HEDAYAH INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE

Hedayah
Countering Extremism & Violent Extremism

POLICY BRIEF

Hedayah's International Research Conference 2025

Recommendations for Policy, Programs, and Research

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ABOUT HEDAYAH

Hedayah was created in response to a growing desire from the international community and members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) to establish an independent, multilateral 'think and do' tank devoted to countering extremism and violent extremism. Since its inception, Hedayah has evolved into a passionate, driven, and international organization that brings together a vast network of unparalleled experts and practitioners to counter and prevent extremism and violent extremism. As the International Center of Excellence for Countering Extremism and Violent Extremism, we are committed to innovation, neutrality, integrity, diversity, and technical excellence by delivering groundbreaking research, innovative methodologies, and programs. Our approach is to deliver real and sustainable impact to governments, civil society and people impacted by extremism and violent extremism through local ownership and collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hedayah extends its thanks to its hosts and sponsors, to the European Union for its generous support, and to the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation for its partnership. We also extend our gratitude to our Strategic Partners, who provide various forms of in-kind and/or direct financial support. This year, these partners included Hedayah's STRIVE Global program, the Global Network on Extremism and Terrorism (GNET), the Cyber Threats Research Centre (CYTREC), Deakin University, the Christchurch Call Foundation (CCF), Magenta, University College Cork (UCC), Deris Wanaag, and the University of Leeds Centre for Global Security Challenges (CGSC). We further thank all of our speakers and facilitators for their invaluable contributions to the event, as well as all those who attended and took part in the conference for enriching this forum by sharing their knowledge and experience. Finally, the authors thank Donger Chen and Hermione Robson for their documentation support.

Suggested Reference:

Zhang, Bozhen. 2026. *Recommendations for Policy, Programs, and Research: Hedayah's International Research Conference 2025*. Abu Dhabi: Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Extremism and Violent Extremism.

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HEDAYAH RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2025

In recognition of the fast-paced and constantly evolving nature of extremism and violent extremism, Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Extremism and Violent Extremism, annually convenes leading experts to share new research, methodologies, best practices, and findings for the benefit of the broader community of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in fields related to preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism (P/CEVE).

As a complex and multi-disciplinary field, information and knowledge sharing, along with opportunities for diverse actors to connect, are vital to ensuring that prevention efforts are evidence-based and contextualized, thereby maximizing their potential for impact. In 2025, Hedayah hosted its **10th Annual International Research Conference (RC25)**, which also showcased research, evidence, and lessons learned from the **Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism (STRIVE) Global program**. Launched in 2015 by Hedayah and funded by the European Union, the STRIVE Global program supports civil society organizations (CSOs), local actors, and government entities in designing and implementing impactful, evidence-based interventions to prevent and counter extremism and violent extremism. Through this platform, RC25 further helped illuminate how research can be translated into practice through locally driven solutions across diverse contexts.

RC25 was hosted by Hedayah in Brussels, Belgium, from 10 November to 12 November 2025, with generous support from the European Union and in partnership with the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation. The conference adopted a hybrid format accommodating both in-person and online participation and brought together more than 350 attendees online and in person from more than 40 countries, representing governmental agencies, research institutions and universities, diplomatic missions, international organizations, research and grant foundations, as well as private sector organizations.

This policy brief provides an overview of Hedayah's RC25 by summarizing thematic panels, interactive sessions, and keynote speeches, and by highlighting recommendations for P/CEVE aimed at informing researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and other relevant stakeholders. More detailed content from these discussions and presentations is available through Hedayah's online channels, or upon request.

THEMATIC PANELS

Thematic Panel 1: Preventing Extremism Online

In an increasingly connected online world, understanding how digital spaces are exploited for radicalization and recruitment by extremist and violent extremist groups is vital. The first thematic panel of RC25 was convened to examine current and emerging trends and threats of extremism and violent extremism on online platforms, evaluate the impact of existing interventions, and explore innovative approaches for preventing and countering extremism in digital spaces.

The panel noted the mixed online-offline engagement strategy employed by extremist and violent extremist actors. More specifically, while these groups actively use the internet to disseminate propaganda, recruit supporters, and raise funds, the panelists underlined that they remain largely reliant on traditional, offline methods to sustain their operations. Therefore, the panel stressed that effective counter-extremism strategies should adopt a mixed approach that addresses both emerging online threats and persistent offline threats.

