Engaging religious actors to transform violent extremism: lessons from Kenya

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At a Glance: Including religious actors in transforming violent extremism has been a policy recommendation for years. Less has been said on how to do this in practice, or how to do it well - despite existing models such as Kenya's "whole of society approach". As a result, state and security actors often struggle to involve religious actors - or even avoid the issue altogether, missing key opportunities. This brief begins by highlighting core principles for effective religious engagement in transforming violent extremism. It then explores the example of Kenya's National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism. Finally, it outlines best practices and policy recommendations.

Involving religious actors in transforming violent extremism is not a new recommendation. At first, this may seem paradoxical when there is strong evidence that religion is not the primary driver of recruitment - including a UNDP report on violent extremism in sub saharan Africa that listed religion in third place, behind other factors such as lack of employment opportunities. Yet the importance of religion in people's daily lives leads to religious actors being important figures in their communities. As influential members of their societies, religious actors play crucial roles in preventing conflicts from erupting into violence, countering violent extremists' recruitment efforts, and increasing their communities' resilience to violent extremism.

Few resources, however, explore what effective religious engagement for transforming violent extremism can look like in practice - despite existing models available. The Republic of Kenya, for example, launched its National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE) in September 2016. It was one of the first strategies to follow the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism and "rally all sectors of Kenyan social, religious, and economic life" against violent extremism.

As one of the world's leading peacebuilding organizations, Search for Common Ground has been active in Kenya since 2008. Our work in transforming violent extremism has included strengthening relationships between security forces and marginalized youth, supporting women religious actors to establish interfaith networks on resilience to violent extremism, and advocating for freedom of religion or belief for all as a requirement to peaceful and just communities.

This brief draws on Search for Common Ground's wealth of expertise in both transforming violent extremism (which includes both prevention and response) and religious engagement to highlight core principles. It then focuses on Kenya's National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism as an illustrative case study. From there, it outlines recommendations for a range of donor, policy and civil society actors involved in transforming violent extremism on how to successfully engage religious actors in their work.

Who are "religious actors"?

Search for Common Ground intentionally uses the term religious actors rather than religious leaders when referring to religious engagement in order to include people who may not have formal religious authority, titles or qualifications - but who still hold influence and respect in their communities for their religious knowledge and/or values. These include men, women and youth, community lay-leaders, educators, social workers, faith-based organizations, activists, etc.

RELIGIOUS ACTORS' ROLE IN TRANSFORMING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Religious engagement is not a cure-all for transforming violent extremism. However, it is equally dangerous to ignore the contributions religious actors can make. Based on Search for Common Ground's experience in the Horn of Africa and beyond, effective religious engagement in transforming violent extremism relies on several factors:

1. **Religious actors already consider transforming violent extremism as part of their responsibilities - but the role they seek may not be one other actors envision.** In the past, government and security actors have looked to religious leaders to provide information on Al-Shabaab and other violent extremist actors or possibly radicalized community members. Religious leaders pushed back on this as both [dangerous for them and ineffective](#). Accusations of being a government spy would break down communities' trust in religious leaders - thus undermining their influence - as well as putting them at very real risk of retaliation. Instead, religious actors see preventing radicalisation and recruitment as their biggest responsibility. Even then, as panelists in a Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs [webinar](#) noted, being perceived as spouting government messaging or uncritically supporting the state risks undermining their credibility, particularly with those already on the road to radicalisation. Pigeon-holing religious actors into roles they do not embrace leads to mistrust and lack of meaningful collaboration between them and the authorities.

2. **Both transforming violent extremism and engaging religious actors are only effective when they incorporate a diverse range of religious actors in their efforts.** Formal religious leaders are not always as well connected to their congregations as they may believe. The deference and social status their title confers - and which makes them powerful influencers - can also [disconnect them from their communities](#) (p.70). This is particularly true for national compared to local religious leaders. The latter can be trusted figures to whom community members [flag suspicious behavior](#), including possible violent extremist activity. Religious leaders may also struggle to reach traditionally excluded groups: youth, women, people with disabilities, etc. Informal religious actors such as Christian lay leaders, but also shaykhas (female Islamic scholars) or leaders of youth faith groups can bring in new perspectives and concerns that may not have reached formal religious leaders. Religious engagement that does not take an inclusive approach risks entrenching existing power dynamics that may in turn be feeding radicalisation and violent extremism.

