

Outside the Box:

Amplifying youth voices and
views on YPS policy and practice

The Counterstrike Generation

Ali Altiok

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, millions of young people, particularly young men in my age group, played the multiplayer first person shooter computer game 'Counterstrike'.¹ The game's logic is simple. Players divide in two teams: 'terrorists' and 'counterterrorists'. The terrorist team fights to plant a C-4 bomb, take hostages, or assassinate, while the counterterrorist team works to defuse bombs, rescue hostages, or kill terrorist fighters. Teenage high school students, including myself, socialised in large internet cafes, playing this game after classes or at weekends. In this way, we – the counterstrike generation – learned how warfare between terrorist and counterterrorist is fought... in the comfort of internet cafes.

Militarised violence was the only form of engagement between terrorist and counterterrorist in this game. Each team was offered a handful of choices of military equipment and weaponry. Players could choose to fight with explosives, smoke grenades, flashbangs, Kevlar vests, helmets, night vision goggles, and various pistols, shotguns, machine guns, rifles and sniper weapons. Most terrorist

teams armed themselves with Kalashnikovs (AK47) and most counterterrorists with Maverick Carbines (M4A1).

To win the game, not much tactical thinking was required. Entire teams were sometimes killed by the other side in a minute or two. The game offered no opportunities to find solutions other than to defuse bombs or rescue hostages. Everything was black or white, terrorist or counterterrorist; you killed or were killed. Somehow, I could never master the game. I was there to hang out with my friends. I never fully understood why we chose this game rather than others. Nonetheless, I watched as my friends spent hundreds of hours engrossed in it.

Counterstrike evidently targeted young men. Although I stopped playing it after high school, I continued to think about the similarities and differences between it and the global war on terror, and gradually understood that Counterstrike's simplistic binary language pervades the international peace and security field.

¹ Henningson, J. (2020), *The History of Counter-Strike*, RedBull. At: <https://www.redbull.com/se-en/history-of-counterstrike>. For more information, watch Valve (23.01.2017), *Counter-Strike: A Brief History*, YouTube. At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdBjDSzczgKY>.



The Global War on Terror and the multilateral system

2021 marked the 20th anniversary of the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In this period, more than two billion children and young people were born or grew up. Their entire lives were lived during a global war to counter terrorist threats.

The start of the GWOT also marked a significant turning point for ever-growing counterterrorism approaches within the multilateral system.² In September 2001, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted its first legally binding counterterrorism resolution in response to the 9/11 attacks.³ Since the adoption of resolution 1373, counterter-

rorism has been the issue that has most consistently brought UN Member States together in multilateral security cooperation.⁴ After 1373, the UNSC subsequently adopted more than twenty counterterrorism resolutions, established mechanisms to monitor states' compliance with them, and created subsidiary bodies to advise states on the topic.⁵

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) followed the trend set by the UNSC. In 2006, members of the UNGA adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS). Proposed by the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, the GCTS was

2 Rosand, E. (2003), 'Security council resolution 1373, the counter-terrorism committee, and the fight against terrorism', *American Journal of International Law*, 97(2), 333-341.

3 Unlike previous counter-terrorism resolutions adopted at the Council, UNSCR 1373 is the first legally binding resolution adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. For more on the importance of UNSCR 1373, see De Londras, F. (2019), 'The transnational counter-terrorism order: A problématique', *Current legal problems*, 72(1), 203-251, at <https://doi.org/10.1093/clp/cuz005>.

4 Altiok, A., Street, J., (2020), *A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism*, Saferworld. At: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>.

5 Lefas, M., Nozawa, J., Kessels, E. (2020), *Blue Sky V: An Independent Analysis of UN Counterterrorism Efforts*, Global Center on Cooperative Security. At: <https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GCCS-Blue-Sky-V-2020.pdf>.

intended to be a whole-of-UN approach that would optimise the coordination of efforts to counter and prevent terrorist threats.⁶

Many UN entities remained reluctant to engage in or associate themselves with the counterterrorism agenda.⁷ Some observed that to do so would challenge their original mandate or working principles. For example, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) sought to insulate their operational and policy work on humanitarian assistance and child rights from the counter-terrorism agenda.⁸ The reluctance of other UN entities (such as the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UN Development Programme (UNDP)) was mainly related to financial, operational, and reputational risks associated with the counterterrorism agenda and approach.⁹ From humanitarian agencies' perspective, participation in counterterrorism was seen to carry the risk of securitising their relations with non-state actors, civil society organizations, and communities.¹⁰ Over time, however, reluctance diminished, then vanished, especially after the UNGA adopted its Plan

of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE) in 2015.¹¹

The Plan of Action broadened the scope of the UN's engagement in counterterrorism. Many UN entities and some international peacebuilding actors claimed that PVE was a new, soft, more inclusive approach to counter terrorist threats, that focused on prevention and respected human rights. PVE was also packaged for young people and communities as a more development-based approach that was somehow insulated from the counterterrorism agenda.¹² In reality, the UN Plan of Action to PVE was neither disconnected from the counterterrorism agenda nor an entirely new approach to terrorist threats. It is an element of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.¹³ This means that no matter how much UN entities try to present PVE as something different, PVE is just a subset of the UN's counter-terrorism agenda; indeed, policy documents openly show these relationships. Nor is PVE as novel as it is claimed to be. It draws conceptually on counterproductive frameworks designed to counter violent extremism (CVE) that have been implemented for almost two decades in Europe

