UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANISATION (UNESCO)

PREVENTING THE INTERFERENCE IF RADICAL EXTREMIST

GROUPS WITH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

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Basic Overview of the Issue

The recruitment of youth to radical extremist groups is nothing new. Throughout history and since the rise of terrorist groups, the recruitment of youth through various complex ways have been prominent. Recruitment into terrorist forces whether willingly or forcibly remains a multifaceted issue with many aspects to consider while proposing solutions. Manipulation through personal connections, appeal to a certain ideology, real or perceived exclusion, prospects of glory, adoption of ideologies across generations, and many other aspects have been the prime reasons in the recruitment of youth and other vulnerable portions of society. While these aspects remain to be consistently taken advantage of, extremist groups have shifted their focus to targeting educational systems in an attempt to propagate their radical ideals and poison the minds of youth through the manipulation of curricula. For the last few decades, the rise of extremist groups' intervention in educational systems throughout various territories in addition to Arabic regions such as Middle-Eastern and African regions which have been festered with the presence of radical terrorism is visible. Even in territories free from active terrorism, the effects of extremism are present.

Groups like ISIS, Ansar al-Sharia and Taliban have actively taken advantage of the societal vulnerabilities throughout the territories they are active in. It is important to note that the main driver of terrorist recruitments is complex and varies across contexts. Factors such as the negligence of education and the lack of protection create grounds for terrorist group recruitments. If the activities of extremist terrorist groups targeting education continue, major societal implications will be seen. Some

Image 1: Map of countries affected by the recruitment of youth by extremist groups

Source: Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel

of the implications can be listed as: the erosion of social cohesion, the stagnation of long-term economic development and suppression of women's rights. The disruption of
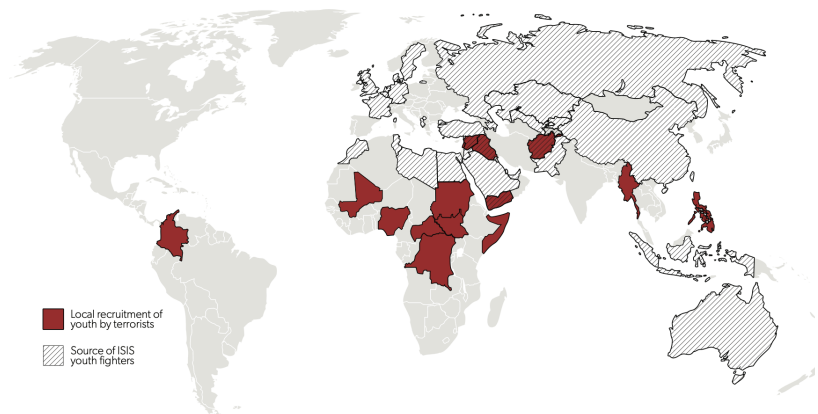
critical thinking, inclusivity andtolerance will also be concrete consequences which will start to surface as a result of the listed implications. There have been numerous Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism (PVE/CVE) programs and case studies done by countries which are deeply affected by the interference of extremist groups in education. However, it will be important to note that taking a wider approach rather than a more local approach will yield more effective results in combating this issue. Taking into account both the actively violent dealings along with the direct infiltration of educational systems, it will be important to study examples of the issue from various regions of the world spanning from east to west.

Explanation of Important Terms

Terrorism

The calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective. Terrorism has been practiced by political organizations with both rightist and leftist objectives, by nationalistic and religious groups, by revolutionaries, and even by state institutions such as armies, intelligence services, and police. (Britannica)

Extremism

Extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedom of others; or undermine, overturn the or replace a government's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the previously mentioned results. (GOV.UK)

Exploitation

The use of something in order to get an advantage from it. (Cambridge)

Interference

An occasion when someone tries to interfere in a situation. (Cambridge)

Radicalism

The action or process of causing someone to adopt radical positions on political or social issues. (Oxford Languages)

Indoctrination

To teach someone to fully accept the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of a particular group and to not consider other ideas, opinions, and beliefs uncritically. (Britannica)

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Programs (PVE/CVE)

