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EAST AFRICA POLICY BRIEF NO.2

The right to FoRB and Preventing and
Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)

Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies: East Africa and Beyond

*Recommendations informed by a workshop for Scholars, Policymakers,
Practitioners, and the Communities in the Horn and East Africa*



Ministry of Foreign Affairs





The right to FoRB and the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE)

THE WORKSHOP

The workshop, 'Reimagining the Role of Religion in Building Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies' on 5-6 November 2024, aimed to locate religion's contribution to building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, creating space to re-envision what these concepts look like in practice. Religion has frequently been viewed as a problematic aspect of peace and security in domestic and international settings. Tainted by associations with conflict, terrorism, and violent extremism within a broadly secularist international public domain, religion is frequently ignored or deliberately excluded from projects aiming to build peace, democracy, and inclusive and just societies. Yet this narrative, while pervasive, is far from the full story. Religion, in all its multifaceted complexity, makes rich and diverse contributions to the goal of realizing just and inclusive societies. Excluding religious actors and factors from analysis and policy and program development limits the options we have available for pursuing peace and, worse, allows fringe and extremist groups to grow and strengthen if unchecked.

The workshop specifically focused on the Horn and the East African context, a region that has seen a marked spread of religion-linked conflicts and extremist activities over the last two decades. Representatives from government, non-government, international organisations, academics, and civil society networks participated in the workshop. 42 participants participated in the workshop.

INTRODUCTION

This thematic area assesses the nexus between the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE). Many FoRB-PCVE initiatives intersect in local peacebuilding processes in the Horn and the East African region. This brief highlights the key findings of the workshop on the FoRB-PCVE nexus, its intersections with peacebuilding, and its challenges.

Initiatives addressing the right to FoRB in PCVE show considerable progress impacts in reducing religious marginalization, religious discrimination, promoting religious tolerance, and harmony. Projects by the Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) illustrate that integrating FoRB platforms to PCVE initiatives supports inter-, intra-, and extra-religious pathways, promoting dialogue among different religious minorities. The workshop findings indicated that successfully addressing the FoRB-PCVE nexus in the Horn and East African region requires a shift in focus from Islamist extremism to include the various forms of extremism present in the region. The FoRB-PCVE nexus needs to acknowledge that different forms of violent extremism are embedded within

structural causes such as historical marginalisation and religious discrimination. These structural causes are concealed under violent extremism labels, which need to be addressed. Implementing the right to FoRB and PCVE at the local level is challenging due to its varied interpretations at the global, national, and local levels. In some initiatives, the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) integrated within Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) programs faces the dual challenge of localizing both FoRB and PCVE concepts.

Workshop discussions highlight the importance of providing FoRB platforms to address the root causes of religious constructs in harmful ideologies to counter or provide alternative narratives. FoRB initiatives encountering extremist religious beliefs require efforts by religious actors with local credibility, where their roles are pivotal in constructing counter and alternative narratives to interpreting extreme beliefs and narratives. The inclusion of women and youth in FoRB and PCVE policy meetings is vital to influence the FoRB-PCVE discourses and actions.



Figure 1 – Islamic State Influence in the Horn and East African Region.
Source: Tyson, Karr, Ford (2025). Africa File.

THE CONTEXT

The “East African corridor,” extending from Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda through Tanzania, and Mozambique, has experienced a marked increase in violent extremism.¹ While often characterised as “religious”, these extremist groups are motivated by a complex array of political, economic, ethnic, and cultural factors, in addition to religion.²

Notable here is Al Shabaab, spreading from Somalia, and the Islamic State (IS), continuing to make inroads in the East African region.³ These non-state armed groups reflect the fluid and variable nature of conflict systems today and are at the heart of some of the continent’s most enduring peace and security challenges.

Recent extremist activities in Mozambique by the Islamic State, and the constant attacks by the Allied Democratic Forces, a rebel group affiliated with the Islamic State (Islamic State Central Africa Province), show the new transnational wave of religious-linked extremism in the region, as shown in Figure 1.⁴ Many countries in the East African region have embarked on massive counterterrorism (CT) strategies, including preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) frameworks and resolutions initiated to contain and avert extremism and terrorism.⁵

These extraordinary national security measures in their terrorism containment efforts resulted in myriad violations and abuses of fundamental human rights and principles, including the right to FoRB.⁶ Impacts in reducing religious marginalization, religious discrimination, promoting religious tolerance, and harmony. Amid different forms of success in violent extremism mitigation, CT and PCVE frameworks and mechanisms have further contributed to stigmatizing communities based on religious affiliations, especially Muslim⁷ and minority indigenous and traditional communities, within the purview of the right to FoRB, furthering new waves of radicalization and extremism.

¹ Nkomo, S. and Buchanan-Clarke, S. (2020). *Violent extremism in Africa: Popular assessments from the ‘Eastern Corridor.’ Afrobarometer, Policy Paper No. 65.*

² Romaniuk, P., Durner, T., Nonninger, L., and Schwartz, M. (2018). *What Drives Violent Extremism in East Africa and How Should Development Actors Respond?* *African Security, 11* (2), 160–180.