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- 6 United Nations General Assembly (2006), *Uniting Against Terrorism: Recommendations for a Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Report of the Secretary General*, A/60/825. At: https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/60/825.
- 7 Rosand, E. (2009), *From Adoption to Action: The UN's Role in Implementing its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*, Global Center on Cooperative Security, at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep20367.pdf>. See also, Rosand, E., Millar, A., Ipe, J. (2010), *Implementing the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in East Africa*, Center on Global Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, at: <https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/eastafrica.pdf>.
- 8 Lynch, C. (2017), 'UN Seeks More Than \$100 Million to Tackle Violent Extremism', *Foreign Policy*, 8, at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/08/u-n-seeks-more-than-100-million-to-tackle-violent-extremism/>. See also, Debarre, A. S. (2019), 'Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Risks for Humanitarian Action', at https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Extremism_Risks_-_Humanitarian_Action.pdf, in the series *Extremisms in Africa*.
- 9 Fink, N. C. (2012), *Meeting the Challenge: A Guide to United Nations Counterterrorism Activities*, International Peace Institute, at: https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/ebook_guide_to_un_counterterrorism.pdf. See also, Kaye, J. L. (2019), *Risk Management for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Programmes: Guidance Note for Practitioners*, UNDP, at: <https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Conflict-and-Human-Rights/Documents/Risk%20Management%20for%20PVE%20-%20UNDP%20Guidance.pdf>.
- 10 Norwegian Refugee Council (2018), *Principles under pressure: The impact of counterterrorism measures and preventing/ countering violent extremism on principled humanitarian action*, at: <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/principles-under-pressure/>. See also, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (2020), *Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism: The Erosion of Children's Rights in Armed Conflict*, Policy Note, at: https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/watchlist-policy-note_jan2020_lr.pdf.
- 11 Glazzard, A., Rosand, E. (2017), 'Is it all over for CVE?'. *Lawfare*, June, 11, at: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/it-all-over-cve>. For more on how reluctance vanished, see Altiok, A., Street, J. (2020), *A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism*, Saferworld, at: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>.
- 12 UN Development Programme (2016), *Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance, and Respect for Diversity - A Development Response to Addressing Radicalization and Violent Extremism*. At: [Discussion Paper - Preventing Violent Extremism by Promoting Inclusive Development.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/764).
- 13 UN General Assembly (2015), *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary General*, A/70/764. At: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/764.

and North America.¹⁴ The transition from CVE to PVE nevertheless had a function. This terminological transition “smoothed engagement with the development community, which had already made headway with the conflict-*prevention* agenda but would resist a role in anything more explicitly counterterrorism-related”.¹⁵

More than five years have passed since the UN and its various entities embraced the PVE approach. In that time, proponents of the approach have not demonstrated any positive results with regard to whether governments or UN entities comply with human right standards when they develop national counter-terrorism laws, frameworks, and programmes through the PVE framework. Instead, as the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism underlined, “the lack of a robust scientific basis for the current policies and practices aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism and the complete absence of human rights-based monitoring and evaluation, including by United Nations entities”.¹⁶ PVE as an approach merely added soft-security measures to hard-security counterterrorism.

After adoption of the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, the counterterrorism infrastructure of the UN system grew dramatically. Within a few years, this ‘PVE-isation’ of the UN system changed how UN programmes engaged with young people. Currently more than forty UN entities are involved in the counterterrorism agenda. Many of them, including the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), UN Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, International Labour Organization (ILO), UN Of-

fice on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and UN Counter-Terrorism Office (UNOCT), implement PVE programmes that primarily focus on young people.¹⁷ In many ways, counterterrorism became one of the main interfaces between multilateral institutions and young people in societies affected by armed conflict.

The adoption of these resolutions, strategies, action plans, and programmes shows clearly the growth of multilateral security cooperation in support of counterterrorism objectives in the last two decades. State co-operation is evidently necessary to maintain international security and to counter and prevent international terrorist threats. However, by insufficiently scrutinising the negative consequences of ‘the war on terror’ while enabling counter-terrorism approaches born of the same militarised warfare, the multilateral system has not in fact made the lives of young people any safer.

A tiny proportion of young people involve themselves in acts of terror, yet counter-terrorism approaches stereotype young people, particularly young men, as potential perpetrators of terrorism or extremist violence.¹⁸ The stereotypes portray young people as a security threat or risk, whose lives should be surveilled, controlled, and governed to prevent their potential involvement in violence. Having built an expansive counterterrorism architecture, the multilateral system has incentivised states to invest massive financial and political resources to protect a tiny sliver of young people from recruitment by terrorist armed groups. Yet, the multilateral system almost entirely overlooks or ignores the counterproductive impact of these policies on young people.