The panel then discussed in depth broader trends of online radicalization and strategies adopted by extremists online. The panelists identified at least two intentions behind online engagements by extremist and violent extremist actors: the mobilization and recruitment of new supporters through mass platforms, and the creation of "safe spaces" for violent extremists via end-to-end encrypted (E2EE) platforms. The disruption of traditional offline exploitation patterns was also noted, as extremist organizations have increasingly tailored their strategies to reach all age groups and demographics online. While extremist groups continue to strategically target local and global grievances and identity-based vulnerabilities online, the panel also observed that they have increasingly used emerging and less conventional technologies for propaganda and recruitment - including using online donations, digital transactions, and gaming-related monetization - to supplement or replace traditional funding streams, while becoming adept at evading platform moderation and detection systems.

Related to this, **the panel identified various content moderation challenges**. Speakers shed light on multiple methods of moderation circumvention, including the use of foreign languages, and the strategic use of hashtags, direct messaging features, coded language, misleading and edited videos, and live-streamed propaganda. Specifically, the panel flagged linguistic complexities in content moderation, as moderation systems remain much more effective at detecting extremism or violent extremist content in English and a few other dominant languages, while their capacity in less widely used languages remains limited.

To combat online radicalization, **the panel underlined the importance of educational programs and digital literacy in prevention and resilience-building**. The panelists called for enhanced educational and cognitive inoculation, representing a form of "psychological vaccination" against extremist propaganda, through critical thinking and digital literacy training such as gamified and interactive pre-bunking programs, while noting that the effects of these interventions may be short-lived and do not guarantee long-term immunity against online extremism. In this context, the panel encouraged that such interventions be complemented by social and emotional learning (SEL) and support to foster empathy and positive identity formation in the long term.

Despite increased research on online extremism, the panel also acknowledged certain knowledge gaps, such as limited evidence on the algorithmic amplification of illegal content and its effect on radicalization across platforms, the challenges and opportunities associated with artificial intelligence in counter-extremism, as well as the monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) of digital literacy programs.

Recommendations:

For policymakers:

- Actively promote public-private coordination, particularly with tech companies, to strengthen content moderation and better understand how emerging technologies can be exploited by malicious actors.
- Build on existing coordination and collaboration mechanisms to create or strengthen formal and informal information-sharing networks on online extremism.
- Develop digital harm or online safety policies that are inclusive of gender, language, cultural differences, and other relevant factors.

For practitioners, including tech companies:

- Devote more resources to developing and training non-English and less dominant language models for content moderation.
- Continue to reinforce and support the strategic communication capacity of civil society organizations, local influencers, and other community actors in digital spaces.
- Strengthen "cognitive inoculation" programs, such as training on critical thinking and digital literacy, and ensure they are reinforced regularly, and develop hybrid programs that combine these with social and emotional learning and community-building components.

For researchers:

- Continue and strengthen research on the tactics and strategies used by extremist actors online - including methods for evading content moderation - in order to design targeted responses and tools.
- Develop a deeper understanding of the online ecosystem and conduct further research on algorithmic amplification in the context of violent extremism, as well as the role and potential of emerging technologies, including AI.

Thematic Panel 2: Gaming and Digital Resilience

As the world's largest entertainment industry today, gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms have emerged as key sites for online radicalization and recruitment, and in turn, for preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism. Furthermore, gaming has important potential for building resilience, particularly in youth and online communities. This panel was convened to examine the risks and the emerging evidence in how gaming can be a space for digital resilience and how prevention efforts can be successful in these spaces.