³ *International Crisis Group* (2024). *The Islamic State in Somalia: Responding to an Evolving Threat. Crisis Group Africa Briefing No. 201.*

⁴ Tyson, K., Karr, L. and Ford, Y. (2025). *Africa File, February 06, 2025. The Critical Threats Project. Institute for the Study of War.* <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/africa-file-february-6-2025-m23-unilateral-ceasefire-saf-closes-khartoum-us-airstrikes>

⁵ Dessu, M. K. (2024). *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism through Policing in Africa.* Washington, DC: Wilson Center.

⁶ Meretti, B. (2024). *The ‘War on Minorities’ under the guise of countering terrorism and violent extremism. Research Brief. Geneva, Switzerland: The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights; United Nations - Human Rights Council* (2023). *Human rights implications of the development, use, and transfer of new technologies in the context of counter-terrorism and countering and preventing violent extremism:* https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session52/advance-version/A_HRC_52_39_AdvanceEditedVersion.docx

⁷ Badurdeen, F. A. (2018). *Surveillance of young Muslims and counterterrorism in Kenya.* In Grasso, M. and Bessant, J. *Governing Youth Politics in the Age of Surveillance.* London: Routledge, pp. 93-107.

For countries like Ethiopia, for example, religious actors are pivotal in peacebuilding, where internal conflicts are heightened under ethnic and religious banners, often politicized by political entrepreneurs. Ethnicity or religion by itself has never been a sufficient reason for conflict to arise in the country; rather, politicians try to provoke the public through their ethnic identities and religious backgrounds.⁸ Resource-based conflicts also exist in the region, often viewed under ethnic or religious cover.⁹ The recent phenomenon of destructive cults, like the Shakahola cult incident in Kenya, which contributed to the deaths of more than 400 people, further heightens the role of religion, and how we term 'religiously driven violent extremism' in the management and regulation of religious institutions.¹⁰ This drives the dilemma of the complications associated with the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Right to Life in safeguarding national security interests.¹¹

There is acknowledgment in the East African region that religion is a strong instrument in building peaceful and just communities.¹² Existing national and locally-led peacebuilding initiatives

reveal the importance of religious engagements to advance the interests and values at the national and local levels.¹³

National governments and international donors increasingly work with religious actors to strengthen peacebuilding initiatives, including anti-corruption mechanisms, strengthening democracy, gender equality, and recognition of and protection for human rights in general, including the right to FoRB. Strategic religious engagements that utilize FoRB literacy show immense potential in creating and sustaining peace.¹⁴ Religious engagements enable a platform to assist in understanding and working effectively with diverse religious actors to achieve development, humanitarian, and peace endeavours.¹⁵ Joint Initiatives for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) a partnership of 50 civil society organisations based in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, and Uganda, has shown the potential of religious actors in promoting religious engagements and, building peace by helping to address issues such as poverty reduction, climate change, public health, education, corruption, preventing and countering violent extremism. JISRA is a five-year programme

(2021-2025) funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to further peaceful and just societies where all enjoy Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB).¹⁶

Promoting the right to FoRB, where no person should experience discrimination for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief, is key in safeguarding other human rights. For example, when the right to FoRB is curtailed, it can deny freedom of expression, freedom of association by banning religious assemblies, detention without trial, impunity for attacks on places of worship, and unlawful killing.¹⁷ FoRB fluency can create an enabling environment for respect between religious groups and can make it harder for violent extremists to exploit local religious differences in communities. Building capacity in this area has the potential to reduce suspicion and antagonism within and across religious and non-religious communities. It facilitates engagement and relationship building. When religious actors work together to develop and implement shared goals, they create mutual trust. Creating and building trust underpins the values and ethics in building sustainable, peaceful, just societies, to strengthen national and global security.¹⁸

⁸ Tadege, M. A. (2022). *Early Warning Systems and Response Mechanisms for Countering Violent Extremism in Ethiopia*. SSRN: papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=446069; Adeto, Y. A. (2020). *Violent ethnic extremism in Ethiopia: Implications for the stability of the Horn of Africa*. ACCORD: <https://tinyurl.com/5n7jxtkd>

⁹ Dent, A. (2025). *The Transnational Smuggling Fueling Conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. *Georgetown Security Studies Review*: <https://tinyurl.com/2njvrk6c>; Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2025). *The DRC Conflict enters a dangerous new phase*: <https://tinyurl.com/43dfu8ap>

¹⁰ Badurdeen, F. A. (2023). *Kenya cult deaths: a new era in the battle against religious extremism*. *The Conversation*. <https://tinyurl.com/2sxp5pfa>

¹¹ Badurdeen, F. A. (2023). *Convergence of cults and religious extremism: What do we learn from the Shakahola mass suicide endeavour?* *Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies*. <https://tinyurl.com/37xejs52>

¹² Kilonzo, S. M., Chitando, E. And Tarusarira, J. (2023). *The Palgrave Handbook of Religion, Peacebuilding, and Development in Africa*. London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ Kenya Community Support Center (2019). *Evaluation Report*. Mombasa, Kenya.

¹⁴ JISRA (2023). *JISRA Midterm Review*. <https://www.mensenmeteenmissie.nl/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/JISRA-2023-Midterm-Review.pdf>

¹⁵ Search for Common Grounds (2023). *Inter-religious dialogues: A space for community-led discussions of religion and acceptance*: shorturl.at/AS41m

¹⁶ JISRA (2021). *About JISRA*. <https://jisra.org/>

¹⁷ Ghanea, N. (2023). *Making Freedom of Religion or Belief a Lived Reality: Threats and Opportunities*. <https://tinyurl.com/3h7kpuja> Kerr, S. (2022). *Reflections on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security*. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 20(2), 61–68.

