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Among the rights and freedoms enshrined nearly seventy years ago in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are the right to life, liberty, and security; equality and dignity; and freedom from injustice and persecution. Increasingly around the globe¹, we are witnessing a denial of these rights and freedoms. The failure to protect these liberties breeds frustration and despair, which too frequently galvanises a vulnerable individual or group toward violent extremism. Often when we talk about violent extremism, we talk about push factors, “the conditions that favor the rise or spread in appeal of violent extremism or insurgency,” which “are socioeconomic, political, and cultural in nature².” The denial of fundamental rights and freedoms work as push factors by creating conditions conducive for recruitment and radicalisation to violent extremism to take hold – especially experiences of injustice, such as discrimination, corruption and repression.

Though there is no one path to violent extremism, radicalisation to violent extremism is most prevalent³ among populations and within communities that are denied basic human rights⁴. The international community is realising that the battle against violent extremism requires coordinated and holistic efforts that prioritise prevention over hard power. If undertaken efficiently, prevention efforts can serve as a bulwark against violent extremism by strengthening a community’s resilience to violent extremist agendas and appeals. We know that equal access to justice, opportunities, and positive alternatives helps to create more harmonious and tolerant communities. Prioritising prevention requires inhibiting conditions that allow for violent extremist rhetoric to resonate: conditions that are often linked to the denial or erosion of rights and freedoms. Giving priority to not only the protection, but also the strengthening of these rights and freedoms, is the best way to deflate the narratives exalted by violent extremists.

Efforts to repress freedoms (speech, assembly, movement, religion – to name a few) and deny human rights can weaken society in a host of ways. When inalienable rights and freedoms are denied, one consequence is the delegitimation of government and law enforcement, which can result in compromised trust and communication, thereby destabilising the wider community. When approached from another angle, violent extremists frequently manipulate religion, or perceived (or real) grievances against a religious group, to galvanise support for their use of violence. One way to inoculate against this recruitment tactic is to protect religious freedoms. This can be achieved by promoting inter- and intra-faith dialogue, and bolstering religious institutions. Equally important is the promotion of a religious institution’s autonomy from

¹ *Freedom in the World 2016: Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom Under Pressure.* [Freedom House](#). January 2016.

² *The Development Response to Violent Extremism and Insurgency.* [USAID](#). September 2011.

³ *2015 Global Terrorism Index.* [Institute for Economics and Peace](#). November 2015.

⁴ *Freedom in the World 2016: Anxious Dictators, Wavering Democracies: Global Freedom Under Pressure.* [Freedom House](#). January 2016.

structures (state or otherwise) that might be seen as illegitimate or corrupt in the eyes of the people. Individuals and groups who lack faith in their government may also come to see their religious institutions as inept, or lacking in credibility, if the two are too closely intertwined.

In recent years, traditional counterterrorism efforts have largely dealt with security threats by responding with the use of force. The belief was that security risks were the responsibility of security actors, and that security threats required law enforcement or military responses. However, this approach was flawed; data has shown that over-militarising responses to security threats can exacerbate frustrations among at-risk communities – and even reinforce narratives by violent extremist groups to aid in their recruitment.

We also witness communal destabilisation when political freedoms are repressed or corruption is rife, and public institutions (including judicial systems) are ineffective or delegitimised. Taken individually or together, these repressions exacerbate a community's vulnerability to violent extremist appeals. In the worst illustrations, history has shown that the vacuum created by the lack of freedoms and denial of rights allows for the entry of (and adherence to) violent extremists. Additionally, group or individual experiences “of unfair justice systems can contribute to a perception of exclusion, and human rights abuses by security forces can help extremist groups recruit new members and build sympathy within the wider community⁵.” For example, violent extremist groups may claim to offer their own brand of justice and the rule of law in areas where government service provision is weak – or they may offer an opportunity to avenge human rights abuses.

These are but a few examples of how the denial and erosion of human rights allow for the entry of radicalisation and recruitment by violent extremists. The best methods to reduce support and sympathy for violent extremism involve protecting and strengthening the very economic, political, social, and cultural rights and freedoms each individual (and community) is owed. As such, priority should be given to supporting: equal access to economic opportunities, education, political systems, and services; gender, racial, and religious equality; interfaith harmony and social cohesion; and good governance – including equality before the law.

If we are to contest radicalisation and prevent violent extremism, we must create environments in which each individual is ensured the rights and freedoms to assemble, to speak, to believe, to learn, to work – cohesive, inclusive societies where the appeals of violent actors fall on deaf ears. Listening to communities and prioritising support for locally owned initiatives⁶ is precisely what the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF), (a public-private partnership and the first global effort to support local, community-level initiatives to strengthen resilience against violent extremist agendas), was established to do.

⁵ *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*. [RUSI](#). 16 October 2015.

⁶ Scott Atran. *Here's What Social Science Says About Countering Violent Extremism*. [Huffington Post](#). 25 June 2015.