The panel noted that gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms are at risk of exploitation by malicious actors. They highlighted the vast global gamer base across computer, mobile, and console games, which continues to grow - particularly among younger demographics and in developing countries. The panel observed that the trust, emotional closeness, and sense of belonging within gaming communities can be manipulated by malicious actors. Furthermore, the significant amount of borderline content on gaming platforms, along with the intersection of harmful subcultures - including racism, hate speech, misogyny, cyberbullying, and extremist ideologies such as nihilism, doomerism, and misanthropy - was seen as creating vulnerabilities and opportunities for radicalization. That said, the **panelists emphasized that gamers and gaming are not inherently problematic or at risk of radicalization**; rather, online digital spaces and their communities can be manipulated and exploited by malicious actors

The panelists then discussed the ever-changing gaming landscape and how extremist and violent extremist actors continue to exploit gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms in various ways. They noted that extremist and violent extremist groups are constantly evolving their methods for radicalization and recruitment. These methods include adopting operational tactics such as developing new video games or modifying existing ones to include extremist content, using gaming cultural references for recruitment and propaganda, and exploiting the online gaming ecosystem for grooming, communication, and mobilization. The panelists also identified localized exploitation of gaming platforms, as extremist groups develop country or

region-specific game modifications and mobile games to facilitate radicalization and recruitment, using humor, memes, in-game language, and team-based culture to target and recruit young individuals. Despite continued reliance on traditional financing methods, the panel also highlighted exploitation of gaming-related financial systems, such as microtransactions, third-party gaming marketplaces and crypto-backed in-game assets, as complementary channels for unconventional funding. These developments make it increasingly challenging for practitioners to keep pace with rapidly changing gaming-related modes, platforms, and cultures to effectively develop P/CEVE efforts.

Beyond digital gaming environments, the panel drew attention to the hybrid offline-online setting for extremist exploitation of gaming. Panelists flagged that extremist groups also leverage offline gaming spaces - such as gaming cafés - for recruitment through face-to-face interaction and radicalization. For example, recruiters may work as gaming café employees or join gaming sessions to build social bonds through shared gameplay, which can facilitate the grooming of young individuals, as seen in some East African countries such as Somalia and Kenya. Recruiters may also first approach users with similar linguistic backgrounds online, using in-game voice chat and private game rooms or channels on Discord or Telegram to build friendships through targeted humor or memes, and then invite them to offline forums, as observed in West Africa.

Despite these risks, the panel stressed the dual nature of gaming in P/CEVE, emphasizing that gaming communities simultaneously present opportunities for resilience-building and prevention. Panelists noted that positive influential community figures - such as streamers, casters, and professional players - can be leveraged for strategic communication to promote positive community building and resilience beyond gameplay. Additionally, gaming platforms can provide moderation tools, including in-game reporting systems, custom chat filters, and community guidelines designed and delivered in local languages, to harness gaming communities' positive potential for resilience building.

Recommendations:

For policymakers:

- Improve coordination among policy actors across cybersecurity, youth, sports, media, and counter-extremism sectors to build resilience within gaming communities.
- Strengthen public-private engagement and work with gaming platforms to design moderation systems and safety tools that are locally and linguistically relevant, incorporating local language, slang, and cultural or community norms.

- Develop a “bottom-up” community engagement framework that emphasizes shared responsibility and community-led initiatives, cooperating with community actors such as streamers, casters, and players to promote positive messaging.

For practitioners:

- Develop gaming-related literacy curricula for students that address online harms and radicalization in gaming, fostering digital resilience and critical thinking.
- Provide targeted training for relevant stakeholders - including law enforcement officers, counter-extremism actors, educators, and community leaders - on gaming subcultures to enhance their interactions with gaming communities

For researchers:

- Conduct academic and empirical research to gain in-depth knowledge on:
    - The constantly changing gaming environment and its subcultures;
    - How extremist actors exploit gaming spaces and the strategies they use for radicalization and recruitment;
    - How to improve early-warning and monitoring systems for detecting potential extremist activity within gaming communities, including ways to localize monitoring and moderation interventions.



Thematic Panel 3: Preventing Extremism Through Education

Education can play a vital role in preventing extremism and violent extremism, providing opportunities to build resilience, and conversely, can be a potential site of radicalization. Ten years from the advent of the *Abu Dhabi Memorandum on Good Practices for Education & Countering Violent Extremism*, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and Hedayah have been exploring new lessons learned at the intersection of education and preventing and countering extremism and violent extremism. This panel was convened to reflect on recent research and practice in this area.

Among the key principles of preventing violent extremism through education (PVE-E), the panel emphasized the importance of a whole-of-school and whole-of-society approach. The panelists underlined that schools should foster a culture of care and tolerance, and that school staff need to be trained on knowledge and policies related to P/CEVE, while students should be actively involved in resilience-building modules and processes within schools. The panel also highlighted the importance of engaging stakeholders beyond educational institutions for PVE-E purposes, including parents and community leaders, in activities such as positive messaging to support schools' resilience-building efforts.