¹⁸ See: Fattori, G. (2022). *Freedom of Religion or Belief is Security: The 2019 OSCE Policy Guidance on FoRB and Security*. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 20(4), 4–11.



Nevertheless, religious engagements & FoRB interventions driven by external actors or by local communities are often viewed with skepticism, especially regarding the actors' or parties' motivations and interests. This skepticism is not without reason. Both FoRB and religious engagement have been criticized in scholarly literature for their potential and actual misuse and abuse to privilege the rights of some religious actors and communities over others, or for the cynical instrumentalization of religion in the pursuit of secular foreign policy goals.¹⁹ Such skeptical views also exist at the grassroots among recipient communities, where FoRB initiatives have been seen at times by some actors as a smokescreen for neo-colonial interventions or Christian proselytizing by Global North donor governments.²⁰ Further, effective religious engagement is inhibited by low levels of knowledge regarding religion and religious dynamics among government officials, security personnel, and even non-state actors working in security realms and peacebuilding efforts. Preliminary JISRA research findings also suggest that there is a blurring of "FoRB" with "religion", meaning that some members of recipient communities see FoRB not as a human right, but as an interchangeable term for religion (most often Christianity

and Islam) itself. Yet we can also see terminological confusion and imprecision in discourses on "FoRB", "interfaith dialogue", and "religious engagement" within policy discourses and practice amongst Global North actors and within international institutions and forums. This highlights the urgent need for improving religious literacy and FoRB literacy in diplomacy, security, and peacebuilding in the East African region and globally.

Despite its promises for promoting religious tolerance and harmony, the FoRB-PCVE nexus is at its nascent stages in implementation. Progress of FoRB initiatives within PCVE are made in the region, where FoRB initiatives such as from the JISRA Kenya project show strides in reducing religious conflicts and religious marginalization. As projects on advancing the right to FoRB and PCVE tend to focus on establishing the universality of these terms, there is an urgent need to improve the usefulness of the contents envisaged in these terms in addressing local problems. The workshop drew attention to the need to make the terms FoRB and PCVE more locally relevant, particularly in the context of growing insecurities associated with religious marginalisation and discrimination. The right to FoRB can be made more locally relevant by interpreting existing

global norms in the light of needs identified by local communities. Likewise, PCVE efforts are pegged to how we define and frame violent extremism, which is, again, contextual. If these politically loaded concepts are made more locally relevant, the FoRB-PCVE initiatives can offer opportunities and protection against the adverse effects of local and global religious polarization, marginalization, and discrimination.

Nevertheless, whether and to what extent aspects of religious extremism or violent extremism harm individuals and their human rights protection, particularly the right to FoRB - will differ from one context to another. The FoRB-PCVE interventions are needed amid a civil war in Sudan that enables gross women's rights violations are very different from violent ethnic extremism and youth rights in Ethiopia, or the impacts of transnational violent extremist movements and human rights violations in Uganda or Kenya. For the right to FoRB to be relevant to all, it will need to be situation-specific. They will need to be localized. Localization²¹ implies taking the human rights needs as formulated by local people (in response to the impact of local insecurities and violence on their lives) as the starting point both for the further interpretation and elaboration of the human rights norms, and for the progress of human rights action, at all levels ranging from the local to the global. To provide efficient protection against the adverse impact of different forms of violent extremism, which is in itself inevitably a top-down process, the right to FoRB needs to be as locally relevant as possible. The right to FoRB and PCVE initiatives needs an infusion from below.

¹⁹ See, for example, E.S. Hurd. 2015. *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁰ Gruell, C.M. and E.K. Wilson. 2018. "Universal or Particular or Both? Understanding the Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cross-Cultural Contexts" *Review of Faith and International Affairs*. 16(4): 88-101.

²¹ Badurdeen, F. A., Carpenedo, M., Baum, A. and Wilson, E. (2025). *Localisation of the Right to FoRB and International Activism*. *East Africa Policy Briefs*, No.1.

The following key findings, issues, and recommendations were discussed at the workshop:

1. Incorporating the right to FoRB in PCVE projects has shown potential in reducing religious marginalization and discrimination, preventing religious conflicts at the local levels, and promoting religious tolerance and harmony.
2. FoRB platforms provide ample opportunities to address the root causes of religious constructs to counter or provide alternative narratives.
3. FoRB-PCVE initiatives in the Horn and East African region require moving beyond focusing on violent extremism as Islamist extremism. Different forms of violent extremism are embedded within structural causes such as historical marginalisation and religious discrimination. These structural causes are concealed under violent extremism labels. The root causes of violent extremism cannot be adequately addressed unless these structural inequalities are also taken into consideration.
4. Implementing the right to FoRB and PCVE at the local level is sometimes constrained due to its varied interpretations at the global, national, and local levels. The right to FoRB incorporated within PCVE initiatives faces the double burden of localizing FoRB & PCVE concepts.
5. FoRB initiatives encounter interpretations of extremist religious beliefs. Interpreting 'extreme in religious beliefs' is daunting in specific localities. There are different types of local social movements or religious networks deemed as extremist networks and new religious movements that may subscribe to extreme ideologies & practices.
6. The inclusion of women and youth is often overlooked in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, despite the participation of women and youth in violent extremism and terrorism. It is important to provide women and youth with space at the strategy and policy levels, such as the regional National Action Plans, to counter and prevent violent extremism.