14 Kundnani, A., Hayes, B. (2018), *The globalisation of countering violent extremism policies: Undermining Human Rights, Instrumentalising Civil Society*, Transnational Institute. At: https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/the-globalisation_of_countering_violent_extremism_policies.pdf.

15 Ucko, D. H. (2018), ‘Preventing violent extremism through the United Nations: the rise and fall of a good idea’, *International Affairs*, 94(2), 251-270. At: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix235>.

16 UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism (2020), *Human Rights Impact of Policies and Practices Aimed at Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism*, A/HRC/43/46. At: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/045/67/PDF/G2004567.pdf?OpenElement>.

17 UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (2020), *UNOCT Consolidated Multi-Year Appeal 2019-2020*. At: https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/unoct_multi-year-appeal_website.pdf.

18 Simpson, G. (2018), *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security*, United Nations. At: <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf>.

Counterterrorism and the global YPS Agenda

As UNSC resolutions 2250, 2419 and 2535 reveal, the global YPS agenda is closely linked to and significantly influenced by counterterrorism discourse, politics, and practices. These resolutions make multiple references to the objectives of counterterrorism and affirm a direct relationship between the YPS agenda and various counterterrorism resolutions. Many states continue to say that their youth-focused counterterrorism programmes are part of their contribution to the YPS agenda.¹⁹ As a result, although multilateral institutions recognise that young people are peacebuilders, several UN entities still approach youth as a suspect community that may easily be drawn into terrorist or extremist forms of violence.²⁰ So, while the YPS policy agenda promotes the participation, inclusion, and protection of young people, for many governments and multilateral institutions it is simply a counterterrorism tool.²¹ From its inception and through its subsequent evolution, the global YPS agenda has straddled a tightrope, pulled between securitisation and inclusion,²² between the competing UN architectures of peacebuilding and rapidly growing counterterrorism.

This balancing act has extended across five milestones. The first is the adoption of UNSC resolution 2250, which formalised the global YPS agenda. The UNSC adopted resolution 2250 while UN member states were simultaneously negotiating the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in 2015. At this juncture, YPS advocates found a window of opportunity to convince UNSC members to adopt a thematic resolution on youth. However, though they succeeded in convincing Security Council members to recognise that youth are ‘peacebuilders’, numerous sections of the reso-

lution underlined young people’s susceptibility to ‘radicalisation’ and recruitment by violent extremist groups.

The second milestone is the *Independent Progress Study on YPS: The Missing Peace* (henceforth *The Missing Peace*), a “study on the youth’s positive contribution to peace processes and conflict resolution” mandated under UNSCR resolution 2250.²³ *The Missing Peace* argued that, by “approaching young women and men on the implicit assumption that they are all at risk of joining violent extremist groups”, counterterrorism approaches, including PVE, had created a ‘policy panic’ with multiple counterproductive effects.²⁴ It skewed investment in youth towards ‘hard-security’ approaches; exacerbated civic mistrust and patterns of exclusion and marginalisation of young people; and shut down civic and political space by criminalising dissenting youth voices. Most important, it curtailed young people’s endogenous capacities to transform underlying patterns of conflict, marginalisation, and exclusion. The findings of *the Missing Peace* positively influenced UNSC resolution 2419, adopted in 2018.

UNSC resolution 2419, the second YPS resolution, is the third milestone. Unlike UNSC resolution 2250, UNSC resolution 2419 did not imply that young people are susceptible to ‘radicalisation and recruitment’ by violent extremist groups. The term ‘radicalisation’, which counterterrorism discourse uses to securitise young people, is entirely absent from the text of UNSC resolution 2419. It nevertheless emphasised the importance of youth inclusion and participation in programmes designed to tackle terrorist violence and develop a narrative against

19 UN Security Council (2020), Towards the fifth anniversary of the youth and peace and security agenda: accelerating implementation of resolutions 2250 and 2419. At: <https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/2543/2543834/>.

20 The UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, for example, rationalises its youth engagement programmes, which are designed to prevent youth being exploited by extremist armed groups. See UNOCT (2021), *UNCCT CT Week HLC*. On: Youtube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nU9xYmWJDRE>.

21 Altioik, A. (2021), ‘Squeezed Agency’, in Ensor, O. M. (ed.), *Securitizing Youth: Young People’s Roles in the Global Peace and Security Agenda*, Rutgers University Press, pp. 74–91.

22 Simpson, G., Altioik, A. (2020), *A Brief Analysis of New UN Security Council Resolution 2535 on Youth, Peace and Security*, Interpeace. At: <https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/200805-Brief-Assessment-of-UNSC-Resolution-2535-Final-version-clean-version-R8699.pdf>.