The panel then turned to specific issue areas within PVE-E. They underscored the need to prioritize learners' wellbeing in schools. This includes creating inclusive and safe learning environments, adopting trauma-informed pedagogies guided by the principles of "do no harm" and "leave no one behind," collaborating with mental health professionals when necessary, and establishing referral systems for students requiring specialized care. The panelists also agreed on the importance of investing in pre-service and in-service capacity building for educators, covering knowledge, communication and facilitation skills, and socio-emotional learning. They stressed that collaboration should be established between the education sector and other sectors to avoid overburdening educators or placing sole responsibility on them. Furthermore, several speakers emphasized that PVE-E interventions are more effective when integrated into existing, broader violence prevention and socio-emotional learning programs, such as anti-bullying, prejudice reduction, and emotion management modules.

The panelists also identified several challenges related to preventing extremism through education. Funding constraints were cited as a major challenge, compounded by coordination issues, as changing political environments and lack of trust can further complicate funding sustainability for PVE-E interventions. Moreover, the panel noted that most PVE-E programs tend to focus on short-term outputs and overemphasize the quantity of activities and participants rather than building meaningful resilience. This results in limited transferability

beyond the classroom, repetitive programming for both educators and students, and difficulties in convincing donors of the programs' long-term impact.

To alleviate some of these challenges, the panel discussed ways forward from project design to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL). The panelists highlighted the importance of contextualized design, ensuring that PVE-E programs are tailored to local realities. They also called for a better understanding of the specific challenges that may hinder effective operationalization of PVE-E interventions, such as infrastructure needs and capacity limitations. The panel further stressed that developing a clear understanding of PVE-E outcomes is key - including defining what success looks like in PVE-E interventions - and improving MEL frameworks to better assess the effectiveness of PVE-E interventions.

Recommendations:

For policymakers:

- Invest in continuous pre-service and in-service training for educators to enhance their knowledge and skills.
- Strengthen institutionalization and coordination among relevant agencies, and actively engage parents, families, educators, and community actors to facilitate a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to PVE-E.

For practitioners:

- Tailor programs to local realities and incorporate interactive and participatory methods to enhance learner engagement in program design and MEL.
- Ensure that PVE-E is integrated alongside other curricula and training modules, such as anti-bullying, critical thinking, and emotion management, among others.
- Prioritize learner wellbeing and safeguarding by creating safe and inclusive learning environments guided by the "do no harm" principle, integrating trauma-informed pedagogies, and collaborating with mental health professionals to build a culture of care in schools.
- Integrate gender-sensitive approaches and promote youth participation in programming.
- Develop and strengthen MEL guidance and frameworks to focus more on defining and assessing longer-term outcomes in PVE-E interventions.

For researchers:

- Conduct in-depth research on the role of PVE-E in conflict, crisis, and emergency settings.
- Further examine the challenges and potentials of new and emerging technologies in PVE-E, such as social media and AI.

Thematic Panel 4: Rehabilitation, Reintegration & Recidivism

Understanding pathways to disengagement, deradicalization, and supporting rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) as well as preventing recidivism remain key concerns for practitioners in counterterrorism, countering extremism and violent extremism, and across fields from psychology to security. This panel was convened to consider current challenges in rehabilitation and reintegration across global contexts and has proposed recommendations and approaches for effective policy and programming.

The panel discussed in detail the barriers and obstacles to effective and successful rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R), considering the different actors involved in these processes. **The panelists began by elaborating on the challenges faced by returnees**, noting that they generally encounter stigma and discrimination in host communities, as well as frequent difficulties accessing essential services due to a lack of identification documents and insufficient information about available services. As a result, many returnees remain unemployed and struggle to reintegrate. The panelists also noted that female-headed households face additional obstacles for reasons ranging from exclusion from male-dominated communication channels to longer stays in displacement camps. Furthermore, the panel highlighted challenges faced by returnee children, such as bullying and exclusion in schools, underscoring the importance of child-focused reintegration and psychosocial support.