ISSUES OF CONCERN EMANATING FROM THE WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

1. Localization of FoRB and PCVE

Various efforts are made to localize the right to FoRB and PCVE in the Horn and the East African region. As the region grapples with varied forms of violent extremism, FoRB initiatives are well incorporated within PCVE to mitigate the impact of violent extremism. In FoRB and PCVE initiatives, a major outcome is to reduce religious discrimination and promote religious tolerance. Therefore, FoRB or PCVE interventions deal with the same root causes of violent extremism.

JISRA partners working on the right to FoRB deal with issues of religious intolerance, religious discrimination, religious marginalization, religious stigmatization, and religious stereotyping. FoRB projects have focused on reducing the stigma of minority religions. Inter-religious activities have brought communities together; for example, in communities where there have been religious divides, JISRA partners have brought different religious groups to visit each other's sites of worship. For example, some have never gone into a church or mosque but do criticise and fear the other's place of worship. So, these projects bring Christian leaders and youth to attend a mosque and observe their ways of praying and other rituals.

Similarly, Muslim leaders and youth attend the Church and observe their ways of worship and other rituals. These exchanges facilitate understanding each other, their ways of life, their places of worship, and their rituals. These exchanges enable you to at least reduce existing biases on the other based on religious differences and perceptions. So, these types of projects have been positive in reducing existing religious stigmas. Further, inter-religious dialogues conducted by religious actors culminate in building

connection between communities. These inter-religious dialogues are pivotal in localities where there are religiously framed conflicts. In Kenya and the East African region, whenever there is a terrorist attack, the blame is channeled towards the Muslim community. Therefore, it is imperative to reduce this type of stigma because not all Muslims condone these activities. Naturally, after terror attacks, there are counter or retaliation attacks. Many JISRA partners work on inter-religious and intra-religious interventions to bring communities together in conflict-stricken environments.

Implementing the right to FoRB and PCVE at the local level is challenging due to its varied interpretations at the global, national, and local levels. To make international human rights, such as the right to FoRB, enforceable on the ground, they must be localized. When the right to FoRB needs to be incorporated within PCVE initiatives, it faces the double burden of localization of both FoRB and PCVE.

The right to FoRB and PCVE are two terms that face intense scrutiny from local communities as Western-led interventions. Some workshop participants expressed concerns about how these concepts from the global North donors reinforce Islamophobia in



recipient countries, based on how communities were framed. Critical views on definitions like violent extremism cascade into PCVE and FoRB interventions. Embedded in these definitional biases are terms like religious intolerance. As Wendy Brown has highlighted, for example, “tolerance” always implies unequal power relations, with one group choosing to tolerate, while the other is merely tolerated. These are politically loaded terms defined by those in power or within majority politics.

Nevertheless, successful attempts on FoRB-PCVE efforts in reducing religious marginalisation and discrimination are evident and have



been attributed to the importance of localization of the concepts. In the localization process of FoRB-PCVE initiatives, domestic stakeholders such as local communities and civil society actors may attempt to contest or reshape the rights or the concept.

These processes are important for the successful implementation of the projects. The workshop looked at how we situated the right to FoRB in preventing and countering violent extremism. We found that before we understand PCVE, we need to understand how FoRB is understood in its context, including local knowledge and the complexities of religion and belief. The nuances within these contexts must be recognised including how we strengthen redress mechanisms, to promote and protect the right to FoRB and PCVE projects in the Horn and East African region.

PCVE projects are framed along the need to address violent extremism. Throughout the workshop, participants highlighted the framing of violent extremism had been considerably biased towards Islamist extremism in the Horn and the East African region. A participant explained that in Kenya, violent extremism was mostly equated with Islamist extremism because of earlier terrorist incidents carried out by Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab, and the Islamic State.

Since the late 1990s, the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, there has been an evolution of different forms of terrorist attacks in the region within a very skewed notion of what was labeled as Islamist extremism. These include the twin attack in Kampala, Uganda in 2010, the Westgate Mall attack in 2013, and the DUSSIT Mall attack in 2019, and subsequent attacks in the region



till date. This prompted various countries in the East African region to design their national strategies to counter violent extremism. In Kenya, the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism stands out as it was among the first to launch a plan and cascade to the local levels through the County Action Plans (CAPs).²²

Throughout the Horn and East African region, a hype on the implicit assumption of violent extremism as Islamist extremism is seen in how PCVE projects and interventions are framed in the region. This cascades to how FoRB initiatives are designed, as VE interpretation influences the FoRB-PCVE nexus. Broadening the VE definitions is critical in defining the problem.²³

Global powers and their definitions of concepts such as violent extremism

We need to understand the ontological origins and the epistemology with terms like violent extremism and how it is defined. Accordingly, in many African contexts, the ontologies and epistemologies are largely based on liberal thinking and occidental epistemology, making concepts such as violent extremism or FoRB alien to many African contexts. There is a need to revisit these concepts and create something more specific, more strategic, more definable, and more actionable

- Dr. Hassan Khannenji

cascade to local spaces. The failure of these definitions to account for the evolution of structural drivers on violent extremism, such as state fragility, marginalisation, and the discrimination of minorities, weakens these definitions in designing PCVE projects.