3. **Intra and interreligious exchange helps break down stereotypes and prejudice, reduces "othering" and helps people find common ground - which can prevent violent extremist ideology from taking root.** Organizing and supporting such exchanges have become part of the mandate of a variety of actors ranging from religious institutions to local grassroots organizations to UN agencies. The proliferation of interfaith exchange has also led to legitimate [criticisms](#) of the approach. Performative or exclusionary interfaith dialogue risks perpetuating exclusions and systems that feed grievances and push people towards violent extremism. Interreligious exchange requires specific [conditions](#) to be effective e.g. the inclusion of women, youth, belief minorities (of which indigenous spiritualities and humanists); a joint plan of action to move beyond dialogue for dialogue's sake; strong contextualisation and local ownership; and a long-term perspective to allow time for sufficient trust-building.

4. **Religious education and literacy are key to transforming violent extremism.** An improved understanding of one's own religious tradition, as well as of others' beliefs, helps build resilience to radicalization and recruitment. This has led religious actors and others to successfully [advocate](#) for better representation of Kurdistan's religious diversity in its school curriculum. In addition to repeated [condemnation](#) of violent extremists' actions, religious actors have generated significant [resources](#) and [trainings](#) on social cohesion and violent extremism. Such resources have the added benefit of being grounded in religious values and language that are likely to resonate with the communities' own, particularly in places where religion has strong influence on daily lives. Religious literacy is also a core skill for secular actors such as policymakers or security forces, both in strengthening their understanding of the role religion plays in driving or preventing violent extremism, and in determining how to [engage religious actors](#) in their work successfully.

5. **Religious actors are also social actors, with an interest in various drivers of violent extremism in their communities**. Seeing religious actors through an exclusively theological lens [limits our creativity](#) for religious engagement in transforming violent extremism. Instead, through the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) - of which Search is a member - faith-based organizations (FBOs) engaged religious leaders to encourage them to act as mediators and preach peace during the 2022 presidential elections in Kenya, instead of allowing political leaders or parties to seek their endorsements and campaign in their places of worship. Other JISRA partners have been actively [campaigning](#) for better access to identification cards for all Kenyans, amid concerns that accusations of discrimination in their obtention were fuelling radicalisation. These examples demonstrate that religious actors can be powerful advocates for their communities on a wide variety of topics, helping reduce socio-economic or cultural tensions that violent extremist groups' recruiters might seek to exploit.

6. **Religious actors require capacity strengthening to transform violent extremism while protecting themselves from harm.** Religious actors - particularly those working in areas with high levels of violent extremist activity - have requested [support and trainings](#) to ensure their safety and security. Without it, they have stressed, their ability to have an impact on the ground will be limited, and their reputation, livelihood and person will be at risk. Such safeguarding measures must also recognise the unique roles that religious actors play in their communities, and how they must balance their safety against their calling. For example, religious leaders and institutions often highly value their "open doors" policy, where [guaranteeing access](#) to their sites of worship and their person is a core aspect of their work, despite the vulnerability it brings. Similarly, overt support from government authorities or foreign actors can increase religious actors' vulnerability by [undermining their credibility](#).

7. **Faith sensitivity in monitoring and evaluation helps accurately capture religious actors' impact in transforming violent extremism.** This can be as simple as [integrating reflection sessions](#) into a religious engagement project's activities rather than handing out surveys after prayer, as the latter could be deemed inappropriate. Religious actors' approach is more likely to be informed by long term thinking and their religious tradition's understandings of radicalisation, peace and violence, which may not always be captured by short term project and evaluation cycles. Similarly, adapting the language of monitoring and evaluation so that it [resonates with local religious actors](#) - e.g. calling it "zakat" instead of "charity" for a Muslim audience - can support ownership of the process by religious actors, as well as draw out additional data from participants. Intersectional disaggregation of data - e.g. religion and gender, age, education, socioeconomic brackets, etc. - is also needed to identify underlying dynamics that may be driving or preventing violent extremism within a religious community. Such approaches also help ensure proper contextualisation and conflict sensitivity, which are key to successful transformation of violent extremism.