The panel then turned to discuss R&R challenges associated with local communities. The panelists observed that reintegration outcomes depend heavily on local dynamics, including local politics, tribal mediation, and the attitudes of community leaders. It was noted that community acceptance varies significantly across localities and is a key determinant of reintegration success.

Moreover, it was argued that where there are low levels of trust in government institutions - which may stem from long-standing grievances, bureaucratic complexity, and weak coordination across governmental agencies - alongside communication gaps and contradictory messaging, reintegration efforts may be further complicated. In this context, one panelist called for locally-led dialogue in which tribal and religious actors frame reintegration around forgiveness, coexistence, and shared identity to facilitate community acceptance and build trust.



The panel also discussed R&R challenges from the perspectives of service providers, practitioners, and programming. The panelists identified specific human resources and capacity gaps, including a shortage of trained care providers, lack of essential medications, and the emergence of unqualified care providers, which can undermine service quality and community trust. They also flagged the short-term nature of many interventions, which creates logistical, staffing, and funding challenges while undermining the sustainability of reintegration efforts. Noting these challenges, the panel called for a cross-sectoral and context-specific approach to rehabilitation and reintegration programming, combining the efforts of psychologists, religious actors, educators, medical health providers, and other stakeholders to offer holistic services.

Additionally, **the panel shed light on general patterns of terrorism recidivism**, warning that the effectiveness of terrorist attacks - including higher casualty levels - can increase significantly with the involvement of experienced terrorist recidivists. The panel noted that released recidivists tend to re-engage quickly, and experienced recidivists are better able to evade detection. Against this backdrop, the panel underlined that post-release intervention is critical and should ideally begin prior to release to reduce recidivism risk, while effective rehabilitation and reintegration measures are key to complementing risk assessment and monitoring efforts.

Recommendations:

For policymakers:

- Develop and publish standardized national procedures and eligibility criteria for R&R programs.
- Institutionalize cross-sectoral coordination, including establishing formal coordination mechanisms across religious, employment, education, and health sectors through regular meetings.
- Provide regular and specialized cross-sectoral training for practitioners on trauma care, religious literacy, and gender-sensitive approaches, among other topics.
- Support and expand locally-led dialogue and trust-building initiatives, and strengthen partnerships with community leaders.
- Address legal and administrative obstacles for returnees, including removing barriers to accessing identification documents, through targeted legal provisions.
- Engage proactively with the media to shape public narratives on returnees, reduce stigma, and improve community acceptance.

For practitioners:

- Design R&R programs adapted to local contexts and tailored to the distinct needs, characteristics, and challenges of different groups. For example, expand vocational training tailored to women's needs.
- Empower community leaders as dialogue facilitators to encourage narratives of forgiveness, coexistence, and shared identity, and invest in trust-building through empathy-based messaging and stigma reduction campaigns.
- Strengthen and ensure more effective communication of R&R programs to both returnees and host communities to reduce barriers to accessing services, delivering information in local languages to reduce misinformation and rumors.
- Build on existing mechanisms to establish a robust network of mental health professionals and facilities with sustainable provision of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).
- Begin R&R efforts before release and ensure immediate, proactive engagement post-release, combining monitoring efforts with R&R interventions.

For researchers:

- Conduct further research to better understand the mechanisms and effectiveness of R&R interventions, including the strengths and weaknesses of messaging, dialogue, and livelihood programs.
- Deepen understanding of gender- and youth-specific barriers to reintegration, and design interventions accordingly.
- Improve understanding of terrorist groups' coordination methods and network structures to inform more effective intervention strategies on recidivism prevention.

Thematic Panel 5: Strategic Communications - Building Trust & Understanding Audiences

Strategic communications represents a wide-ranging toolkit that can be harnessed to support countering and preventing extremism and violent extremism efforts. This panel was convened to present findings from across the spectrum of practice from policing and law enforcement, through to religious actors, to consider how effective, evidence-based strategic communications can build trust and resilience.

The panel discussed general patterns and characteristics of extremist, violent extremist and terrorist narrative framing. The panelists noted that malicious actors consistently employ an "us versus them" framing to draw perceived moral, cultural, and religious boundaries, which over time deepens feelings of exclusion, isolation, and ideological separation. In particular, they often manipulate this framing through restrictive identity formation, forcing binary choices by demonizing and dehumanizing the opposing group. Furthermore, the panelists highlighted the fragmentation and decentralization of propaganda through digital media, especially in short-form formats.

