



## Is UN Equipped to Deliver New Plan on Preventing Extremism?

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As the so-called Islamic State expands its reach and influence, it is evident that many find its narratives and tactics appealing. Countering that appeal and preventing the spread of the group's violent ideology is essential to its long-term defeat. Partly as an acknowledgment of this fact, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched his new [plan of action](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674) ([http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674)) on preventing violent extremism (PVE) on January 15<sup>th</sup>. The plan recognizes the urgency of getting ahead of the phenomenon and stopping the next wave of recruits falling prey to the growing allure of violent ideology.

The new PVE plan has already drawn some criticism for dwelling too much on what member states ought to do to prevent violent extremism, rather than offering a concrete plan of action for the UN to undertake. However, it does build on a host of initiatives emanating from the UN Security Council and General Assembly over the past decade, and expands the preventive dimension of multilateral activities in this area. Furthermore, it outlines a holistic approach that goes beyond conventional security-focused counterterrorism measures such as border monitoring, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement. It instead focuses on a broad spectrum of preventive strategies including conflict resolution, promoting critical thinking in education, and providing youth with employment opportunities and other positive alternatives to violence.

Emphasizing the need for concerted action to engage communities and build resilience to prevent further recruitment of violent extremists, the Secretary-General has insisted that the UN should bring its vast reach and experience to bear by “coordinating and developing activities with Member States, to prioritize, sensitize and adapt existing programmes to permit them to target the drivers of violent extremism more precisely and to introduce new initiatives to close potential gaps.”

Throughout its 70-year history, the UN has been working on development, education, conflict prevention, and other fields that are now seen as essential ingredients for preventing and countering violent extremism. When it comes to implementing the new action plan, the key will be to understand that such measures take time to develop in national capitals and at the community level. This will require leadership that has the credibility to effectively work with member states as well as UN colleagues. It will need the discipline to resist political pressure to get involved in near-term crisis situations that distract from attaining longer-term goals. This approach is at the heart of the new UN plan.

The question is: If a new leadership plan is put in place, will the person in charge have the mandate and support to cut through the vast UN bureaucracy and clearly communicate with both internal and external audiences? At present, the leadership structure on countering or preventing violent extremism is hydra-headed and compartmentalized. With various actors leading different parts of the architecture, member states and UN partners are unclear about with whom they should be engaging on these issues, and internal tensions have led to an uncoordinated approach even within the narrow confines of the organization's counterterrorism architecture.

Discussions are already under way among a handful of member states, including some from the Security Council permanent members, about how to develop a leadership structure that will make the UN's current constellation of counterterrorism and violent extremism prevention efforts more coherent. In 2014, Australia used its Security Council presidency to call for a special envoy on countering violent extremism. Two years later, this idea still has legs and could provide the direction needed to implement the PVE plan. Yet, the envoy would need to have a strong mandate to work with the UN system and member states to introduce PVE into the UN mainstream, as part of a strengthened prevention agenda. It would also have to work with member states as they develop and implement their own national PVE strategies.

Another option calls for an expansion of the mandate of the assistant secretary-general responsible for the expert team that serves the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee. This would see the position provide a senior coordinating and representative role for the entire UN system, allowing for a single focal point to address counterterrorism and PVE. However, it may be difficult for the assistant secretary-general to serve two masters in this way.

A third option would be to create a more senior position at the level of under secretary-general, who would be dedicated to counterterrorism and PVE efforts, commensurate with the level of threat that terrorism and violent extremism pose to international peace and security.

Whatever course of action is taken, there needs to be a single focal point with the direct authority of the secretary-general and empowered to work with both the Security Council and the General Assembly, members of Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, and the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre, which focuses on capacity building and technical assistance. A key issue will be addressing the challenge the UN and member states face in balancing the need to respond to near-term crises while maintaining the longer-term focus and investment required to prevent violent extremism.

The new PVE action plan makes a case for why a more patient, low-key approach to prevention is needed, so that it will "broaden the way we think about this threat and take measures to prevent it from proliferating." However, a great deal of the reluctance from other actors within the UN system—those working on development, education, gender, conflict prevention, peace-keeping and other critical issues—stems from their concerns that their day-to-day work is becoming relabelled, disrupted, securitized, or politicized in the name of countering terrorism.

If the current push to create a single focal point does take root, the new position should allow for greater clarity in the functions of the counterterrorism entities. The clear need for high-level UN leadership on the issue has been evident for years and it is past time key stakeholders find an agreement on the specifics. In the end, the differences between the options for leadership are not as consequential as the alternative of doing nothing, and allowing the dysfunctional status quo to continue hindering the UN's impact on the ground, where it is needed most.

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