CASE STUDY: KENYA'S APPROACH TO TRANSFORMING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The Republic of Kenya's approach, outlined in its National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism (NSCVE), has led to an overall [reduction in violent extremist incidents](#) in the country. Looking at the NSCVE and its County Action Plans - notably [Garissa](#), [Lamu](#), [Kilifi](#) and [Kwale](#), four counties with high rates of violent extremist activity, we can identify how strategic religious engagement has supported these efforts, and where gaps remain:

1. **Religious engagement is a core component of Kenya's approach, and has been from the onset.** Several [national design workshops](#) included faith-based organizations (FBOs) and religious leaders and all four County Action Plans (CAPs) examined list FBOs and/or religious leaders as part of the consulted stakeholders. In addition to providing valuable insight for the context analysis, involving religious actors from the onset ensures their assigned roles and responsibilities are ones they are capable and willing to do. The resulting strategy is structured along nine pillars of which the first, the "Faith Based and Ideological Pillar", is placed under religious leaders' responsibility. The eight other pillars address the Political, Security, Psychosocial, Education, Arts and Culture, Training and Capacity Building, Media and Law and Policy dimensions of transforming violent extremism - all of which contain relevant work strands for religious engagement. In addition, the localisation of the strategy through a County Action Plan for each of the 47 counties captures the experiences and insight from local religious actors, local women and youth groups, etc. and has broadened the space for such actors to engage in transforming violent extremism according to roles they chose for themselves.

2. **Kenya benefits from preexisting interfaith structures that it leverages effectively to transform violent extremism.** Such structures exist at both county and national levels- such as the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics (CICC) or the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK) - and have been able to host intra- or inter-religious [dialogues](#), develop curricula or other interfaith resources, organize joint prayer rallies, and counseling for returnees and victims of violent extremism, etc. In addition, [joint environmental action](#) or even [free bus rides to promote positive stories](#) are some of the more creative interreligious activities put in place - which, although they technically fell under the strategy's "Arts and Culture" pillar, remained geared towards celebrating diversity (including religious) and positive interfaith experiences. The promotion of interfaith dialogue in Kenya has, among other things, been credited with [reducing political violence](#) in Mombasa after the 2017 elections.

3. **Religious actors lead efforts to increase religious education and literacy as part of Kenya's strategy.** The Kilifi CAP plans for improved understanding of Qur'anic Arabic that can help young people be critical of violent extremists' interpretations of

sacred texts, while the Garissa CAP points to the role of elders and religious leaders in contextualizing "jihad" within the Qu'ran. Religious institutions and madrasas are presented by both the Lamu and Garissa CAPs as strategic sites, with teachers being trained in messaging to counter violent extremist rhetoric. The Kwale CAP goes further in suggesting the need for curricular reform of the madrasa system - led by religious leaders - to provide a common education plan and close loopholes that could be exploited by recruiters. Beyond strengthening knowledge of one's own religion, the Kenyan model also uses interreligious exchange - including the examples in the previous paragraph - as a space to increase religious literacy about other beliefs. All these efforts highlight the need for political actors to see religious spaces such as madrasas not only as prime locations for recruitment, but as sites to inculcate positive values and messaging that strengthen peace and social cohesion.

4. **Through its "whole of society" approach, Kenya creates space for traditionally excluded groups to become actors in transforming violent extremism.** Women, for example, are recognised as key stakeholders in the NSCVE, and a specific pillar on gender and women was created in several CAPs including Garissa and Kilifi. Rather than being simply passive victims, women's capacity to act as educators, mediators or providers of psychosocial support for prevention and deradicalisation is incorporated into Kenya's strategies - a capacity stemming in part from their role in moral and religious education. In this spirit, the Garissa CAP suggests drawing on Morocco's example, where women were given a leading role via religious education and sending them out to disrupt radicalization efforts in targeted areas. International exchanges on best practices and lessons learned are not limited to the national level, but possible also in local contexts. Likewise, there is some effort made to reference African Traditional Religions, e.g. the Kaya elders (one of Kenya's African traditional religions) mentioned in the Kwale and Kilifi CAPs, or the "indigenous cultural sites" listed as an example of cultural diversity in the Garissa CAP. However in practice these inclusion efforts remain the exception rather than the rule, despite minority religious beliefs being vulnerable to attacks by violent extremists.