The panelists also shed light on the emotion- and need-based appeals of extremist and violent extremist narratives, arguing that these frequently prioritize emotional mobilization over evidence-based reasoning to garner support. This includes emotional manipulation targeting intrinsic desires, such as hedonistic appeals, to foster emotional connection, rather than relying on rational judgment or purely ideological arguments. Some groups were also observed to construct attractive self-image framing that fulfils fundamental human needs like belonging and self-esteem, portraying group membership as a way to become a better or more desirable version of oneself as part of self-transformation.

To counter extremist, violent extremist and terrorist propaganda, the panel underscored the importance of credible counter-messaging, especially the credibility of messengers. Messenger credibility is key, as higher messenger credibility was found to be linked to increased reporting of extremist propaganda and activities, while low credibility reduces public willingness to report. One panelist's research found that the perceived relevant expertise and institutional affiliation of messengers are critical to the credibility of counterterrorism messaging, and that - contrary to conventional wisdom - security actors are viewed as equally or more credible messengers than local authorities in many cases. The panel also underlined the need to expand and leverage messenger types, including alternative messengers such as business actors, to help build and strengthen trust.

Discussing specific ways to reinforce strategic communication, **the panel called for strengthened efforts to build religious literacy**. The panel noted insufficient integration of religious literacy and jurisprudential reasoning in P/CEVE strategic communication interventions, as well as limited literacy programming led by religious authorities, which combined with limited critical understanding of key religious concepts, creates space for the spread of extremist ideology based on misinterpretation.

Recommendations:

For policymakers:

- Use evidence-based approaches in policymaking, including evaluating the credibility of counterterrorism messengers for specific messages, and designing policies accordingly.
- Integrate religious literacy components into core P/CEVE national policies, messaging campaigns, education curricula, and training for practitioners.

For practitioners:

- Develop positive and constructive narratives that are culturally sensitive and meet target audiences' needs in healthy and meaningful ways. Where appropriate, use marketing methods such as data analytics and statistical approaches to expand positive identity options to effectively compete with extremist messaging.
- Identify and work with trusted institutions and individuals with high messaging credibility to design and implement strategic communication efforts.
- Integrate religious literacy programs into P/CEVE strategic communication interventions, led by religious authorities.

For researchers:

- Further analyze extremist propaganda and target audiences for recruitment to identify what needs are being exploited, and how they are manipulated.
- Develop deeper understandings of religious discourse across online and offline spaces.
- Conduct further research on counterterrorism messenger credibility, using evidence-based approaches to assess messenger trustworthiness and how it influences bystander reporting.

Thematic Panel 6: Radicalization & Recruitment - Trends & Responses

The final panel of the conference was convened to consider broader trends in radicalization and recruitment in the context of large-scale social phenomena and online spaces. It presented on-the-ground practitioner perspectives alongside a systematic review of the literature, bridging evidence and practice to reflect on current trends.

The panel noted that radicalization is a complex, multi-level, and dynamic process shaped by personal, social, and structural factors. Consequently, the panelists emphasized that how we research and perceive the topic must continue to evolve, and that some current approaches in P/CEVE may be ineffective if they do not keep pace with these developments. More specifically, a "catch-all" approach often focuses too narrowly on monocausal explanations - such as poverty or ideology - whereas, in reality, we need to understand radicalization as part of a system and evaluate it across micro, meso, and macro levels. Illustrating this, one panelist discussed the complex nature of the terrorism-migration nexus, challenging reductive claims that irregular migration is a key driver of terrorist violence, and called for nuanced research efforts on this important topic.

Noting these complexities, **the panelists highlighted the importance of deprivation, grievances, and structural vulnerability as conducive factors to radicalization.** In particular, the panel called for the need to evaluate wider socioeconomic and structural conditions in the context of extremism and violent extremism, both to understand and to prevent it. These conditions include socio-economic deprivation - such as poverty, inequality, social marginalization, and long-term economic hardship - as well as crises and instabilities that have been regularly, and effectively, exploited by extremists and violent extremists. Among other important areas of focus, the panel stressed that family adaptability and cohesion play an important role in P/CEVE efforts - where the wider community may not create resilience through stability and belonging, promoting the comprehensive wellbeing of the family unit was identified as a strategic intervention targeting core psychosocial drivers of radicalization.

