

# Conflict, Violent Extremism and Development

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New Challenges, New Responses

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## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Some common terms used in this book are controversial or need defining. The following are the definitions preferred by the authors:

**Islamism:** any ideology which seeks to apply Islam in the political sphere. Islamism is not necessarily violent. Indeed, in many Muslim-majority countries, Islamism is actually a mainstream ideology.

**Jihad:** often inaccurately translated as ‘holy war’, jihad more accurately is legally sanctioned war (the legal system in question being sharia). We agree with those scholars who suggest that its equivalent in Christian/Western thought is Just War.

**Salafi-jihadism:** this is a term increasingly applied by violent extremists themselves. Equivalent terms used by others include ‘global jihadism’ or ‘transnational jihadism’. As Salafism (q.v.), strictly speaking, refers to an apolitical worldview, Salafi-jihadism is something of a contradiction in terms. Salafi here is used by Salafi-jihadists to confer legitimacy and authenticity to their violent campaigns.

**Mujahid** (pl. *mujahidin*): one who participates in *jihad*.

**Salafist/salafism:** from the Arabic *al-salaf al-salih*, ‘the pious forefathers’. Salafism means emulating the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims. In its most fundamental sense, Salafism is apolitical, as true Salafists reject the application of religion to politics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Islamist violent extremism is rarely absent from our front pages and television screens. In the West, we regard it mostly as a problem for us, when it visits our towns and cities in the form of transnational terrorism. But this form of violent extremism is a much bigger problem for the people who endure civil conflicts in which violent Islamists participate—countries such as Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan. How violent Islamists change conflicts, how they are changed by conflicts, and whether they are in some way new or different from other kinds of conflict actors are the questions we seek to answer in this book.

These questions are relevant to policy-makers in government and practitioners in NGOs. Governments are increasingly looking to address the drivers of violent extremism rather than merely waiting to deal with the downstream consequences. As a result, a new field of practice called ‘countering violent extremism’ (CVE) has come into existence. CVE is usually seen as a non-coercive, ‘softer’ approach to violent extremism, in contrast with counter-terrorism (CT) which relies on harder measures such as the military or criminal justice systems. Some define CVE narrowly as exclusively preventative, while others use it more loosely to include, for example, the so-called ‘deradicalisation’ initiatives which seek to reduce the risk from those who have already become violent extremists.

More generally, governments and aid agencies have for decades been working on conflict prevention and conflict resolution under headings such

as ‘peacebuilding’, ‘statebuilding’ and ‘good governance’. The apparent spread of Islamist violent extremism in the last 25 years—and in particular the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2013—has raised concerns that existing models for dealing with conflict may be out of date. If violent Islamists represent something new or different, then assumptions and traditional ways of working need to be re-examined.

The focus of this book is violent (Sunni) Islamists, primarily those linked to ISIL or Al Qaida, which are increasingly referred to as “Salafi-jihadists” but at its core are three country case studies which seek to compare these with other violent groups, either violent Shia Islamists or non-Islamists. The focus on violent Islamism is necessary because that is where the greatest and most urgent current threat lies and it is a threat which prompted the research commissioned by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) on which this book is based. However, we are acutely aware that there are many types of violent extremist. Even though this term is most often used (without a great deal of introspection, it has to be said) to denote violent Islamists, our comparative approach should remind readers that other motivations must not be overlooked. In Iraq and Syria, for example, Shia militias and state-sponsored paramilitaries are a major and under-exposed security problem. Underestimating other kinds of violent extremists is not just analytically wrong—it risks missing out a vital factor in designing interventions or policy responses. As we shall show, groups such as ISIL are most often a symptom of governance failures, and if the underlying factors in Iraq and Syria are not addressed, then ISIL, or successor groups, will continue to flourish. Like ISIL, Shia militias are both a symptom and a cause of the manifest governance failures in those two unhappy countries.