23 UN Security Council (2015), Resolution 2250 (2015), S/RES/2250. At: <https://daccess-ods.un.org/tmp/4936742.78259277.html>.

24 Simpson, G. (2018), *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security*, United Nations. At: <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf>.

terrorism.²⁵ It also tasked the Secretary General to report to the Security Council again in 2020.

The fourth milestone is the 2020 Report of the UN Secretary-General on YPS. This report did engage with the debate over securitisation of the YPS via the counterterrorism discourse, but did so without rocking the boat for UN entities or agencies. On a positive note, the report mentioned that “[protecting] the human rights of young people requires also ensuring that responses to violent extremism do not stigmatise or instrumentalise youth”.²⁶

The fifth milestone is the adoption of UNSC resolution 2535. This broke new ground by intro-

ducing language on protection of civic and political space.²⁷ As national counterterrorist laws and measures shrank civic and political space,²⁸ resolution 2535 was a positive step to counter the securitisation of young people. At the same time, however, the resolution reintroduced ‘radicalisation’ language that had been removed from UNSC resolution 2419. Resolution 2535 “stressed the importance of providing opportunities for young people to strengthen resilience against radicalisation to violence and terrorist recruitment by creating policies for youth”.²⁹ Security Council Member States reversed course and once again labelled young people as susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment by extremist armed groups.



25 UN Security Council (2018), Resolution 2419, S/RES/2419(2018). At: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/173/81/PDF/N1817381.pdf?OpenElement>.

26 United Nations (2020), Report of the Secretary-General: Youth, peace and security, S/2020/167. At: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/055/28/PDF/N2005528.pdf?OpenElement>.

27 Simpson, G., Altiok, A. (2020), *A Brief Analysis of New UN Security Council Resolution 2535 on Youth, Peace and Security*, Interpeace. At: <https://www.interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/200805-Brief-Assessment-of-UNSC-Resolution-2535-Final-version-clean-version-R8699.pdf>.

28 Youngs, R. (2019), *Civic Activism Unleashed: New Hope or False Dawn for Democracy?*, Oxford University Press.

29 UN Security Council (2020), Resolution 2535, S/RES/2535 (2020). At: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/182/94/PDF/N2018294.pdf?OpenElement>.

Counterterrorism and youth

Evidence over two decades clearly shows that prevailing hard security-based counterterrorism strategies have not effectively ended or reduced terrorist violence. On the contrary, their militarised nature was arguably largely counter-productive and resulted in the geographic expansion of terrorist forms of violence.³⁰ Countries participating in militarised warfare experienced an increase rather than a decline in the number and frequency of terrorist attacks.³¹ Between 2001 and 2017, the number of ‘terrorist fighters’ increased by 270 per cent and the number of so-called ‘Salafi-jihadists’ terrorist groups, increased by 180 per cent.³² In the past five years, the incidence of far-right terrorist attacks increased by 250 per cent, and the number of deaths as a result of these attacks increased sevenfold.³³ These trends indicate that violence between terrorist armed organizations and counter-terrorist states is cyclical, and that the ways in which counter-terrorism approaches securitise young people play an important role in continuing the cycle.

Statistics suggest that young people, particularly young men, account for a significant proportion of the membership of terrorist armed groups – just as they play these roles in national armies or in state security institutions. A study undertaken by the United States Military Academy found

that about one fifth of Boko Haram’s suicide bombers are teenagers and children.³⁴ Another study by the RAND Corporation claimed that, between 2014 and 2016, the median age of jihadist terrorists in the U.S. was 20 years old.³⁵ In far-right groups in the United States of America, the average age of mobilisation appears to have been 34 years old.³⁶ Yet, young people in their 20s were the largest generational cohort that identified with far-right extremist groups.³⁷ These studies assert that the age composition of those who join terrorist armed groups, or those who commit terrorist acts, makes a compelling case for the vulnerability of young people to recruitment, or for their impulsive tendency to engage in violence.

When these age-disaggregated data are considered carefully, however, what they say about the vulnerability or impulsivity of young people is less sensational or dramatic than suggested. The number of young people who join terrorist armed groups is a tiny proportion of the youth population. The vast majority of young people reject participation in terrorist forms of violence, even if they are alienated from formal politics, socially excluded, economically marginalised, or directly exposed to violence.³⁸ As a matter of fact, the age demographic of terrorist armed groups broadly mirrors the age

