Berghof Foundation

Engaging with Whom?

Opportunities and Challenges of PVE Approaches
in Iraq and Germany

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Content

1   Introduction

Mohammed Abu-Nimer's *Alternative Approaches to Transforming Violent Extremism. The Case of Islamic Peace and Interreligious Peacebuilding* (2018) is a significant contribution to the ongoing debate about the set of Counter-Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) concepts. His longstanding expertise as an academic researcher and practitioner in the field of conflict resolution and dialogue for peace is reflected in the combination of theoretical reflection and insights into peace practice in his lead article.

In it, he provides a detailed account of policy development regarding the above-mentioned concepts and explores their impact on multinational agencies, international governmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs). The consequences of security- and military-oriented Counter-Terrorism approaches implemented following the terror attacks on 11 September 2001 (9/11), especially in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq, are now undisputed, whereas the negative effects of CVE and PVE are still debated.

As Abu-Nimer describes in the lead article, however, the discourse among practitioners and researchers is gradually shifting towards a more critical discussion about both concepts. While national and international actors are facing a set of challenges and problems integrating CVE and PVE into their development and peacebuilding programmes and are articulating some of these problematic aspects, three of Abu-Nimer's recommendations are particularly relevant, but are not adequately reflected in the ongoing debate. They are, firstly, his critique of a lack of sincere engagement with religion, its identity components and faith-based organisations (FBOs); secondly, his demand to de-Islamise CVE and PVE; and, thirdly, the identification of CVE as a result of the "Realist" power paradigm, which contrasts with a culture of peace discourse driven by the "Idealist" paradigm.

In my comments on the lead article, I welcome the opportunity to review these points by firstly discussing Abu-Nimer's suggestion to engage more seriously with religious agencies and actors, using Iraq as an example. I will examine in what way religion and its identity components are being integrated in project structures of international NGOs (INGOs) in Iraq and the limitations of this approach. In this context, I will argue that the emphasis on de-linking religion from the CVE/PVE debate and focusing more on root cause analyses (Abu-Nimer 2018, 13) is much-needed. Unlike Abu-Nimer, however, I will argue in favour of increased engagement with *secular* organisations and movements, which are currently held in high regard by Iraqi citizens and are at risk of being instrumentalised by rival conflict parties. In a second step, I will support many of the arguments presented by Abu-Nimer in relation to the perceived deficiencies of CVE/PVE approaches by presenting their negative impact on practitioners in the field of international media development. Finally, I discuss the German Government's 'Live Democracy!' to support the call for a holistic 'idealism' approach in PVE.

2   Increasing Engagement with FBOs? The Example of Iraq

2.1   Pitfalls of engagement

The reasons for the poor quality of democratic governance in Iraq and its iterative conflict dynamics are many and varied. Ethno-sectarian violence and tensions between Sunnis, Shi'as and Kurds still shape the political landscape and society today. It is undisputed that the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and failings in governing the country after the military victory unleashed a set of deep structural, legal and political problems, which provided the breeding ground for political violence, violent extremism and the resurgence of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014.

The sectarian, quota-based system applied by the US-backed Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 in setting up the Iraqi Governing Council[1] (Jakob 2016, 265) resulted in political actors mobilising religious and ethnic identities to generate public backing for political influence. Until recently, most of the parties mobilised their constituencies through identity politics and sectarian differences rather than around political programmes (Al-Qarawee 2014). And still today, state and non-state actors with rival sectarian factions are competing for control and influence in a complex power-balancing exercise by mobilising religious identities (Mansour 2017, 4).