Using the term Jihadist, is political. It tends to appeal to the disenfranchised. But again, it's organic. It's something that draws from the experience of the people in Lamu, in Somalia, in Afghanistan, and elsewhere. One cannot understand these motives without looking at state fragility. Fragility goes hand in hand with failure in most of post-colonial African countries in managing minority populations, and therefore, when we see violence that are extreme in this area, say in the Sahel, one cannot talk about this question without looking at the role of state and the global powers failure to intervene to ensure that these people belong in the first place. When you look at the borderlands of Niger, of Burkina, Faso, or Mali, we can see the reasons of this problem having both colonial and post-colonial origin, and therefore the motives and the focus that Islamist violence is embedded in these origins and outcomes. Now, with the evolution of terrorist organisations, state sovereignty seems to have been threatened, and therefore, the State is quick to focus on the violence that these groups face. And, of course, over time, we've also treated terrorism with a lot of exceptionality

- Dr. Halkano Wario

²² Badurdeen, F. A. (2023). *International and local NGOs addressing violent and hateful extremism in Kenya*. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 23(5), 465–482.

²³ Badurdeen, F. A., Aroussi, S., & Jakala, M. (2022). *Lived realities and local meaning-making in defining violent extremism in Kenya: implications for preventing and countering violent extremism in policy and practice*. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 16(1), 1–22.



There is a need to rethink concepts like violent extremism in FoRB-PCVE initiatives to negate the politics of viewing specific religions through extremism lenses. The terms *violent extremism* and *terrorism* carry biased connotations when deployed in specific contexts by those in power. These terms are also formulated within majority-minority religions or politics. Some workshop participants highlighted the politics of labelling with regard to the term ‘violent extremism’ by pointing to the Shakahola forest cult incident in Kenya. Pastor Paul Mackenzie encouraged his followers to starve themselves as they prepared to meet Jesus, resulting in the cult deaths of more than 400 people in Malindi. Nevertheless, many refrained from labelling the incident, the religion, or even the perpetrator as “violent extremist”, despite the presence of extreme ideologies. The Shakahola incident needs to be viewed beyond a religio-political perspective. Extremist groups are often viewed distinctly. The incident was not seen as transnational, transregional, or global. The Horn and the East African region have yet to make efforts to understand new religious movements. Nevertheless, the region is littered with small fringe groups that are threatening those within and outside their religious and belief purview.

Paul Mackenzie (Pastor of the Good News International Ministries), behind the Shakahola forest massacre, was a leader of a fringe religious institution. He was charged with the killing of probably up to 500 people, including children, through starvation and torture. At one time, I think, Kenya discussed charging him with terrorism charges. He faces a battery of charges, one of which is terrorism, and that has been the hardest one to prove, unlike the other ones that he has committed. I think that Kenyans debated, especially from Muslim communities, that if this guy were Abdullah or Ibrahim or Mohammed, would these charges on terrorism grounds even need explanation? He would be directly linked to terrorism due to the extensive number of deaths. How have we been so blind to this level of violence against very vulnerable people for a long time? I think that that’s not necessarily a vindication against the State, but also the institution, but also the general public about how being focused on specific forms of extremism makes us not focus on other forms of extremism that go unobserved.

– Dr. Halkano Wario



²³ IRCK (2024). JISRA Kenya Journey on its Submission to the UPR 4TH CYCLE on Freedom of Religion and Belief

2. FoRB-PCVE initiatives address the same root causes of violent extremism

FoRB-PCVE initiatives need to move beyond the focus on violent extremism as Islamist extremism. JISRA partner organisations are implementing FoRB-PCVE initiatives in Kenya among a broader scope of violent extremism as envisaged by the local communities. While some focused on localities highlighted because of Islamist extremism, many other initiatives looked at broader aspects of different forms of violent

extremism and its root causes: *We have extremism during election periods. We have different forms of political extremism and ethnic extremism during elections. We looked into all those broader aspects of violent extremism (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).*

Different forms of violent extremism – some structural causes are hidden under the violent extremism labels. The issue of the

state repossessing land or elite-land-grabbing, extrajudicial killings, and perceived marginalisation are local grievances that facilitate opportunities for manipulation by violent extremist actors.

In Kenya, the issue of land has been identified by various task forces as an essential requirement in addressing land-related injustices. Some participants explained these different forms of grievances need to be addressed in PCVE efforts.

Views from workshop participants

‘In Lamu [a border county of Kenya], we often have what the media calls terror attacks. But according to my observation, these are not terror attacks. They are not Al-Shabab. They are local militia groups. These are militia groups or mercenaries who are paid by politicians. Some of these politicians are Christians, and some of them are Muslims, who are owners of big chunks of land. These attacks are usually used to scare squatters in these lands. The idea is actually to scare them off because some of these lands are also known to have some minerals.’