Even though there happens to be no exact definition of the PVE/CVEs, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) states that CVEs actions comprise of the use of non-coercive means to dissuade individuals or groups from mobilizing towards violence and to mitigate recruitment, support, facilitation or engagement in ideologically motivated terrorism by non-state actors in furtherance of political objectives. (UNODC)

Secularism

A worldview or political principle that separates religion from other realms of human existence, often putting greater emphasis on nonreligious aspects of human life or, more specifically, separating religion from the political realm. (Britannica, 2024)

Detailed Background of the Issue

Terrorist Groups' Aims in Recruiting Youth

The reasons for youth joining terrorist groups are apparent in certain contexts where education is neglected. However, it is important to note why extremist groups focus on the employment of young recruits, in order to fully understand how education systems are exploited.

One of the main reasons for the employment of youth is their impressionability. Their state of being open to change due to their developing nature makes them absorb knowledge without any questioning. An appropriate family environment and access to quality education are two vital factors in the development of adolescents. If either of these factors are missing in a child's life, extremist groups position themselves as the providers of care, food, financial support and schooling which slowly molds young impressionable children into accepting the values and ideologies of the group they are raised under.

Adolescents' openness to indoctrination places them as a valuable recruit in the eyes of extremist groups. The long term loyalty of youth due to their impressionability is also a

factor which has placed them as targets for recruitment in the eyes of groups such as ISIS, Ansar al-Sharia, Taliban, etc. As an example of extremist groups' effort in recruiting young impressionable youth, 12 percent of ISIS's foreign affiliates are identified to be children (Cook and Vale, 2018). The effects of this large scale indoctrination of children has profound effects on the children themselves and society as a whole. Children will face mental and physical harm which they may never recover from. The mass indoctrination of children will also result in the ideologies of extremist groups being carried to the next generation due to the mass recruitment of children into terrorist groups, causing generational cycles of violence.

Pathways into Extremist Groups

Pathways into extremist groups are complex. Whilst extremist groups continue the recruitment tactics of child soldiers, new ways of child recruitment into extremist groups have arisen. Many young people are recruited through their family members or close connections manipulating them into believing that the groups they join are working to provide help and protection to them. There happen to be many other instances where young people are recruited forcibly. The targeting of schools, orphanages and displaced communities in an attempt to forcibly recruit children in masses. Later, they were trained as combatants, scouts and informants. Children can be exploited for
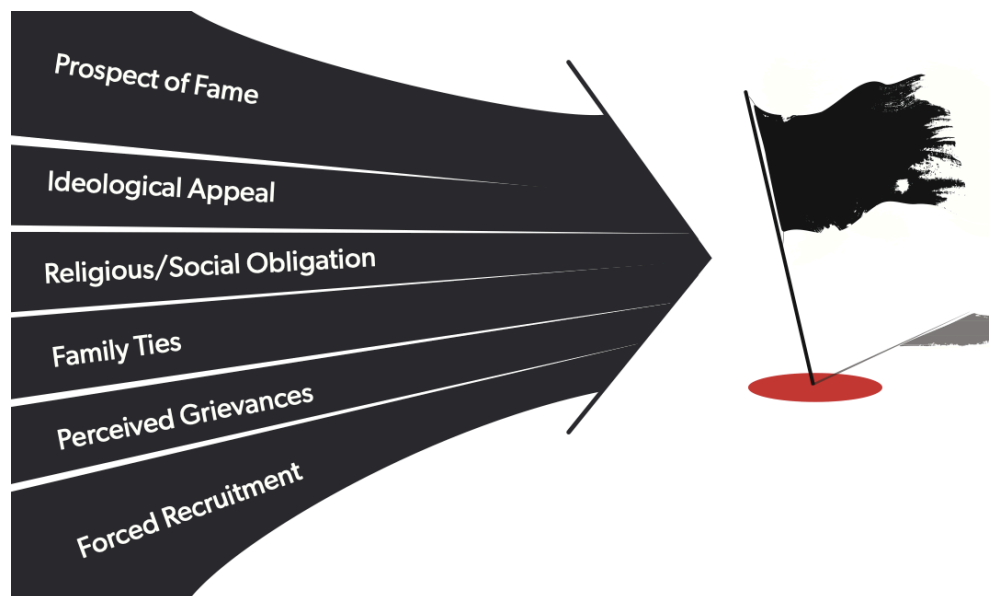

Image 2: Pathways into violent extremist groups. Source: American Enterprise Institute

propaganda, which causes deep psychological scars and hampers their reintegration into society. However, it is crucial to note that no recruitment should be fully regarded as willing,

since it is dictated by many factors such as escaping poverty, marginalisation, insecurities and attempts of survival.