Sectarianism is also exacerbated by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry over power and influence in the region since 2003. Both major powers raced to fill the post-war vacuum left behind by the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. Although the nature of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran is not solely sectarian but also driven by geopolitical, nationalistic and ideological factors, there is a sectarian dimension to the conflict, which both powers have cultivated for their own benefit.[2]

In Iraq, the power struggle resulted in political, economic, social, religious and military interference. From 2003 on, Iran combated the US presence and Saudi influence in Iraq through its support to Shi'a militias and political parties that follow a sectarian strategy. At the political level, Iran is directly funding Shi'a parties, encouraging sectarian identity politics, and supporting political developments along sectarian lines (Nader 2015, 5). The sectarian strategy is also pursued in the military domain, where Iran provides many of Iraq's 50 Shi'a militias with money, weaponry and training.[3] At a religious level, the Iranian government supports low-ranking Shi'a clerics such as Seyyed Mohammad Tabatabai, the deputy head of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militant group, who propagate Iranian ideology in Iraq and lessen the influence of more independent but influential clerics such as Ali al-Sistani (Nokhostin Mosaahebeye, based on Nader 2015, 4).

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, disseminates ultra-conservative Wahhabist ideology by funding madrassahs, mosques, educational institutions and centres, and fellowships for Islamic scholars, missionaries, academics and journalists worldwide (Chen 2017, 19). Furthermore, direct funding of armed Sunni extremist groups, such as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, and the direct intervention against Shi'a Houthi militias in Yemen aggravate the ongoing ethno-sectarian fighting in the region in general and in Iraq in particular.[4]

Overall, developments in Iraqi domestic politics and broader regional conflicts, which have been shaped over 'confessional' differences such as those which have fuelled Shi'a-Sunni sectarian tensions, both can be regarded as the main reasons for Iraq's instability and the ongoing ethno-sectarian conflict.

Even though the success of violent extremism groups, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the so-called Islamic State (IS), is not solely the result of identity politics, it is evident that the strengthening of religious Shi'a-Sunni affiliations has added to existing Sunni grievances.[5]

Leaving aside the question whether the influence of religious leaders such as Ayatollah Ali al- Sistani or Muqtada as-Sadr has in the first case improved or in the latter case worsened the conflict dynamic, the

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1   The Iraqi Governing Council preceded the Iraqi Parliament (Council of Representatives).
2   Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Iranian–Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry", Blog Post, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Boston, MA, 25 October 2015, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry.
3   For example, between 2003 and 2007, Iran supported the Mahdi Army, the militant wing of the Sadrist party. Furthermore, many of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), or Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi, are affiliated to the Islamic Republic of Iran and collaborate closely with Iran's Quds Force, the paramilitary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. They include Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Saraya Taleaa al-Khorasani, Kata'ib Imam and the Imam Ali Brigades. See Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi and Jonathan Spyer, "Iraq's Shi'a Militias and Iran", pundicity. Informed opinion & review, 15 January 2015, http://www.aymennjawad.org/15773/iraq-shia-militias-and-iran.
4   Kimberly Kagan, "The Smart and Right Thing in Syria", Hoover Institution, 1 April 2013, https://www.hoover.org/research/smart-and-right-thing-syria.
5   For example, the collaboration of Sunni insurgent groups with IS was not due to ideological overlaps, as none of them shared IS's long-term objectives for Iraq (Adnan/Reese 2014, 4), but due to their unheard grievances linked to strong perceptions of exclusion and unfairness.

answer to the question whether increased engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organisations can help in effectively responding to extremism remains complex.

While events such as the Conference on Interfaith Dialogue for Social Cohesion in Iraq, hosted by the World Council of Churches in December 2017, can provide a basis for constructive interfaith dialogue and help to identify and analyse the role of religious leaders in "restoring inclusive multi-religious and multi-cultural communities in Iraq",[6] the focus on religion as the source of – and the answer to – violent extremism is an obstacle to discussion of how these entities can make a genuinely effective contribution to transforming the conflict in Iraq. Furthermore, when planning to cooperate with religious leaders or organisations, INGOs have to consider realistically which of these leaders are open to cooperation and where their limitations lie. In addition, INGOs should take into consideration that religious and ethnic affiliations are present to a certain extent in many (religious or secular) organisations.