‘The issue about extrajudicial killings is a big concern. And I think as religious leaders in Kenya, we need to do something about it. Because to the extent this threatens our freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Then we are actually in a very nasty situation. I see this as seemingly becoming a pattern that if anybody voices anything against the status quo, as is happening in the country, you are perceived as an enemy by some political groups. And it seems like, for many years, Kenya has tolerated militia groups owned by politicians. So, it is only now that we are beginning to see. During elections, politicians fight with each other by sending goons to distract from election rallies. And it’s a pattern that we have not addressed in the past. But I think we need to address it long before the next elections.’

‘Let’s look at our law enforcement. If they don’t heed our concerns, like you, go to the police station 4 times, 5 times, 6 times. They do not have time to listen to your issues. Now. There is the brother [recruiter or radicaliser of violent extremist movements] trying to give you solutions. So, where will you have affinities? So, it can be any form of extremism, and this is compounded by historical grievances and historical moments.’

‘So, when we talk about FoRB and the broader VE concept, it’s very important for us to understand this aspect of social justice, which is the root cause. So that is where, when you miss it, others have an opportunity to lure these young people because they have historical grievances that remain unaddressed. Marginalization has structural causes that are embedded and multiplying, and these young people become vulnerable because recruiters always say: See, your grandparents were marginalized. Now, your fathers, you’re also marginalized. So, it is a cycle of marginalization that becomes an easy prompt for them to get into these particular extreme networks.’

3. FoRB initiatives strengthening Counter and Alternative Narratives

FoRB platforms provide ample opportunities to address the root causes of religious constructs to counter or provide alternative narratives. FoRB platforms facilitate positive attitude changes for communities to air out individual and community grievances, and according to a JISRA partner organization, this includes platforms for women

and youth to discuss local issues. Counter and alternative narratives implemented by JISRA partner organizations in Kenya have proven to be effective in conflict settings. Counter and alternative narratives implemented by some JISRA partners have assisted in supporting early warning mechanisms in preventing conflicts or extremist activities. For example,

in Kisauni, or particular areas in Lamu, immediately after an attack, there are counter-attacks due to labelling of communities or blaming specific communities. JISRA-FoRB initiatives facilitate religious leaders to conduct inter-religious dialogues, where they try to dissect extreme forms of narratives.

Some of the JISRA partner organisations in Kenya work with local county action plans on PCVE. The ideology pillar of the PCVE country action plan looks at ways in which counter and alternative narratives are formulated based on evolving trends in violent extremism narratives. So, most member organisations work on how to dissect different ideologies and also connect with marginal issues in creating an appealing narrative to radicalise and recruit individuals. It is important to understand the role of counter or alternative narratives in PCVE and how platforms facilitate the generation of these narratives. However, participants also highlighted that there is a need to have counter and alternative narratives along with addressing underlying structural issues and socio-economic needs of the communities. Counter and alternative narratives are linked to legitimacy, representation, and acceptance. A participant during the workshop explained how counter and alternative narratives assist in PCVE. Counter narratives directly challenge or oppose the existing dominant narratives. These narratives legitimize the integration of different viewpoints. Violent extremist organisations (VEOs) such as Al-Shabaab usually feels intimidated by these counter-narratives. Most often, these VEOs threaten these religious figures who work on counter-narratives. Hence, it has been difficult to work in these hostile spaces with counter-narratives. Counter-narratives offer legitimate fronts by legitimate scholars as interpreters of religious tenets. These narratives also offer alternative pathways to solving societal problems.

For example, a participant gave an example of a counter-narrative used in their training:

There is the issue of cultural imperialism and the need to protect religious and cultural spaces. One thing that has emerged is that the global North says that we should have FoRB fit into our communities. We have a contextually appropriate FoRB that has a strategic respect for our Africanness, and the global North should not push certain agendas and attach these agendas for funding (Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).

Counter and alternative narratives need to support critical reflection, reality checks, and the need to be proactive based on local contexts. In counter and alternative narrative constructions, one important aspect has been the critical reflection within counter and alternative narrative spaces. Critical reflection is the process of identifying, questioning, and assessing our deeply held assumptions about our knowledge, the way we perceive events and issues, and our beliefs, feelings, and actions. Workshop reflections described the need for engaging communities to critically reflect on violent and harmful narratives.

For example, how do we use narrative to deconstruct and critically reflect on issues such as ‘What is jihad? How do we understand jihad?’ What do these narratives mean to a particular community in that particular location? Narratives are contextual and may differ from Nairobi to Mombasa or Lamu. So, how do we contextualize? This means helping people to understand and reflect. There is very little reflection when

it comes to religious dogmas and teachings. The need to develop critical reflection around narrative creation and interpretation is crucial.

Often, however, counter- and alternative- narratives are disconnected from people’s lived realities. They become more theologically focused than responding to the real concerns of the individual or the communities, such as poverty, under- or unemployment, and access to education. Recruiters and radicalisers of VEOs are more targeted in addressing people’s daily struggles. These recruiters give individuals the needed answers to their life problems. Lack of reality checks and narratives unable to respond immediately make religious actors less effective in providing alternatives to extremism.

Young people are often looking for quick responses, which religious actors have, on the whole, been unable to provide. For example, a participant at the workshop highlighted the need for understanding youth brands and branding in narrative formulations. It is crucial to rethink the youth and their place in designing counter and alternative narratives. This is also important in making narratives more proactive than reactive. Proactive narratives designed by the communities based on their local context, religious practices, and teachings on cohesion and coexistence were considered an emerging need.