Forcible Recruitments

Forcible recruitment of children has remained as one of the primary tactics used by extremist groups. Children may be kidnapped, abducted or coerced through threats. They can even be purchased from traffickers. These approaches are usually utilised in the cases of vulnerable children who do not have a home or lack parental support. Important examples can be listed as: ISIS's targeting of schools, orphanages and displaced communities to integrate them into indoctrination program called "Cubs of the Caliphate", the presence and activities of the Houthi rebels and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula include taking advantage of the instability in Yemen and recruiting children where education systems have collapsed and finally Ansar al-Shaira's use of schools to teach children extremist ideologies alongside the provided basic education.

Manipulation Through Personal Connections

There are cases where the close ties of children create the perception that the extremist groups they support are providers of help and support. ISIS and other terrorist groups take advantage of the young population's search for identity, desires for financial gain, protection and solidarity which pull them towards violent extremism. Later, factors such as unemployment, poverty and marginalisation push them further into being involved with terrorist groups which propose the prospect of overcoming the listed factors. The perception that these terrorist groups are defenders against other armed groups is also a prime tactic in the manipulation of youth.

Ideological Appeal of a Group

Due to the oppressive and neglecting environment children might find themselves in, the ideals of a certain group might appeal to them even though in reality, they are being deceived by a deceptive representation of an extremist group whose aim is to gain more followers such as the children mentioned above. Young individuals who are seeking identity, belonging and purpose; are the main targets of extremist groups. There have been attempts to encourage moderate political leaders to denounce the ideologies of violent extremism which may pose a counter-narrative to drive youth away from such ideologies.

Religious and Social Obligation

Extremist groups, primarily jihadist extremist groups are notorious for using religion as a tool for justifying their actions and attempting to recruit more people. Certain groups may utilise religious, social and cultural aspects of their community to attract more followers including children. Moreover, through the intervention of educational systems and curricula, overly religious and nationalistic indoctrination is actively utilised in the process of recruiting adolescents. Again the encouragement of religious figures to denounce the overly extremist ideologies of violent extremist groups which use religion as a tool in the recruitment processes of young people through education has been enacted in the past. Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb who is well regarded in the Islamic world has declared their actions as un-islamic and that their actions distort the teachings of Islam.

Tactics of Extremist Groups in the Recruitment of Youth Through Education

Along with the factors mentioned above, the utilisation of education through the following actions has been prominent. It is important to understand the correlation between the general pathways into extremist groups and how they take advantage of the vulnerabilities of children primarily through education in order to come up with solutions handling the key points of the issue.

Infiltration of School Curricula

The infiltration of school curriculums and teaching systems is not only present in areas with active terrorist activities such as the Middle-East or certain African regions, but also areas with no active presence of such groups like Europe and North America. For example, throughout 2021, members of the far-right neo-fascist organisation Proud Boys have attended several school board meetings across the country and pushed their agenda by calling for the banning of certain books from school libraries (The New York Times, 2021). The Ku Klux Klan has also been spotted handing out leaflets with racist, antisemitic and homophobic language directed at various school board members in a neighbourhood in Virginia. A deeper network reaching across 370,000 registered users along with an unidentified number of unregistered users, the Stormfront white-supremacist forum created in 1995 harbours various teachers in

positions of influence pushing an extremist agenda (Southern Poverty Law Centre, 2017). As a more direct infiltration, Taliban's enforcements can be given as an example as they attempt to purge academics and promote an extremist agenda. Taliban has been imposing heavy punishments to professors and teachers who stand against them in the "Talibanisation" of Afghan education.