5. **The Kenyan strategy seeks to encourage secular-religious collaboration to increase the reach and impact of messaging to transform violent extremism.** For example, the Lamu CAP makes reference to the popular Radio Salaam, which past projects effectively used to combine religious and secular messaging against violent extremism. Meanwhile, Garissa's CAP points to limited media reporting on the positive role of religious actors in transforming violent extremism as an area for improvement. However, the national strategy and its CAPs still primarily describe young people as either vulnerable to radicalisation or actors of violence - despite peer-to-peer engagement being the most effective way to prevent recruitment. There are exceptions - Kwale CAP does encourage engaging youth in "youth friendly spaces (youth centers, schools, sports fields)", while some religious actors have worked to engage youth as key actors in transforming violent extremism. However, older religious leaders remain reluctant to engage on social media - where both citizens' engagement and the presence of extremist recruiters are amplified - despite this being a vital space for religious-secular collaboration on joint messaging to transform violent extremism.

6. **The Kenyan national strategy commits to providing skill building and resources to those involved in transforming violent extremism, including religious actors.** Religious actors and FBOs can - and do - provide learning resources, such as the training of imams and madrasa teachers on transforming violent extremism, or capacity building for mosque management committees, as described in multiple CAPs including Lamu's. At other times, this might include training that empowers youth in addressing inter-religious issues and identifying joint solutions in their communities, or roundtables that strengthen women's capacity to engage security providers. Religious actors' recognised social role as educators and repositories of knowledge can be highly useful for transforming violent extremism - but they also benefit from strengthening their own skills and even developing new ones, such as social media training for younger imams to extend their messaging's reach. Rather than formal student-teacher relationships that replicate old power dynamics - whether between religious leaders and their communities, or between Western donors and local practitioners - a more holistic approach allows expertise to be drawn and shared by multiple stakeholders, including religious actors.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, Kenya's approach offers a strong model for effectively engaging religious actors in transforming violent extremism. Based on these observations, the following recommendations are for experts, religious actors, institutional decision-makers, and donors active in transforming violent extremism on how to further more effective religious engagement:

1. **Religious engagement should be fully leveraged for effective transformation of violent extremism.**

    a. Donors, practitioners and decision-makers should right-size the role of religion in driving and preventing violent extremism through context analysis and strengthening the religious literacy of secular actors where necessary.

    b. Donors, practitioners and decision-makers should adopt inclusive definitions of "religious actors" to ensure informal religious leaders and influential actors such as women and youth are actively engaged in transforming violent extremism.

    c. Donors should fund intra/interfaith and religious education initiatives, both as specific interventions to transform violent extremism and as part of broader social cohesion or peacebuilding programming.

2. **Religious engagement in transforming violent extremism should not be limited to theology but mainstreamed throughout strategies and programming.**

    a. Practitioners and decision-makers should engage religious actors in strategies and programming for transforming violent extremism in ways that utilize their religious *and* social capacities. They should involve them at design level and throughout the action plan or project cycle - providing capacity building, specific funding, and other relevant tools as needed.

    b. Donors and decision-makers should support secular-religious collaboration aimed at increasing the reach of messaging aimed at transforming violent extremism both online and offline.

3. **Transforming violent extremism involving religious actors should use faith-sensitive monitoring and evaluation methods.**

    a. Donors and practitioners should adapt monitoring and evaluation tools and language to reflect the cultural and religious context where P/CVE interventions are taking place.

    b. Donors and practitioners should establish shared indicators of success to capture local understandings of peace and violent extremism, and allow ownership of the monitoring and evaluation process by both donors and stakeholders, including religious actors.

    c. Donors, decision-makers and practitioners should disaggregate data from religious groups according to age, gender and other characteristics to better understand the impact of P/CVE initiatives on religious communities.

4. **Efforts to transform violent extremism should include a religious lens as part of conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm approaches.**

    a. Practitioners should provide Do No Harm/conflict sensitivity capacity strengthening for all actors, including religious actors, involved in projects aimed at transforming violent extremism.

    b. Decision-makers, donors and practitioners should support religious actors to ensure their safety and security while carrying out P/CVE work, while not hampering their ability to carry out other aspects of their vocation and engagement with their communities.