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Institute for
Conflict Transformation
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In recent years, the Muslim world has witnessed a steady increase in the intensity and scale of violent extremism. For more than a decade, Al Qaeda was the emblem of this phenomenon, but the last couple of years have seen the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Al-Shabab in the Horn of Africa and more recently the ISIS in Iraq, Syria and beyond, with an even higher level of atrocities committed by these armed groups.

Violent extremism is obviously a destabilizing factor in countries where it operates and in the region as a whole. It hinders democratic transitions and obstructs development. Several Arab and Western countries are particularly concerned by the phenomenon, since the extremist groups exert an attraction on youth who would be trained in the various fronts and then return to their home country where they are perceived as a threat to national security.

It would be counterproductive and dangerous to explain the phenomenon of violent extremism by reductionist theories such as a clash of civilizations, or a confrontation between two worldviews and two sets of values, one enlightened and the other obscurantist. It would be erroneous to see it as a religious war led by medieval fanatics against modernity, or as the manifestation of religious radicalism, which seeks the return to the original sources of religion.

Violent extremism in the Muslim world can easily be understood as a reaction to socio-economic and political factors. It is fuelled by the sense of injustice and the feeling of humiliation prevailing in Muslim societies, particularly among the youth.

It is a violent reaction to structural violence in all its manifestations, including unmet basic needs, violated human rights, absence of decent life and social consideration, lack of adequate education, in the midst of rapid, unequal, disproportionate and ostentatious wealth grabbed by the few,

unemployment, impossibility of political participation, electoral fraud, coercion, repression, etc. All this leads to frustration, despair, alienation, hopelessness, dreamlessness and ultimately to resignation, suicide and violent extremism.

Multiple external factors are also behind the emergence of violent extremism: political, economic and cultural hegemony, double standards and unequal treatment, military interventions, spread of weaponry, counter insurgency tactics, etc. In fact, the situation in the Muslim world is characterised by an intense popular widespread anger, with the feeling that the honour and sanctities of Muslims are being trampled on. There is also the feeling that Muslim countries are being constantly aggressed by Western powers, either directly or indirectly through the support of repressive and corrupt regimes that prevent the emergence of real democracies in the region. These external push factors contribute to feeding armed groups with more and more recruits not necessarily from disadvantaged segments of society, sometimes even from higher social classes.

Violent extremist groups often resort to religious rhetoric because they do not master the political language, due to the impoverishment of political culture in the Arab world after decades of occupation and tyranny. They prefer formulating their grievances and discontent and expressing their claims in a mastered religious language that is rich in vocabulary relating to the issue of fairness. Because most individuals who join violent extremist groups have a limited knowledge of religious sciences, they fall in a selective use and/or an extremist interpretation of the religious foundational texts.

Since 9/11, the US and many Western and Muslim countries have adopted Counter Terror (COTER) legislations to counter Islamic violent extremism and applied almost exclusively a security-driven approach. The security and repression approach alone to violent extremism is now widely reckoned to address only a small aspect of it; when going beyond what has wide indigenous popular support, the security approach becomes at best useless, and more often than not counterproductive; it may even become a generator of more extremism. The negative effects of non-smart "war on terror" legislations used in particular in the financial sector targeting religiously-based charities were highlighted. Also, the "war on terror" rhetoric, used often indiscriminately in West countries, and as a weapon against political opponents in Muslim countries with authoritarian regimes have produced negative effects.

In recent years, programs for "disengagement and de-radicalization" (DDR) or for "countering violent extremism" (CVE) were launched in a number of North American, European and Muslim countries. The youth in the Muslim world by-and-large reject this kind of programs, because they consider that in the mind of their initiators, de-radicalisation is achieved only when there is an explicit support to the regime. The UN and EU are also attempting to start similar initiatives. Most of these programs, perceived as being supporting tools to COTER strategies, are having difficulties to reach out to relevant actors and to produce a measurable impact. In the Muslim world, several religious institutions and research centres are working on DDR projects. Most of them are perceived, by the target groups of those projects, as being controlled or at least too close to governments.

Many voices in the Muslim world insist that the Western approach in dealing with violent extremism should not be copied to design national action plans in the region. In the West, Islamic extremist groups are viewed as an external threat to security to be exterminated. At home (i.e. in the countries of origin of local fighters), they should be considered as part of the social fabric to be re-integrated.

To be successful, any CVE approach should address the internal and external causes of violent extremism in a comprehensive way. It should, in particular, encourage political participation in the broader sense (not exclusively partisan) and mobilise credible religious leaders in order to develop an alternative discourse to counter *ghulu* (the Quranic term for extremism) and to promote *wasatiya* (an Islamic concept, which designates the avoidance of extremes) among the youth who might be attracted by violent extremist groups.