4. FoRB-PCVE initiatives treading the ‘extreme’ lines in religious and belief ideologies and manifestations

FoRB initiatives have to encounter extremist religious beliefs, where interpreting what counts as “extreme” can be daunting in specific localities. There are different types of local social movements or religious networks deemed as extremist networks and new religious movements that may subscribe to extreme ideologies and practices. Extremism, however, refers to much more than the terms used. The mere mention of extremism rightly evokes images of ideologically motivated terrorist acts. Yet not all extremism is terrorism, and conflating the two can be dangerous.²⁴ Hence, to be labeled “extreme” is alienation or marginalization in the community. Extremism is attached to an ideology, which is often embedded in political or philosophical viewpoints. In these contexts, FoRB project implementers navigate across what is extreme and the thin line between what can and cannot be tolerated.

Individuals and groups will be quick to identify the manifold behavioral extremes of their members. Once these individuals or groups cross over from moderate to extremism, they succumb to being labeled depending on the local socio-political or religio-cultural demarcations. Extremism, for example, was explained by a

participant as ‘defending your religion when your religion is under threat.’ Based on his experience with youth engagement in inter-religious activities, he emphasized how some young people from religious minority groups defined extremism.

Extremity in religion and beliefs outlines the limits of the Right to FoRB. As drawing the line between what can and cannot be tolerated is not easy; factors such as harm-physical or emotional – are used to define extreme beliefs and extremism. In FoRB initiatives, a participant highlighted that extremism can be defined along the acceptance of pluralism.

You can start talking about the limits of plurality. But I think the first point should be to accept that there might be no limits for a standard liberal definition. Extremism - when it becomes physical, it's dangerous. And does it work in the Netherlands or Western Europe? You can humiliate people with words to a large extent. You can traumatize people to a large extent with words. So many of these distinctions that we think work in Western or liberal thought are not very useful, right? Except for this perspective on plurality. But this has to be a very localized plurality
- Dr. Simon Polinder

State-led regulations were viewed as limiting the right to FoRB, and some participants advocated for the self-regulation of religious institutions as sufficient to prevent extreme forms of religious ideologies, practices, and manifestations. Participants opined that there were sufficient laws to regulate churches; however, what was lacking was the self-regulation of different religions. For some, religious issues needed to be viewed beyond the secular and best left to credible religious authorities among the respective religions. It would be impossible for the state to understand every religion due to the existing differences and expertise required. Therefore, some alluded to the fact that the existing legal framework in which religious organisations operate is sufficient and requires no further laws, but rather better ways to implement such existing laws. Self-regulation offers religious actors an opportunity to set standards by which they agree to be bound within their religious domains.

²⁴ Kirkpatrick, D. and Onursal, R. (2019). Not all types of extremism are terrorism – conflating the two is dangerous <https://theconversation.com/not-all-types-of-extremism-are-terrorism-conflating-the-two-is-dangerous-116211>



Many people argued that although there were calls for self-regulation among religious institutions and limits on state interference, following the Shakahola massacre, the government faced criticism for not intervening in a timely manner, especially as the death toll continued to rise. A participant also explained the difficulties of self-regulation due to political interests and the dynamics of majority-minority religious politics.

Politicians and religious leaders in Kenya often share spaces, and political leaders have vested interests. The self-regulation of religious institutions is intertwined with these political interests. A task force was established following the Shakahola forest massacre incident.

While the proposed regulations aim to prevent future tragedies, they also raise concerns about infringing on the constitutional right to religious freedom.

Key critiques include:

- > **Balancing Freedom with Regulation:** The re-registration of religious institutions could be seen as overreach if not carefully implemented.
- > **Enforcement Challenges:** Ensuring compliance across the country, particularly in remote areas, could be difficult, with large institutions possibly resisting the new regulations.
- > **Curriculum Changes:** Incorporating religious extremism awareness into the national education system is promising, but its success will depend on grassroots implementation.

While these measures aim to bring accountability and transparency, the challenge lies in ensuring they do not infringe on constitutional rights to religious freedom. Article 18 of the universal Declaration of Human Rights states that Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

– Mr. Alfred Kibunja

A key concern of the task force was to investigate and recommend measures to regulate religious institutions in Kenya. Key recommendations included stricter oversight and registration of religious institutions, the creation of a Religious Affairs Commission to balance freedom of religion with public safety, education, and awareness regarding religious extremism or cultism, as well as media and legal reforms to regulate the propagation of harmful doctrines. While state regulations were necessary, some participants critiqued the task force’s recommendations as limiting the right to FoRB.



5. Inclusive approaches in FoRB-PCVE initiatives

The inclusion of women and girls and gender mainstreaming is often overlooked in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, despite the participation of women and girls in violent extremism and terrorism. Similarly, the role of women and girls, while acknowledged in FoRB initiatives at the community and national levels, remains marginalized in policy discussions. Participants emphasised the importance of including them in FoRB-PCVE. These gendered roles of women and girls in the FoRB-PCVE nexus were associated with their socialization roles in the family and the communities.

First, women and girls are active in the recruitment and joining of Al-Shabaab. In the second place, they are often responsible for the household and the upbringing of the children. That means that they know their children best: they see their struggles, problems, the influence of other youth, their vulnerability to radicalization, and the attraction of joining certain violent groups. So, women are important in countering radicalization and recruitment. In the third place, women are often victims of VE.