Having worked in and on Iraq for six years, with a focus on media development, I have found that even though FBOs are not always chosen as cooperation partners for international NGOs, the choice of most project partners and participants is based on ethno-sectarian and/or religious categories rather than a completely secular perspective. Religion and members of religious groups are therefore always integrated as staff, participants or partners during project implementation. Given the fragmented social fabric in Iraq, this approach is considered necessary and aims to ensure equal participation and reflection of society, but it suffers from a number of pitfalls.

Although the various groups within Iraq are represented in project structures, the question of the possibilities and the limitations of their influence on the root causes of violent extremism has to be considered. Iraq is currently facing various challenges, ranging from acts of revenge by Shi'a militias toward the Sunni communities in former IS-held territories, to infighting among different Shi'a political parties and the question of how to deal with Iranian-backed Al-Hashd al-Sha'abi militias. All these challenges can fuel further radicalisation and violence. Partners involved in peacebuilding projects have limited capacity to tackle these issues due to the weak state and a political system that is captured by elite groups.

In addition, some civil society organisations, whether religious or not, are drawn into the country's political trench warfare. In some cases, the affiliation to a certain religious group (for example to a militia) can cause serious problems during collaborations.

Furthermore, very few of the organisations working in the field have a peacebuilding approach at all. In its 12th issue, the Civil Society Dialogue Network Discussion Paper published by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) notes: "Iraqi civil society actors lack expertise in mediation and conflict transformation theory and practice, [which] may limit their ability to implement peacebuilding programmes effectively" (EPLO 2017, 3). This means that training and support in mediation and conflict transformation tools are not only needed in a religious context for organisations with a religious background but are required by all peacebuilding actors.

Taking the limitation of FBOs and the challenges and existing needs of other CSOs into account, the question is to what extent increased support for and cooperation with religious organisations alone would be able to contribute to effective PVE approaches.

2.2 Secular actors: a chance to de-Islamise the conflict

It is undisputed that violent extremist groups elevate exclusive religious identity above other shared cultural identities to reach those who feel humiliated, discriminated against and deprived on a socio-economic level. In Iraq, groups such as Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State particularly address Sunni grievances, while Shi'a militias address resentments harboured by their respective constituencies.

But since 2015, nationwide anti-government protests – organised by a broad cross-section of Iraqi society, ranging from secular and religious movements to individuals, liberals and communists – also reflect concerns and distrust towards religious parties. Although the protests are hijacked or opposed by the Shi'a militias with

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6   World Council of Churches (WCC), "Iraqi religious leaders call for restoring religious and social cohesion", 15 December 2017, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/iraqi-religious-leaders-call-for-restoring-religious-and-social-cohesion.

various ambitions, "there are signs that secular movements in Iraq have an opportunity to effectively convey their philosophy to the electorate".[7]

For instance, after the defeat of IS in Anbar, an originally Sunni-majority province in which tribal and religious leaders could hitherto influence the electoral behaviour of residents, locals are now turning away from them, suspecting them "of preparing the ground for extremism".[8]

With the upcoming elections scheduled for May 2018, Iraq's Shi'a, Kurdish and Sunni parties are less able to line up their constituencies in accordance with identity politics, or ethno-sectarian rivalries. Most of the parties are now implementing new campaign strategies by avoiding religious topics and emphasising secular themes.[9] Many religious parties even collaborate with secular movements. For instance, the Sadrist Movement of the Shi'a religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr, involved in killings during the sectarian civil war in Iraq between 2006 and 2008, is running with the Iraqi Communist Party and the Sunni-led Iraqi Nationalist group.

In light of these developments and given the increased risk of the exploitation of secular movements, the need to support and integrate *all relevant* Iraqi state and non-state actors in PVE-peacebuilding processes becomes apparent. Religion is only one attribute of individuals in a society and cannot cover the entire scope of its population's identity. The support and inclusion of secular actors may help to generate alternative discourses around conflict sources, away from the allegedly insuperable antagonism between Shi'a and Sunnis.

3 Challenges facing the International Media Development Sector

Abu-Nimer (2018, 1) points out that "the emergence of violent extremism as a central framework and priority adopted by most Western and non-Western government agencies" has affected various actors in the field of peacebuilding.