Threats to Educators, Teachers and Schools

An elusive Taliban commander Khalifa Umar Mansoor has made the statement, "We will continue to attack schools, colleges and universities across Pakistan as these are the foundations that produce apostates." which clearly implies the highly utilised factor of fear enacted upon schools and educational institutions (The Express Tribune, 2016). Mansoor has credited himself responsible for the wanton killing spree at the Bacha Khan University in Charsadda, which happens to be the second deadliest mass killing in an educational institution in Pakistan. The first one was also headed by Mansoor. With the spike of terrorist attacks on schools over the last decade has placed educational institutions and educators under the constant pressure of dealing with the threat of extremist groups.

Use of Informal Education Networks

Extremist groups have also taken advantage of the informal education networks. These networks which operate outside the formal education systems, are effective in the dissemination of extremist ideologies due to their accessibility. Online platforms, community organisations and overly religious teaching groups can be specified as informal networks which are primarily used for such purposes of extremist groups.

Examples of Extremist Groups Infiltration of Education Systems

Taliban's Educational Restrictions

Since the overthrow of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan by the Taliban, various detrimental actions have been taken in an attempt to directly impose their islamist extremist agenda on students. After the removal of women from educational institutions completely, Taliban has shifted their focus towards the removal of male educators who challenge the extremist ideologies of Taliban. Along with the overhaul of staff of educational institutions across the country, they have also focused

on making an overhaul of university curricula and removing dissenting influences within academics.

Educational Policies of ISIS

The Islamic State's actions regarding the recruitment and indoctrination of students has been considerably more systematic and aimed towards long-term gains. The ISIS university takeover of the University of Mosul has eventually resulted in the shutdown of the institution. Countless students, professors and researchers have been dismissed as a result.
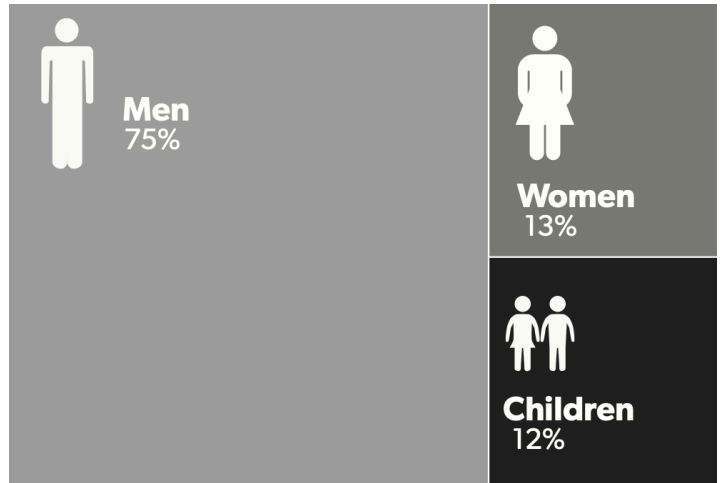

Image 3: Identified Foreign ISIS Affiliates in Iraq and Syria.

Source: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation

Researchers have been dismissed for being female, Shia muslim or even having American ties. There have also been many instances of professors fleeing the country just to avoid being placed on a death list. These actions of the Islamic State have had a detrimental effect on the Iraqi education infrastructure which was being pieced together after the Iraq War. The Islamic State is also infamous for systematically recruiting, indoctrinating and providing training and education which prepares them for taking on an active role in the future of ISIS.

Extremists' Infiltration of Education in Europe and North America

Even though the regions of North America and Europe do not face active terrorism, they are subject to extremist influences from numerous radical groups. As explained in the "Infiltration of School Curricula" section, extremist white-supremacist organisations such as Ku Klux Klan, Young Boys and extremist networks such as the Stormfront remain as a major threat to secular education systems in North America and Europe. Promotion of biased classroom materials brought by teachers with extremist ideologies as well.

Manipulation of Educational Materials

The infiltration of school systems and the use of corrupted, biased and antisemitic

extremist propaganda has been prominent in areas where terrorist groups have an established presence. Extremist groups take control of the educational materials being taught in schools in order to propagate one-dimensional world views which shape the views of children from a young age, making them ideal recruits

Image 4: Class being taught within the ISIS system. Source: Atlantic Council

in the future. As an example, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" an antisemitic materia in various Middle-Eastern countries has been used in the past. There happen to be other ways of pushing agendas within the classroom, one of which involves the educators supporting an extremist ideology.