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- 30 Institute for Economics & Peace (2020), *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. At: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>. The database used by this index excludes terrorist acts perpetrated by states. Despite this limitation, the Index reveals that broader counter-terrorism measures led to the geographical expansion of terrorist forms of violence.
- 31 Kattelman, K. T. (2020), ‘Assessing success of the Global War on Terror: terrorist attack frequency and the backlash effect’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, 13(1), 67-86. At: [Assessing success of the Global War on Terror: terrorist attack frequency and the backlash effect: Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Vol 13, No 1 \(tandfonline.com\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17513758.2020.1812221).
- 32 This number covers the years between 2001 and 2018. For more on these statistics, see, Seth G. J., Charles V., Danika N., Nicholas H., Clayton S., Hannah B. (2018), *The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat: Current and future challenges from the Islamic States, Al-Qaeda, and other groups*, Center for Strategic and International Studies. At: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf.
- 33 Institute for Economics and Peace (2020), *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*. At: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>.
- 34 Warner, J., Matfess, H. (2017), *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational and Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram’s Suicide Bombers*, Combatting Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy. At: <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Exploding-Stereotypes-1.pdf>.
- 35 Williams, H. J., Chandler, N., Robinson, E. (2018), *Trends in the draw of Americans to foreign terrorist organizations from 9/11 to today*, Rand Corporation. At: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2545/RAND_RR2545.pdf.
- 36 Pape, R. A., Ruby, K. (2020), *Right Wing Extremists in the US, 2015-2020*, Chicago Project on Security and Threats. At: https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/right_wing_extremism_online_2021_01_31.pdf?mtime=1612073812.
- 37 START (2021), *Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States*, PIRUS (Keshif). At: <https://www.start.umd.edu/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus-keshif>.
- 38 Simpson, G. (2018), *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security*, United Nations. At: <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf>.



demographic of the countries and regions in which extremist forms of armed violence occur. Young people constitute the great majority of the population in countries that are hit worst by terrorist form of violence.³⁹ In Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, Yemen, more than 60% of the population is under the age of 24.⁴⁰

By highlighting the youthful demographic of these countries, coupled with their association with terrorist armed groups, advocates of counter-terrorist warfare foster an urgency and ‘policy panic’ around disrupting the recruitment of young people into terrorist armed groups. Resources are then allocated for counterproductive counter-terrorism approaches that largely focus on preventing the recruitment of young people into terrorist armed groups, on the assumption that young populations are suspect.

The main problem is that these misguided prevention interventions largely downplay or completely ignore the fact that the excessive and unnecessary use of force by counterterrorism agencies helps to reproduce violence. This was one of the most important findings of *Journey to Extremism: Drivers, incentives and tipping points for recruitment*. For this report, UNDP interviewed 495 young people (most below the age of 30) who consider themselves members of extremist armed groups.⁴¹ The report found that government action, particularly abusive or violent behaviour by state security institutions (in other words, state violence), was the main reason why young people had joined extremist armed groups. This finding showed that young people are often more afraid of their governments than they are of extremist armed groups, as reported in *the Missing Peace* study.⁴²

39 Institute for Economics and Peace (2020), *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney. At: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>.

40 UN Population Fund (2021), *State of World Population 2021: My Body Is My Own, Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination*. At: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SoWP2021_Report_-_EN_web.3.21_0.pdf.

41 UN Development Programme (2017), *Journey to extremism in Africa: drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment*. At: <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

42 Simpson, G. (2018), *The Missing Peace: Independent Progress Study on Youth and Peace and Security*, United Nations. At: <https://www.youth4peace.info/system/files/2018-10/youth-web-english.pdf>.

Counter-productive security approaches have created a situation in which young people find themselves in the crossfire between terrorist armed groups and militarised state counter-terrorism approaches that violently intervene in their everyday

lives. To reverse this trend and disrupt this cycle of violence, the YPS agenda needs to better understand the ineffectiveness and counterproductive nature of counterterrorism in all forms.

The impact of counterterrorist warfare on youth

When counterterrorism takes the form of military warfare, it exposes young people to huge amounts of violence and suffering. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen alone, the Watson Institute has estimated that more than 929,000 people, including 387,000 civilians, have lost their lives as a result of counter-terrorism wars.⁴³ These wars also displace many young people. Conservative estimates suggest that counter-terrorist military interventions have caused the displacement of more than 37 million people from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines, Libya, and Syria, a number that “exceeds those displaced by every war since 1900, except World War II”.⁴⁴ These data have not been disaggregated by age. However, considering that the median age in these countries lies between 16 and 25,⁴⁵ it is evident that killings and forced displacement disproportionately impact youthful communities. Instead of protecting young people from the violence of terrorist or extremist groups, militarised counterterrorism campaigns put ever greater numbers of young people in danger and expose them to large scale violence and insecurity.

Counterterrorist warfare also places an extremely heavy economic burden on the shoulders of young people and children. The United States alone has spent about USD 8 trillion on wars to counter terror.⁴⁶ This astronomical number is paid for almost exclusively “by borrowing funds rather than through alternative means such as raising taxes or issuing war bonds”.⁴⁷ This means that the economic cost is not apparent to most current US taxpayers, who pay regular ‘peacetime’ taxes to service the debt incurred by these wars. Interest on the debt adds significantly to the overall cost. Estimates suggest that, even if all counterterrorist wars were to stop now, future generations will need to pay USD 8 trillion by the 2050s just to cover the interest charge.⁴⁸ The financial burden on the next generation is likely to aggravate both horizontal and intergenerational social and economic inequalities.