When their houses are attacked or their husbands are killed, or they join violent extremist groups, women are the ones to keep the household up and running. That is a huge challenge and a risk: being alone and being a breadwinner makes them vulnerable to becoming dependent on and loyal to extremist groups. Fourthly, violent extremist groups often instrumentalize religion to discriminate against and oppress women. If this gender inequality is not addressed (by religious leaders), it allows violent extremist organizations to capitalize on these inequalities and further entrench their ideologies

– Mr. Alfred Kibunja

Religious discrimination against minorities has direct and sometimes indirect implications for women's participation in peacebuilding. Some narratives, assumptions, or factors might be religious, and some might not, but they still impede women's participation. For example, a participant explained that in Uganda and globally, the trend is the direct stereotype of the connotation of Islam and violent extremism. Accordingly,

'It has happened in Uganda. I have seen it happening in Kenya and many other countries. So, at the end of the day, if somebody knows that they're going to be profiled, you do not expect women to come out and actively practice in peacebuilding projects. Some of us have come out to participate in these projects. We have been labelled; we have been stereotyped.'

(Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).

Similarly, despite varied efforts taken on the inclusion of youth in FoRB and PCVE initiatives, a gap exists in their involvement in FoRB-PCVE initiatives. Youth are a cluster group extremely affected by recruitment and radicalization, but also by counter terrorism responses by the State and other actors. It is important to provide youth with space at the strategy and policy levels, such as the National Action Plan on countering and preventing violent extremism.

However, a participant explained that during high-level meetings, youth are rarely visible.

'Usually, the criminal justice actors from the courts, the magistrates, and the probation officers are in these meetings, but youths do not sit in these Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) forums. Hence, a disconnect exists in youth inclusion in these platforms.'

A participant also highlighted that under the new National Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, youth inclusion has been prioritized. The engagement forums have moved from siloed pillars to more inclusive approaches. Violent extremism and the way it is responded to have an impact on the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.

Inclusion incorporates different modalities of information and channels concerning different target groups. Technology, mainly social media platforms and AI, can help youth and others access information on PCVE and peacebuilding. Youth are technology savvy; hence, youth engagement spaces should focus on the use of both online and offline platforms due to the nature of how violent extremist actors misuse and manipulate information for propaganda and recruitment.

A workshop participant highlighted this complex context as follows:

'Terror groups are extremely savvy, and they understand the medium within which, or the space within which, the young and vulnerable are at risk. It will be very difficult to keep up with the so-called algorithms

and artificial intelligence in the future in terrorism propaganda and recruitment. We have many examples from JISRA partners who have utilised social media platforms to promote tolerance and prevent hate and hate speech. When we look at social media messages or information, they are not based on external information, but information that is very close to the youth themselves or their communities. The social media ecosystem often replicates the same information from outside local communities. So now, how do we penetrate these online groups? It is not easy because they have a leeway of control. So, it's about promoting critical consciousness. For example, youth should be able to respond to questions like 'Why are we in this discussion on this platform? What is this person trying to lure us with?'

We have not had enough of these discussions

(Workshop Participant, Nov 2024).

Targeted interventions are needed to provide youth and women with the opportunities, skills, and information required to create counter and alternative narratives, whether online or offline, based on their local contexts. By prioritizing inclusion, a more equitable use of innovative technology and skills can be planned and implemented for marginalized minority communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote FoRB platforms to support the prevention and countering of violent extremism. FoRB platforms create spaces for religious and belief communities to engage in dialogue, enabling opportunities to learn from one another, express local grievances, and form new friendships and relationships. Positive relationships are crucial in reducing negative attitudes and perceptions toward others, thereby supporting PCVE efforts. Additionally, these platforms offer ample opportunities to address the root causes of religious constructs to counter or provide alternative narratives.
2. Implementing the right to FoRB and PCVE at the local level is sometimes constrained due to its varied interpretations at the global, national, and local levels. The right to FoRB incorporated within PCVE initiatives faces the double burden of localizing FoRB and PCVE concepts if the local contextual knowledge is not prioritized.
3. Strive to address local structural causes of violent extremism via FoRB-PCVE initiatives. In the Horn and East African region, FoRB-PCVE initiatives require moving beyond the focus on violent extremism as Islamist extremism. Different forms of violent extremism are embedded within structural causes such as historical marginalisation and religious discrimination. These structural causes concealed under violent extremism labels need to be addressed.
4. Promote Religious and FoRB fluency to support credible local interpretations of extreme religious beliefs. FoRB initiatives encounter interpretations of extremist religious beliefs in specific contexts. Interpreting 'extreme in religious beliefs' is daunting in specific localities due to the need for local credible knowledge and personnel. Strengthening credible religious actors and their capacities is important to encounter critical discussions on extreme religious beliefs in their localities.
5. Promote women and youth in FoRB-PCVE spaces at strategy and policy levels, such as the regional National Action Plans to counter and prevent violent extremism. The inclusion of women and youth is significant in the efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism.



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The policy briefs aim to generate reliable, relevant, timely, and actionable analysis and recommendations on the Right to FoRB in selected countries of the Horn and the East African region. This publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or mechanical methods, with due attribution.

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