The panel also shed light on the changing and hybrid environments of radicalization, where the online space meets the offline space. The panelists challenged the online-offline dichotomy and pointed out that it is not common for radicalization to occur only online. Nevertheless, they noted that online environments should be understood as social environments, or "digital street corners", as much as technological platforms, where peer pressure shapes attitudes and subsequently directs behaviors. The panel also discussed an associated link between physical sports groups and radicalization.

Finally, the panel discussed several emerging extremist trends, such as nihilism, changes in trends in age groups, and leaderless networks. Regarding ideologies, the panelists warned of the rise of nihilistic violence and how it has repositioned radicalization, particularly in European contexts such as Sweden. In line with this, they also recognized that many extremist activities have become harder to detect, as they are increasingly leaderless, sporadic, and

spontaneous. The panel also reported on a broadly observed trend of the decreasing age of extremist recruits, with some as young as 13 or 14 years old. Furthermore, the panelists called for more research on the role of neurodiversity in both radicalization and resilience-building.

Recommendations:

For policymakers:

- Continue and increase efforts to address structural factors in radicalization, including designing policies that invest in objective wellbeing through measures such as housing, employment, healthcare, social protection, and economic empowerment.
- Design more balanced P/CEVE measures that consider the complex, multi-level, and dynamic process of radicalization, and refrain from over-securitizing the issue and labelling certain demographics.
- Enhance working relationships with research groups to ensure that policies are evidence-based and reflect the most up-to-date trends in the field.

For practitioners, including law enforcement, CSOs, and tech companies:

- Design more robust referral pathways and support bystanders such as friends and families in navigating the risks and signs of radicalization.
- Ensure that law enforcement and practitioners engage with quality and care in their interpersonal engagements with persons of concern in the pre-criminal space.
- Deliver programs that enhance target populations' familial relationships, parenting skills, ethical/moral development, and mental health needs.
- Combat the "whack-a-mole effect" online by monitoring cross-platform engagements and hybridized threats, ensuring that moderation systems are data-driven, fair, and proportionate.

For researchers:

- Strengthen research on the migration-extremism nexus, especially in non-Western contexts, as well as the role of diasporas and immigrants in P/CEVE.
- Continue to explore emerging trends in extremism, such as the role of mixed, hybrid, or lack of ideologies in radicalization, including "nihilist violent extremism".

INTERACTIVE SESSIONS

In addition to six thematic panels, RC25 also featured four **interactive sessions**. Held in the formats of discussion, demonstration, consultation, and workshop, these sessions provided opportunities for more interactive dialogue and helped practitioners explore ways to translate research findings into actionable practice.

The first interactive session, convened by Hedayah in a discussion format, highlighted resources developed by Hedayah as the implementing partner for the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF)'s *Initiative on Education for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism*. During this session, speakers focused on the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Toolkit created for the Initiative. They briefed participants on the development process, introduced the key areas of focus identified for understanding success and impact in interventions that seek to prevent violent extremism through education (PVE-E), and explained how to apply these principles to develop Theories of Change in PVE-E policy and programming. Participants were then invited to design PVE-E logical frameworks and discuss how the prospective outcomes could be measured.

The second interactive session, delivered by the Violence Prevention Network (VPN) in a consultation format, focused on the *Voluntary Code of Conduct on Preventing Violent Extremist Use of Online Platforms*. This Code was under development by the VPN and the UK Home Office to support technology companies in adopting a proactive, upstream approach to preventing terrorist and violent extremist use of online platforms. Following a brief presentation on the Code and its development, participants were invited to provide feedback on specific sections of the draft Code and to reflect on how it might interact with existing measures aimed at preventing terrorist and violent extremist use of online platforms. In addition, participants were invited to contribute to the development of the *Diversions Playbook*, a technical resource and guide being created to support platforms in implementing the Code.

