed.

Conclusion

Despite all the difficulties and confusion surrounding it, PVE rests on a theory that is both important and timely. Analytically, practitioners of counterterrorism must recognize that terrorists are not created overnight—there are forces that push and pull individuals to embrace violence as a mechanism for social and political change. Any response to terrorism that denies the existence of these forces is likely to fail, and it is the contribution of PVE to ensure that states do what they can and what is necessary to achieve a more multifaceted and comprehensive approach. Programmatically, though insufficient time has passed since the Plan’s publication in January 2016 for any definitive conclusions to be drawn, its introduction appears to be persuading some communities that were previously marginal to counterterrorism—those concerned with development, humanitarianism and civil society—that they too have a role to play, by targeting the factors leading to radicalization. It is less certain whether the increase in programmes and initiatives launched under the rubric of ‘preventing violent extremism’ is actually doing just that, and indeed, the difficulties of measuring such progress will remain a challenge in normalizing the term.

A different route to assessing the PVE Plan of Action might consider its normative impact rather than its practical effect. The Plan is unlikely to achieve its full potential, but it may at least nudge the international community towards a fuller understanding of the threat of terrorism, and perhaps compel a more holistic approach by some of the more receptive member states. In that sense, its greatest contribution may be normative, which is also where the UN’s broader work in counterterrorism has had its greatest effect. A new plan, a new committee, a new piece of international legislation—these innovations will not remove politics from the dealings of states and governments. However, what these measures can do is plant seeds for better analysis and, in turn, a more enlightened response.

Norms, however, are the product of precedent, and it is on this front that PVE is most challenged. With no ownership of the term and no criteria for determining attendant projects, PVE can easily be subverted, misused or manipulated. The lack of definition and conceptual framing in the Plan of Action leave the term virtually defenceless against misuse. In the wrong hands, it is likely to bring out the worst instincts of UN member states; and this means that it may be necessary in the future to introduce yet another term, yet another concept, with which to bridge the gaps and seek a new balance, much in the same way that PVE was brought in to ‘reinvigorate’ Pillars 1 and 4 of the General Assembly’s decade-old counterterrorism strategy.