The CVE approach in particular has been widely acknowledged in North American and European countries' policies to counter extremist narratives in the framework of a global information war. Given the fact that tools underlying the concept are similar to strategic communication tools, particularly in counter-messaging campaigns, it is not surprising that media development implementers came under pressure to integrate these concepts into their programme architectures. The inclusion of the concept in policies has increased since 2016, when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) determined that certain activities undertaken for the purpose of preventing extremism were now eligible as Official Development Assistance (Miller 2017, 1).

As a consequence, international media development organisations had to analyse how their work could contribute to strengthening strategic communication.[10] This had profound implications for recipients, who are now facing various challenges. Some organisations fear, for example, that funds previously earmarked for media development organisations are going to be shifted to strategic communication or media projects that actively counter extremist propaganda.[11] Additionally, the realignment in donor policies conflicts

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7 Safwan Al-Amin, "The Future of Secularism in Iraq", Atlantic Council's MENASource News, Analyses, Perspectives, 14 September 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-future-of-secularism-in-iraq.

8 Kamal Al-Ayash, "Down With The Elites: Anbar's Social Status System Changed Irreparably By Extremism", Niqash, 22 August 2018, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/society/5841/.

9 Ali Mamouri, "Iraq's Islamists dump religion for upcoming elections", Al Monitor, 21 January 2018, http://newageislam.com/islamic-world-news/iraq-s-islamists-dump-religion-for-upcoming-elections/d/114021.

10 Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), "Countering violent extremism debate: Origins, efforts, and challenges", GFMD News, 14 June 2017, https://gfmd.info/en/site/news/1127/Countering-violent-extremism-debate-Origins-efforts-and-challenges.htm.

11 ibid.

with the regular objectives of media development. Strategic communication is aimed at shaping the target audience's perceptions and behaviour. The goal of media- and communication-focused development strategies in peacebuilding, on the contrary, is to promote dialogue and cooperation between different factions in conflict areas, encourage political debate, shape opinion building processes in civil society and support these processes with capacity development measures and training.

The Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)[12] dealt with this topic thoroughly in an open letter addressed to donors, policy-makers, security agencies and private communication businesses, in which the challenges organisations are facing and the resulting demands are broached. The challenges highlighted include (1) a growing threat to the independence of the media in development and transition countries, (2) the misuse of current CVE/PVE approaches by autocratic regimes for silencing opposition and dissent, (3) the erosion of the credibility of plural and independent media systems, (4) the endangering of the lives of field staff working on media development programmes on the ground and (5) the short-term evaluation of project outcomes according to securitisation aspects, instead of the long-term evaluation of activities. The demands expressed by the authors of the letter therefore include the following: (1) avoid mixing media assistance and messaging, (2) avoid the weaponisation of media and civil society by mainstreaming CVE in human rights and development activities, (3) invest in serious and independent research to deepen the understanding of the effectiveness and impact of CVE and counter-narrative activities, and (4) adopt a human rights-based approach in line with do-no-harm principles.[13]

Most of the problems and demands outlined here are equivalent to those Abu-Nimer points out in the lead article. The GFMD clearly states that the methods are not applicable to media development as a peace practice since the goals of CVE conflict with those of media development. The challenges media makers in Iraq, for instance, were facing against the backdrop of the rise of the Islamic State (IS) required a totally different approach.[14]

The pressure to deal with such issues through a CVE lens blurs the view of the real causes of extremism and is posing major challenges for media developers, who have to work within the logic of security and prevention instead of media freedom and pluralism.

4 Civic Education and the Role of Primary Prevention: The German Case

One major difference between German and international PVE approaches can be ascribed to the role of civic education. Civic education has a central place in Germany's democratic system. It can be described as a means to "encourage critical reflection among German citizens [...] to sensitize them to history, politics and democratic values [and] to promote active citizenship, which foresees societal and political participation" (BPB 2012, as cited by Berczyk/Vermeulen 2015, 94). In light of the history of the Nazi regime, right-wing extremism has been regarded as a fundamental threat to the democratic system since the end of WW2. Civic education, in terms of its conceptualisation, is therefore based on prevention. Policies targeting and preventing expressions of

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12 Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) is a network of journalism support and media assistance groups; see https://gfmd.info/.