The high cost of counterterrorism skews economic resource allocation, away from development interventions and towards hard-security approaches. In 2019, for example, Nigeria spent USD 9.4 billion to contain violence,⁴⁹ more than a quarter of the country’s national budget. Similarly, G5 Sa-

43 Crawford, N. C., Lutz, C. (2021), *Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan & Pakistan (Oct. 2001–Aug. 2021); Iraq (March 2003–Aug. 2021); Syria (Sept. 2014–May 2021); Yemen (Oct. 2002–Aug. 2021) and Other Post-9/11 War Zones*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. At: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Direct%20War%20Deaths_9.1.21.pdf.

44 Vine, D., Coffman, C., Khoury, K., Lavasz, M., Bush, H., Leduc, R., Walkup, J. (2020), *Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States Post-9/11 Wars*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. At: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Displacement_Vine%20et%20al_Costs%20of%20War%202020%2009%2008.pdf.

45 UN Population Fund (2021), *State of World Population 2021: My Body Is My Own, Claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination*. At: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/SoWP2021_Report_-_EN_web.3.21.0.pdf.

46 Crawford, N. C. (2021), *United States budgetary costs and obligations of post-9/11 wars*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. At: https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_U.S.%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Post-9%2011%20Wars_9.1.21.pdf.

47 Peltier, H. (2020), *The cost of debt-financed war: public debt and rising interest for Post-9/11 war spending*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. At: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Peltier%202020%20-%20The%20Cost%20of%20Debt-financed%20War.pdf>.

48 Cost of War Project (2021), *Economic Cost*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University. At: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/economic>.

49 Institute for Economics and Peace (2020), *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney. At: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-2.pdf>.

hel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) currently spend 15–30% of their national budgets on countering terrorism, according to Niger’s delegate to the United Nations, Abdou Abarry.⁵⁰ Commenting on this budgetary lopsided-

ness, he also warned that high resource allocations to counter-terrorism are “diverting resources from other socioeconomic priorities such as sustainable development”.⁵¹

The impact of approaches to counter and prevent violent extremism

Counterterrorism methods have been diversified and broadened to improve the ‘effectiveness’ of military interventions.⁵² New terms and associated frameworks were invented, notably around ‘countering and/or preventing violent extremism’ (C/PVE). Counterterrorism campaigns currently employ numerous soft-security interventions alongside military techniques. The repertoire of contemporary counterterrorist activities includes empowerment, job creation, education, mental health and psychosocial support, media, arts, sports, culture, and many other programmes that predominantly target young people.

In a broad sense the C/PVE approach has two intertwined goals with respect to young people. It seeks to prevent young people from joining extremist armed groups; or to recruit them to work as counterterrorists. In this respect, C/PVE interventions largely recycle traditional counterinsurgency tactics: their aim is to win the “hearts and minds” of communities (and youth communities in particular), reduce their support for armed groups, or involve community members in gathering intelligence.⁵³ They are neither entirely new nor revolutionary.

Nonetheless, the pseudoscience of C/PVE introduced some new elements in counterinsurgency methods. C/PVE recognises the importance of young people in relation to addressing security but treats them as a suspect group by inventing (or co-opting) the idea of ‘radicalisation’. Its innovation is simple. Unlike counterinsurgency tactics, C/PVE programmes do not usually target entire communities. They tend primarily to target young people as suspicious individuals in communities due to their presumed vulnerability to radicalisation for violence.⁵⁴ In this way, C/PVE approaches enable security actors to focus and target their interventions. However, by labelling young people as suspicious individuals within communities, they harm social cohesion and fuel mistrust between young people and their wider communities.⁵⁵

It is important to note that C/PVE interventions are often implemented by youth-focused peacebuilding and development organizations. C/PVE should not be viewed as a peacebuilding or development intervention, however. As Marc Sommers has observed, these interventions are “inherently and explicitly connected to security concerns, mainstream development practice quite often is not”.⁵⁶

50 Abarry, A. (2020), ‘Amid Unprecedented Violence, Escalation of Terrorist Attacks in West Africa, United Nations Regional Office Needs Greater Role, Speakers Tell Security Council’, SC/14069. At: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14069.doc.htm>

51 Abarry, A. (2020), ‘Amid Unprecedented Violence, Escalation of Terrorist Attacks in West Africa, United Nations Regional Office Needs Greater Role, Speakers Tell Security Council’, SC/14069. At: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14069.doc.htm>

52 Kundnani, A., Hayes, B. (2018), *The globalisation of countering violent extremism policies - Undermining Human Rights, Instrumentalising Civil Society*, Transnational Institute. At: https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/the_globalisation_of_countering_violent_extremism_policies.pdf.

53 Novelli, M. (2017), ‘Education and countering violent extremism: Western logics from south to north?’, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 47(6), 835–851.

54 Sommers, M. (2019), *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism*, Promundo-US. At: [Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism \(promundoglobal.org\)](https://promundoglobal.org/).