The third interactive session, presented by researchers from Deakin University in a demonstration format, introduced and demonstrated a new *Conflict and Extremism Do No Harm Tool*, developed through co-design workshops with local development and humanitarian agency teams in Africa and Asia. The tool was designed to enable local actors to analyze the common and complex interplay between extremism and other forms of conflict - including insurgency and armed groups, ethnic or religious conflict, clan or tribal violence, land and other resource disputes, and more - noting that at the local level, violent extremism is often deeply interrelated with these other layers of conflict. Participants were then invited

to discuss the tool's practical application in project development, humanitarian work, and monitoring and evaluation.

The fourth interactive session was delivered by the Christchurch Call Foundation (CCF), Meedan, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) to highlight preliminary findings from Catalyst, a global consortium initiative led by CCF that addresses online misogyny and gender-based violence as pathways to violent extremism and terrorism. The session provided an overview of three research streams from Catalyst: a harms taxonomy across online misogyny and gender-based violence and violent extremism, bystander interventions in online contexts, and the building of multilingual classifiers to improve online detection. Participants were then invited to break into small groups to discuss these interventions, exploring methods, early insights, and potential applications in efforts to counter violent misogyny and violent extremism on gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms.



KEYNOTE SPEECHES

RC25 featured special interventions from high-level counter-extremism and counterterrorism experts and practitioners on topics ranging from extreme right-wing terrorism, radicalization and recruitment trends in the Horn of Africa, and countering and preventing extremism efforts in Iraq.

The first speaker presented research on the rise of extreme right-wing terrorism, using Ireland as a case study to challenge key assumptions in radicalization literature. The speaker argued that too much emphasis is placed on broad preventative measures targeting the general population, rather than focusing on the few individuals who commit violent acts, and questioned the assumed strong link between social media and violent extremism, noting that the evidence for this link is limited. While acknowledging that social media could play organizational and performative roles, the speaker underlined that radicalization is not confined to online spaces. Instead, they highlighted "contentious action", where grassroots protesters and extremist actors converge, fostering community-building and escalating calls to action and participation. Based on analysis of over 500,000 posts and examination of actors, narratives, and drivers behind the rise of extreme right-wing terrorism in Ireland, their research found that despite interconnected online ecosystems, local context remains crucial in radicalization. Ideologically, a "pick and mix" of conspiracy theories, anti-mask and anti-elite sentiment, racism, nationalism, and xenophobia dominated popular rhetoric along political, personal and lifestyle lines. The speaker concluded by advocating for an increased focus on how extremism develops across online and offline settings, rather than reducing it to universal root causes.

The second speaker presented the Iraqi strategy for combating violent extremism through a soft power lens - defined as a non-coercive tool relying on persuasion and cultural or intellectual appeal to influence and change behavior. The speaker outlined this strategy in three sequential phases: first, the establishment of structures, funding, and regulations; second, the implementation of programs to enhance community awareness and coordination among partners; and third, the assessment stage measuring results across ideological, security, and social dimensions. The speaker then delved into the successful promotion of moderation, peaceful conflict resolution, and community mediation among various stakeholders in Iraq, including religious actors and youth volunteer teams. Additionally, the speaker introduced several ongoing national priorities, ranging from reducing extremism in displacement camps and developing educational training guides to using climate change as a preventive P/CEVE measure, alongside psychological and social rehabilitation, youth volunteering, and juvenile justice guidance. The speaker concluded with data from Iraqi government agencies, highlighting Iraq's improvements in social cohesion and peaceful

coexistence resulting from these ongoing efforts to reframe P/CEVE beyond traditional security perspectives.

The third speaker examined radicalization and recruitment trends in the Horn of Africa, arguing that recruitment into groups like al-Shabaab in the region is far more complex than surface-level interpretations. Citing the 2016 Somali Youth League hotel attack, this presentation showed that there is no single profile of a typical suicide attacker, calling for deeper understanding of motivations in local contexts. The speaker noted that al-Shabaab and Daesh have adopted intricate, long-term recruitment strategies, manipulating politics and clans through targeted identity framing and messaging - moving beyond traditional socio-economic drivers like land loss and exclusion, which reflects the groups' evolution and long-term presence in Africa from an "incubation stage" to an "expansion stage". The speaker concluded with counterterrorism recommendations centered on local and regional action, with specific focus on improving education access, governance, youth employment, rehabilitation programs, sustainable security, and credible strategic communications.





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