13 Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD), "GFMD Workshop: Mediadev, CVE & Counter-Propaganda: Where is the problem?" GFMD News, 11 July 2016, https://gfmd.info/en/site/news/957/GFMD-Workshop-"Mediadev-CVE--counter-propaganda-Where-is-the-problem".htm.

14 Opposing the IS group's media machinery were Iraqi journalists with little or no access to IS-controlled territory. They received censored or no information from official sources in the Iraqi military and government and had to rely on information from family members working with the army or from social media. The potential for Iraqi journalists to become dependent on information disseminated by the IS group or other conflict parties, such as the Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi – also known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs), an umbrella organisation for 40 predominantly Shi'a paramilitary and military forces – and thereby inadvertently becoming propagandists for the extremists was immense. Propaganda against the IS group was also being produced. In fact, some politicians have even gone so far as to suggest that any media that did not support the government's fight against the IS group must themselves be considered terrorists.

extremism have been supported by the Federal Government since 1992 and have been widened to include the promotion of democracy since 2001.

In Germany – in contrast to other European countries – a relatively clear distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary prevention has been developed in recent years (Ceylan/Kiefer 2018, 61-72). Primary prevention programmes are closely related to civic education. They address the whole of society and all potential factors which may contribute to the dynamics of radicalisation leading to violence of any type. Primary prevention programmes aim at self-development, knowledge transfer, skills building and empowerment (ibid., 65). In contrast to secondary and tertiary prevention programmes, which target those who are at risk of becoming or are already radicalised, primary prevention through civic education fosters the resilience of all members of the public to extremist ideologies by various means. This approach attempts to circumvent the risk of stigmatising Muslim communities and to be resource- and not deficit-oriented.[15]

4.1 Current PVE debates in Germany

Abu-Nimer argues in his lead article that PVE requires more than the fight against violence and terror in terms of Counter-Terrorism. He recommends an in-depth analysis of local circumstances and root causes of violent extremism for the purpose of peacebuilding in general and interreligious peacebuilding in particular (Abu-Nimer 2018, 18-19). Essentially, then, the aim of peacebuilding in the context of preventive measures is to strengthen societal structures by addressing more complex social and economic inequalities. In the German case, it is clear that structural and socio-economic factors play a role in processes which lead to extremist actions. Feelings of discrimination, social marginalisation and exclusion, powerlessness and hopelessness are identified within the research landscape as potential factors in radicalisation or orientation towards religious extremist ideologies (Müller/Nordbruch 2016: 19). Similar to the international developments which Abu-Nimer outlines, Germany went through the development from Counter-Terrorism to CVE to PVE with an emphasis on deconstructing ideologies.

Currently, the latter approaches, which take the more structural and often less visible causes of violent extremism into account and aim to tackle the multiple causes, figure prominently in the German discourse. It is widely recognised that right-wing and religious extremist theories can only be challenged with a pluralistic, inclusive and socially just democratic model.

This orientation is also due to problems resulting from conventional preventive approaches. The problems correlating with such approaches adopted so far in Germany correspond with those discussed in the lead article. For example, (1) concerns are shared by civil society actors about the relationship between those involved in education and youth work, on the one hand, and police and security agencies, on the other. Furthermore, challenges and problems resulting from PVE approaches include (2) the potential for infringement upon civil liberties, (3) the stigmatisation of the Muslim community in particular (i.e. by targeting and racial profiling), (4) institutional forms of anti-Muslim bias and discrimination, (5) the mistrust of affected communities and their fear that these programmes are primarily for the purpose of monitoring, (6) the reframing of local capacity building programmes in various fields in accordance with CVE/PVE language and terminology, and (7) the measurements of the results according to objectives sought rather than, for example, according to intended and unintended consequences.