Major Parties Involved

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS)

As explained in various parts of the report, the Islamic State has had different approaches in the exploitation and utilisation of younger populations. Their systematic approach of providing children with education geared towards supporting extremist ideologies and preparing them for positions within the Islamic State. ISIS has systematically manipulated school systems, primarily in areas such as Raqqa and Mosul by rewriting the curriculum. The rewritten sharia-based curriculum aimed to suppress critical thinking and indoctrinate the children into adhering to extremist beliefs. Secular subjects such as art, music, national history, literature and anything related to Christianity was banned, deemed blasphemous and school materials received an overhaul accordingly. ISIS has also taken over and shut down various educational institutions and numerous researchers have been dismissed for being women or having ties with the United States. It is also important to mention the "Cubs of the Caliphate" program of the Islamic State where children from the

ages 10 to 15 are gathered and trained to actively take part in the extremist group as combatants, scouts and messengers. ISIS's aim is to indoctrinate a large portion of the Iraqi and Syrian youth to build the future of ISIS. These actions result in facing major difficulties in the reintegration of children into society as they are raised to embrace extremist ideologies.

Taliban

Taliban has made profound changes in the education system of Afghanistan since they have taken over the government. Taliban has significantly increased the emphasis on Islamic education with the implementation of extremist ideologies and the increasing disregard of secular subjects. For example, higher education credits for Islamic studies have been tripled, calling for universities to adjust their curriculum accordingly. Another area where Taliban has made deep changes is gender based restrictions. Taliban has barred female education beyond 6th grade due to the noncompliance with Sharia, affecting approximately 1.4 million girls (UNESCO, 2021).

The Houthi Rebels

The Houthi movement is an extremist movement originating in Yemen from the Zaidi Shia minority and has been posing a major threat to the nation of Yemen with control established in various areas in the country. With the officially recognised Yemeni government operating from exile, grounds for the exploitation and exertion of influence by extremist groups over various institutions including schools have been created. The Houthis' considerably effortless access to the exploitation of schools have deteriorated the country's education system profoundly. The ongoing conflicts within the country have created a large-scale humanitarian crisis and in turn, hindered the access to education greatly. Furthermore, schools have been used as grounds to propagate extremist ideologies on youth in a similar manner to other terrorist groups. Banning of secular practices, prohibition of gender mixing and excessive use of slogans alongside religious anthems are some of the actions which have been enacted. However, the Houthis' utilisation of schools are more geared towards recruitment to the insurgency, later forcing children to partake in conflicts. 1,406 children recruited by the Houthis who had died on the battlefield in 2020 and 562 between January and May the following year (UN, 2020).

Ansar al-Sharia

Ansar al-Sharia is a terrorist group operating under Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula which is a part of the Al-Qaeda network. Ansar al-Sharia has different branches that operate independently. They have a branch operating in Yemen as well as Libya. Ansar al-Sharia utilises similar tactics in the disruption and manipulation of educational systems as well as recruitment of youth into their ranks compared to the aforementioned extremist groups. Benghazi and Derna were captured and schools within the region were altered to fit the radical Islamic ideologies of the groups. Youth centres and informal madrassas were also turned into recruitment hubs. Since 2017, the extremist group's effect on the region has significantly weakened due to the military involvements of the Libya National Army (LNA) and the United States. The LNA has organised various operations to mitigate the effects of Ansar al-Sharia and along with the support of US airstrikes, the group's infrastructure has deteriorated.

Yemen

The officially recognised Yemeni government has been operating in exile since the Houthi insurgency capture of the capital Sana'a in 2014. In an attempt to recapture the capital, a Saudi-led coalition enacted a military intervention to reinstate the official government, however, this attempt has failed. Due to the instability of the official government the Houthi Rebels were able to take advantage of the turmoil by claiming control over numerous institutions including the education system. Since then, 2 million children among the Yemeni population have been out of school whilst others have been recruited by the Houthis (UNICEF, 2019). The intervention of international bodies has been present which include UNICEF and UNESCO's launch of initiatives to restore educational materials, train teachers and attempting to reinstate and rehabilitate schools along with the United Nations Security Council's sanctions on the groups who were responsible for the involvement of children in conflicts.