55 Barzegar, A. Nagham E. K. (2018), *Youth Engagement and Violence Prevention: A Review of Transatlantic Experiences*, British Council. At: https://www.britishcouncil.us/sites/default/files/youth_engagement_and_violence_prevention_report.pdf.

56 Sommers, M. (2019), *Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism*, Promundo-US. At: [Youth and the Field of Countering Violent Extremism \(promundoglobal.org\)](https://promundoglobal.org/).



The direct connection to security concerns opens the way to securitisation of peacebuilding and development organizations through youth-focused policies and programmes.

When peacebuilding and development organizations implement C/PVE programmes, they mobilise young people to trust, work and collaborate with security actors. But these policy frameworks do not permit peacebuilding, development, or youth-led organizations to hold security actors to account for violence they commit. The C/PVE approach asks young people to trust security actors but does not empower peacebuilding and development organizations to question their trustworthiness. In this respect, it appears clear that C/PVE is not a sound approach for building trust between security sector actors and young people.

Moreover, the C/PVE as an approach curbs the aspirational dimensions of youth-focused peace and development work. Development and peacebuilding interventions traditionally engage young people for peace, democracy, and justice. But when devel-

opment and peacebuilding actors implement C/PVE programmes, they ask young people to study, work, play football, draw pictures, sing songs, or engage in similar social activities to prove that they are not becoming 'radicals', 'extremists' or 'terrorists'. These types of C/PVE interventions aim to empower young people so that they become more resilient to violent extremism. But when counterterrorism programmes value youth empowerment, we should ask what this empowerment is for. We need to question how counterterrorism empowers young people when the same approach simultaneously treats youth as a suspect community. Perhaps of gravest concern, P/CVE youth programmes frequently pathologise and criminalise young people who ask challenging questions and seek systemic and transformative change;⁵⁷ they discourage young people from demanding justice and exposing or challenging unlawful surveillance and other abuses by state security institutions.⁵⁸

The impact of youth empowerment programmes associated with C/PVE is rarely assessed.⁵⁹ This is not surprising because lack of monitoring and eval-

57 Sukarieh, M., Tannock, S. (2016), 'The deradicalisation of education: terror, youth and the assault on learning', *Race & Class*, 57(4), 22-38.

58 Muslim Justice League (2021), *What is 'Countering Violent Extremism'?* At: <https://muslimjusticeleague.org/cve/>.

59 Wallner, C. (2021), *The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism: Assessing the Evidence Base in*

uation is a chronic problem in the counter-terrorism field.⁶⁰ In the few cases where youth empowerment programmes have been monitored and evaluated, the quality of assessment was observably poor; but the evidence available suggests that these programmes are in fact ineffective in preventing extremist forms of violence.⁶¹

However, problems with counter-terrorist youth empowerment programmes go way beyond monitoring and evaluation. These programmes often rely on fundamentally misguided and flawed radicalisation theories that label young people as suspect communities.⁶² Empirical evidence contradicts the assumptions on which many of these theories are built. They assume that individuals flow

predictably into extremist armed groups and that people who participate in extremist violence have specific profiles or life paths. Conversely, the empirical evidence shows consistently that participation in extremist forms of violence has highly complex causes and does not follow a linear path.⁶³ In this regard, one of the most worrying concerns is the tendency of C/PVE programmes to suppress civil liberties and permit pre-emptive surveillance of young people. Youth empowerment programmes open the way for security actors to proactively monitor and surveil young people and their spaces.⁶⁴ Under the guise of preventing future terror attacks, young people are often unlawfully surveilled in public spaces, school corridors, on the internet, at sports clubs, and even in kindergartens.⁶⁵

Relation to P/CVE Interventions, Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper. At: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/the-contested-relationship-between-youth-and-violent-extremism-assessing-the-evidence-base-in-relation-to-p-cve-interventions>.

60 Altiock, A., Street, S., (2020), *A fourth pillar for the United Nations? The rise of counter-terrorism*, Saferworld. At: <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1256-a-fourth-pillar-for-the-united-nations-the-rise-of-counter-terrorism>.

61 Wallner, C. (2021), *The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism: Assessing the Evidence Base in Relation to P/CVE Interventions*, Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper. At: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/the-contested-relationship-between-youth-and-violent-extremism-assessing-the-evidence-base-in-relation-to-p-cve-interventions>.

62 Patel, F. (2011), *Rethinking Radicalization*, Brennan Center. At: https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Report_RethinkingRadicalization.pdf.

63 Ibid.

64 Coppock, V., Guru, S., Stanley, T. (2018), 'On becoming "radicalised": Pre-emptive surveillance and intervention to save the young Muslim in the UK', in Grasso, M., Bessant, J. (eds), *Governing Youth Politics in the Age of Surveillance*, Routledge, pp. 108-122.

65 Jefferis, D. (2016), 'What could go wrong with asking teachers to monitor kids for "extremist" beliefs?', ACLU. See also Qurashi, F. (2018), 'The Prevent strategy and the UK "war on terror": embedding infrastructures of surveillance in Muslim communities', *Palgrave Communications*, 4(1), 1-13.



