



Roundtable on

Religious Identity, Belonging and Radicalization: Implications for International CT-PVE Programs

Date: July 12, 2017,

Venue: Global Center on Cooperative Security,
747 Third Avenue,
New York City 10017

(1) Background

a) On September 8, 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy as a global instrument to enhance national, regional and international efforts to counter terrorism and extremism. Reviewed every two years ever since, it proposes a common strategic and operational approach to countering extremism, drawing on a diverse range of expertise.

b) In January 2016, the former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon presented to the General Assembly a comprehensive Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism. The plan seeks to privilege approaches that directly address the drivers of and conditions conducive to violent extremism at local, national, regional and global levels.

c) More recently, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2354 (May 2017), featuring a Comprehensive International Framework to counter terrorist narratives. Though the resolution provides a broad range of concrete guidelines aimed at countering extremist narratives, it notes, among others, that a continued research into the drivers of terrorism and violent extremism is necessary in order to develop more focused counter-narrative programs. It also notes that efforts to counter terrorist narratives can benefit from engagement with a wide range of actors.

While there is clearly an international consensus and well thought-out approaches to preventing violent extremism, there have been no high level discussions of Religious Identity and Belonging as a problematique or key variable in radicalization; neither have there been deliberations on

approaches to challenging rigid religious identities as part of a de-radicalization, counter-terrorism or PVE process.

Because religious identity is tied to transcendental regimes of meanings and belonging, it acquires far greater normative influence on 'believers' than other systems or modes of self-identity. This underlies the need for the Roundtable.

(2) Objectives of the Roundtable

Violent extremism in many cases is an expression of religious absolutism where religious adherents derive their identity or self-concept from beliefs that justify intolerance and violence against the religious Other. The mission of the roundtable is to create a space for relevant stakeholders to explore the interconnections between the formation of strong religious identities and violent extremism. It has the following specific objectives:

(a) To promote a more sophisticated understanding of religious identity as a key variable in preventing violent extremism and inform a more integrative and holistic approach to C-PVE.

(b) To create a forum for review of evidence from academic research/literature and from the field on the nexus between the formation and construction of religious identities and radicalization.

(c) To create a working or advisory group of academics, policy analysts, policy makers, international/intergovernmental organizations, civil society and religious leaders to work together to develop a more nuanced understanding of the formation and construction of religious identities (both from a psychological and an anthropological/cultural points of view) and strategies for creating a multidimensional space for negotiating religious identities.

(d) Develop outputs that can provide insights for international, regional, sub-regional organizations, governments, civil society organizations, religious groups and leaders, academic leaders at secondary and higher education levels on ways and means of dealing with religious identity issues as an element in PVE.

(3) Topics

A critical element, often ignored in PVE circles is how extremists acquire and enact their religious selves and the steps needed to prevent identification with extremist religious beliefs. The Roundtable will provide the space to undertake this discussion within the following broad topics:

What do we know about Religious Identity?

Core questions: Why is religious identity important (when compared with other ascribed or avowed identities including ethnic, gender or racial identities)? What are the factors that influence the formation/construction and strength of religious identity over time?

The nexus between Group Identity, belonging and the dehumanization of the religious Other

Core questions: What do people derive from group membership? Aside from faith, what group membership ‘benefits’ do religious groups provide that provide members a sense of belonging? Why are non-members excluded? How are outsiders categorized and labeled? How are non-believers or out-group members framed within in-groups?

Approaches to transforming/negotiating religious identities and collectivities

Core questions: What can we learn from projects that bring religious groups and leaders together? How were variegated religious identities and complex relationships negotiated and transformed in those projects? What could have gone wrong? Can it work elsewhere?

Bringing Religious Identity discourses into current C-PVE programs and debates

Core questions: How can identity discourses contribute to or feature in counter narrative campaigns or as part of a comprehensive approach to the threat of terrorism and VE? How can a more nuanced understanding of religious identity and approaches inform the next review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy? What can it contribute to current UN Plan of Action to PVE? How can DDR benefit from a more identity-based approach?

(4) Participants and Format of the Roundtable

The roundtable will have up to 20 discussants selected from the academia, the, the UN regional and inter-governmental organizations, religious communities, and civil society organizations. Discussions will follow a brief presentation and discussion format.

(5) Expected Outputs

The Roundtable will recognize the need for a long-term engagement. Therefore a working group will be created from the Roundtable to continue working on the topics for another three to five months. The expected outputs of the Roundtable are:

- a) An occasional paper and a report on deliberations and findings after the Roundtable.
- b) A position paper that can contribute to the next review of the global counter-terrorism strategy and contribute to ongoing international, regional and national efforts to prevent violent extremism.

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