4.2 "Live Democracy!"

The "Live Democracy! Active against Right-wing Extremism, Violence and Hate"[16] programme was introduced by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth as part of the Federal

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[15] Of course, secondary and tertiary prevention approaches are being pursued at the German federal and state level in addition to primary prevention (Ceylan/Michael 2018, 61-74).
[16] See https://www.demokratie-leben.de/en/federal-programme/about-live-democracy.html.

Government Strategy to Prevent Extremism and Promote Democracy. The programme, launched in 2015, will run until 2019. Its approach seems promising: in addressing the problems mentioned above, its strategy differs from previous ones in that it embraces the idea that the promotion of democracy and its values must be the focus of efforts to prevent extremism. The programme thus tackles the causes by a) applying the group-focused enmity (GFE) approach,[17] which addresses different forms of extremism, group-related hate and ideologies of inequality, b) promoting civil participation and democratic behaviour at local, regional and national level and c) recognising civil society organisations in various action fields as important actors.

Within the programme framework, several measures are combined at various levels. In order to build sustainable structures, one programme area covers three sub-programmes: In "Local Partnerships for Democracy", 265 towns, cities, municipalities and rural districts are supported to develop strategies for the promotion of democracy and diversity. At the federal level, 16 Democracy Centres are being funded, whose services comprise the development of policies and strategies in relevant fields, the coordination of local activities, and mobile victim and exit strategy counselling. In the programme area "Structural development of nationwide NGOs", selected non-governmental organisations are receiving long-term support to professionalise and hence to institutionalise their services. In addition, funding is being provided for pilot projects – in six thematic areas – which are pursuing new approaches in promoting democracy and preventing radicalisation. The thematic fields include radicalisation prevention, prevention and deradicalisation in prison and probation, projects on selected aspects of group-focused enmity and strengthening democracy in rural areas, the promotion of diversity at the workplace and in society, and promotion of diversity in the educational sector.[18]

The programme provides funding for partners working in various fields, including Muslim organisations and communities such as the Council of Muslim Students and Academics (RAMSA), a Muslim women's education centre (MINA), Schura, the Islamic religious community in Bremen and the Cologne branch of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB). Most of their funding from "Live Democracy!" is provided for radicalisation prevention projects.

While the intention of collaborating more closely with such organisations is a good start, there are still many pitfalls. Concerns are being raised by Muslim actors about the lack of funding in fields other than radicalisation prevention. The explicit and monothematic linkage between Muslim organisations and deradicalisation could add to the stigmatisation of the Muslim community in general. Projects promoting social participation among young Muslims beyond the logic of prevention do exist but are rarely recipients of public funding; for example, the regular youth work carried out by Islamic organisations in most cases depends on private funding or voluntary work. The financial shortcomings of these organisations, however, cause many problems. Volunteers and imams often lack educational skills and qualifications, for example (Charchira 2017, 304-305). Furthermore, many Islamic organisations do not meet the formal requirements to be eligible for recognition as an official religious community and are thus excluded from the benefits associated with this status.[19] The valuation of these institutions could be very important (ibid., 312). Many young Muslims identify with their mosque community, which they see as authentic and safe, and hold theological and spiritual services provided by them in high regard. Funding projects in other fields could help in extending youth work beyond prevention (ibid.).

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17 GFE is a concept that describes a syndrome of antagonism against out-groups based on the ideology of unequal status. It describes the interrelationship between negative attitudes and prejudices towards groups identified as "other", "different" or "abnormal". It is based on the premise that people who reject one out-group also hold the same negative attitudes toward other out-groups (Küpper/Zick 2014, 242).

18 Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, "Live Democracy! Active against Right-wing Extremism Violence and Hate, https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/93488/e2475074ed5761fddd1bfa619e68d123/demokratie-leben-aktiv-gegen-rechtsextremismus-gewalt-und-menschenfeindlichkeit-englische-version-data.pdf.