Pakistan

Pakistan has taken measures to directly eliminate any potential ramifications of extremist groups' influences through education by enacting curricular reforms, promoting civil engagement and awareness campaigns and collaborations with UNODC. Pakistan has also formulated a country-wide action plan as part of their counter-terrorism strategies called the

National Action Plan (NAP). Pakistan's NAP has aims spanning across various areas such as military, legal, educational and media reforms. Their goals in the education reforms place emphasis on the importance of the regulation of madrassas and reforming of the madrasa curriculum to better fit the country's ideals and prevent the dissemination of extremism among youth.

The European Union

Even though there happens to be no active presence of terrorist groups in Europe, it is not possible to ignore the influences of extremist ideologies' effect on educational networks and the lives of adolescents. The EU has launched various initiatives attempting to tackle the issue. One example of these initiatives is the €60 Million invested 4 year "EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation". This hub has been acting as a central platform for intelligence sharing regarding research on the prevention of radicalisation and best practices in the prevention of extremist activities in general contexts and educational contexts. There have been many accounts in European countries where activities where extremist agendas have been promoted or at least speculated to be promoted. Examples to this can be given from Germany, UK and France. In Germany, neo-nazi fascist groups have been present with attempts regarding the involvement in education and other areas. In the UK, the highly speculated "Trojan Horse Scandal" has caused a major spike in the scrutinisation of Muslim schools in Birmingham resulting in some schools being closed or placed under heavy supervision. In France, the heavy supervision and cut of support to certain Muslim schools has led to tensions between the government and such schools.

Chronology of Important Events

Date	Description of Event
August 2014	With the Islamic State's seizing of large territories in Iraq and Syria, the declaration of a caliphate takes place. Educational

	curricula is profoundly changed.
September 21, 2014	The Houtis' capture of the Yemen capital, Sana'a. Education systems are corrupted and children are recruited.
March 2015	The beginning of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, against the Houthi insurgency.
July 2015	ISIS's establishment of the "Cubs of the Caliphate" program. Large portion of the youth population is recruited forcibly.
December 9, 2015	United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 is enacted, which encourages Arab states to counteract extremist groups' recruitments by implementing and promoting inclusive curricula.
March 2019	ISIS is defeated in Baghouz and the manipulation of education systems is exposed.

August 2021	Taliban bans girls' education in Afghanistan after taking control of the government.
May 2022	"Education Cannot Wait" initiative by UNESCO is set into action in Yemen which focuses on addressing the disruption of educational systems, rebuilding and reinstating schools affected by the Houthis.
June 2022	Iraq organises campaign to rehabilitate children and youth in ISIS-affected areas
October 2023	Saudi Arabia's reforms regarding school curricula in an attempt to combat extremist ideologies.

Relevant International Documents

-United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Action Plan to Mitigate Violent Extremism, 12 February 2016 (*A/RES/70/254*)

https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n16/037/59/pdf/n1603759.pdf

-United Nations Security Council Resolution on Emphasizing the Role of Young Individuals in Countering Extremism, 9 December 2015 (*S/RES/2250*)

https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n15/413/06/pdf/n1541306.pdf

-United Nations Security Council Resolution on Combating Extremist Actions Primarily Targeting Youth, 28 September 2001 (*S/RES/1373*)
https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n01/557/41/pdf/n0155741.pdf

-United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on the Safeguard Mechanisms Regarding the Protection of Educational Systems to Attacks, 24 March 2016 (*A/HRC/RES/31/32*)
https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g16/083/21/pdf/g1608321.pdf

-United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the Importance of Access to Education in Emergencies and Protection Against Extremist Influences, 9 July 2010 (*A/RES/64/290*)
https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n09/479/23/pdf/n0947923.pdf

Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There have been major attempts in solving the issue at hand as it has been widely recognised as an issue with a high potential to yield negative implications in the future if not dealt with. Major international parties such as the United Nations and the European Union have implemented frameworks and initiatives spanning over a large portion of the affected countries and regions. One of the most effective solution attempts was made by UNESCO with their Prevention of Violent Extremism through Education (PVE-E) initiatives which aim to equip educational institutes, classrooms and educators with the necessary tools to undermine the spread
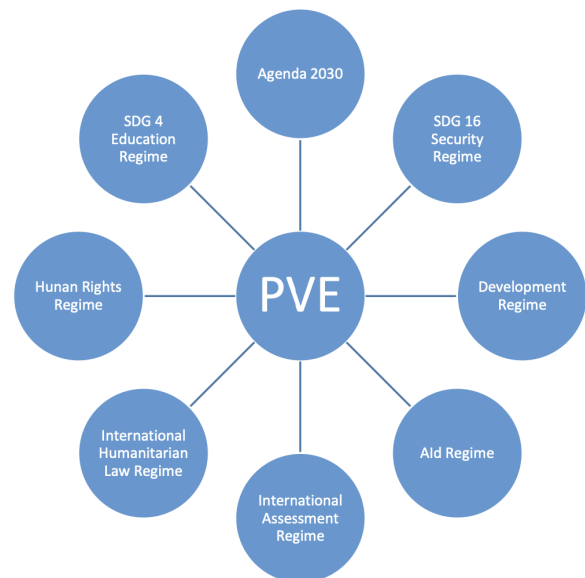
Image 5: A schematic representation of PVE as part of a regime complex (the Development and Security agents are on the right half of the scheme whereas the Education and Human Rights are on the left side). Source: National Counter Terrorism Authority

of extremist ideologies by improving students' critical thinking skills and class engagement. The EU has also pushed towards the implementation of Radicalisation Awareness Network

(RAN), an initiative which supports counter narratives within classrooms along with teacher training. The World Bank and OECD have also been in active financial support for frameworks against the spread of extremism through education. Various case studies by countries such as the US, the UK, Pakistan, Kenya, France, etc. have been effective in the understanding of the issue.

However, it must be noted that the PVE global regime can have contradictory effects due to the different approaches of various parties. These contradictions arise from the implementation of Framework of the Sustainable Development Goals where the emergence of international organisations which primarily focus upon the economic aspect of sustainable development, such as the World Bank and OECD, compete with international actors, mainly UN, UNESCO which foster sustainable human development. Since PVE can be taken into account as a part of a regime complex where contradicting powers such as development and security actors on one hand and the education and human rights actors on the other, the continuous tug-of-war between these actors is visible.

Solution Alternatives

Due to the multi-faceted nature of the issue and its variability across different contexts, calls for the implementation of solutions which promote international cooperation and engagement. As explained in the "Past Attempts to Resolve the Issue" section, even though different international actors push towards initiatives aiming to resolve the issue at hand, the differences between the approaches of various actors results in contradictions between initiatives. Balancing out the implications of development, security, education and human rights approaches, will yield more favourable results in the improvement of the overarching issue. However, it must be noted that military force will have to be used in the fight against extremist groups as they have proven to be capable of defending themselves against large military campaigns such as Saudi Arabia's coalition against the Houthis in Yemen.

Furthermore, it will be necessary to push for further initiatives that aim to tackle the issue through educational reforms, heavy supervision and providing educators with the training to effectively undermine the spread of any extremist ideologies. In areas without active terrorist activities, it will be necessary to organise crack-down operations to decimate

any influences of extremism through the collaboration of relevant organisations. In regions with active terrorist and extremist groups, it will be beneficial to advocate for collaboration between the countries in the region and call for the support of various international organisations and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Useful Links

Reuters's insight on the conundrum Muslim Schools are currently in, in France's fight against Islamism.
https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/muslim-schools-caught-up-frances-fight-against-islamism-2024-06-03

A scholarly article by Trees Pels and Doret J de Ruyter which explores the influence of education in the prevention of radicalisation or exploitation of it in radicalisation
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/Article_9155.pdf

The Humanist's article on challenging hate groups and protecting children against their intervention in educational systems
https://thehumanist.com/magazine/fall-2023/rising-extremism-challenging-hate-groups-and-protecting-children

The UK Government's Department of Education's official guidance on management of risk in the radicalisation in educational settings.
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-risk-of-radicalisation-in-your-education-setting

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