PARTICIPANTS ATTEND A YOUTH CONFERENCE IN MOGADISHU TO ENHANCE YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SOMALIA POLITICS ON OCTOBER 10, 2016. AMISOM PHOTO BY ILYAS AHMED

Conclusion and recommendations

Counterterrorism in the form of military warfare kills, displaces, impoverishes, and disciplines young people; as a ‘soft’ counterinsurgency method, it violates their rights and freedoms and curtails their peacebuilding agency. In this policy brief, I have argued that in the last 20 years counterterrorism has been one of the primary sources of direct and structural violence experienced by young people.⁶⁶ For the YPS agenda, however, it has been tricky and uncomfortable to recognise and address the damage that state security approaches to counter terrorist threats have caused.

Though *The Missing Peace* cautioned about the counterproductive nature of hard-security oriented counter-terrorism approaches, advocates of the YPS agenda have paid little or no attention to

protecting young people from this harmful warfare. UN Member States, multilateral institutions and even most peacebuilding actors - including young people engaged in implementing the YPS agenda - have simply not paid enough attention to the harm that counterterrorist warfare has done to young people. Many of the actors who have influence over the YPS agenda reproduce new forms of ‘policy panic’ about youth. Wherever this is so, counterterrorism agencies recycle unfounded and dangerous narratives about youth participation in extremist forms of violence.⁶⁷ Counterterrorist states, multilateral institutions and many experts simply assume that, if young people spend more time online due to conditions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, they will be more vulnerable to online recruitment by extremist armed groups.

66 On the harmful impact of counterterrorism on youth, see: Maira, S. M. (2016), *The 9/11 Generation*, New York University Press; Grasso, M. T., Bessant, J. (eds.) (2018), *Governing youth politics in the age of surveillance*, Routledge; Martini, A., Ford, K., Jackson, R. (eds.) (2020), *Encountering extremism: Theoretical issues and local challenges*, Manchester University Press; Walker, R. F. (2021), *The Emergence of ‘Extremism’: Exposing the Violent Discourse and Language of ‘Radicalisation’*, Bloomsbury Publishing.

67 See for example: UN Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (2020), *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism*. At: https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org/securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jun/cted-paper-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-counter-t_0.pdf. See also, Jensen, V. (2020), *Pandemic focuses attention on investing in youth initiatives to prevent violent extremism*, UNECSO, at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/pandemic-focuses-attention-investing-youth-initiatives-prevent-violent-extremism>. See also, UN Security Council (2021), Twelfth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat, at: .

These claims are once more based on anecdotal evidence (at best), which more often than not has roots in negative assumptions and stereotypes about youth. Recent policy panics on youth and violent extremism that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic again confirmed that the impulse to securitise young women and men is deeply embedded in the cultural processes and value systems that shape multilateral security cooperation. Advocates of the YPS agenda must continue to dismantle myths and negative stereotypes of youth, and expose the roles that multilateral institutions play in legitimising the violence young people experience under the guise of counterterrorism.

Though this matter is urgent and important, most YPS advocates and organizations are not comfortable speaking out about the securitisation of young people through counterterrorism. This is partially due to their enduring dependence on donors who only see YPS from a counterterrorism perspective or who fund youth P/CVE programmes heavily. YPS advocates may believe that it could be strategically advantageous to avoid this issue in order to mobilise broader support from member states. But the risks and problems associated with counterterrorism are too big to ignore. Recognising the detrimental impact of counterterrorism is not a question of choice but should be seen as an imperative to maintain the legitimacy and integrity of the YPS agenda. If YPS advocates are serious about protecting marginalised and excluded young people, they should not speak exclusively about protecting

young people from the violence of non-state terrorist groups. The YPS agenda must be shaped to protect young people simultaneously from the violence of terrorist (non-state) actors and the violence of counterterrorist states.

To move the YPS agenda forward, three actions should be undertaken. First, advocates of the YPS agenda should counter counterterrorist securitisation of young people. Organizations that work on YPS should document counterproductive counterterrorism activities of all forms, and expose counter-terrorist interventions that harm young people and violate their human rights. Human rights mechanisms to which YPS advocates can report abuses and violations of the rights of youth include the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. Second, advocates of the global YPS agenda should critically monitor and evaluate the impact of C/PVE programmes that claim to empower young people. Inclusive, youth-led participatory processes should be established to assess the harms and counter-productive effects of such programmes. In particular, practitioners should ensure that non-elite, marginalised, excluded, and stereotyped young people participate in such assessments. Third, advocates of the YPS agenda should remove counterterrorist language and thinking from YPS resolutions and practice. YPS specialists should take steps to explain why and how YPS programmes differ from youth-focused C/PVE programmes.



Interpeace

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION
FOR PEACEBUILDING

Interpeace Headquarters

Maison de la Paix
2E Chemin Eugène-Rigot
Petal 5 (Building 5)
CH-1202 Geneva
Switzerland