19 The criteria which must be fulfilled for recognition as an official religious community are "a) Permanency, shown through a constitution and a sufficient number of members; b) Clear membership rosters, in order to determine which pupils are entitled to attend religious instruction; c) Representative who can define the religious principles and represent them; and, d) Not subject to influence by state institutions." (Berglund 2015, 16).

Another problem results from the need to specify a target group within project architectures. Even though primary prevention targets society as a whole, in practice, it is often Muslims and migrants who are the focus of preventive measures. Implementers thus unintentionally contribute to rising anti-Muslim discourses in Europe and the United States, which in turn play into the hand of extremist groups.

Given the fact that the programme is still in its initial phase, it is possible that these shortcomings can be addressed in the next phase, provided that the programme is continued in its present form by the new government. In retrospect, there are signs that concerns from civil society actors have been taken into consideration by official bodies. Under the previous programme, only 5 percent of funded projects were implemented by Muslim civil society organisations, whereas in 2017, 28 percent of implementers were from the Muslim community.

Furthermore, various channels built into the programme's architecture allow the integration of feedback from practitioners and researchers. Throughout the programme, selected practitioners are invited to attend consultation sessions with the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. Analysis and evaluation of all programme areas are conducted through research centres working in the field of youth and extremism prevention.[20] In addition, the Ministry is funding the BAG RelEx[21], an advocacy group of civil society actors working in the field of religious extremism prevention. The overall purpose of the group is to provide a platform to facilitate exchange and to guide and coordinate the members' inputs, also towards the funding organisation.

The political situation in Germany will also determine whether and how the recommendations are taken into account. With the right-wing AfD in Parliament, difficulties are to be expected. As of 28 March 2018, the AfD has already submitted a parliamentary interpellation comprising 236 questions about the programme[22] and there are concerns that Members from the mainstream parties will side with the AfD.

5 Concluding Remarks

Mohammed Abu-Nimer argues that PVE approaches as they are conceptualised now are not designed to be transformative. Indeed, if agencies and policies follow the current approaches without adjusting their programmes, PVE approaches will not contribute effectively to preventing violent extremism. However, the question remains whether the focus on religion *is* the best cure for violent extremism.

I would agree with Abu-Nimer by emphasising that the local "reading" of the conflict and the actors is important. Depending on the local context, the involvement of religious actors or organisations may or may not be necessary for transforming conflicts caused by violent extremism. In fragile states like Iraq, where religion is also used as a tool for organisation and mobilisation, the identification of underlying patterns (Jakob 2016, 255) and relevant state and non-state actors from secular backgrounds is more important. These actors could facilitate dialogue as part of reconciliation and peacebuilding processes, help peacebuilding practitioners to understand what citizens envision as crucial, and contribute to the re-formation of an active civil society beyond sectarian divides.

In countries with functioning governance structures, like Germany, on the other hand, the involvement of FBOs and religious actors must be pursued as an important contribution in light of the absence (or exclusion) of such groups from political representation. Even though in Germany religious organisations and representatives of religious communities are taken into account in prevention approaches, there

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20 The Ministry commissioned, for this purpose, the German Youth Institute (DJI), which receives academic support from the Institute for Social Work and Social Pedagogy (ISS) and Camino, an institute for evaluation and quality development.
21 The acronym stands for „Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft religiös begründeter Extremismus" (BAG RelEx).
22 See http://dipbt.bundestag.de/doc/btd/19/010/1901012.pdf.

are still limitations to their role in activities. Approaches like "Live Democracy!" are moving in the right direction but need to improve the conditions for the engagement of religious organisations.

Ultimately, preventive concepts can only work if the root causes of extremism are tackled at various levels. The improvement of social conditions, the provision of equal opportunities for all members of society, anti-discrimination and participation cannot only be the result of CVE or PVE activities. Improvement in these various fields has to be initiated by civil society actors from various fields, and should not be reduced to CVE/PVE language or logic. As violent extremism has various root causes, religion can play a role, but it cannot be *the only* solution.

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