



WOMEN'S ALLIANCE FOR SECURITY LEADERSHIP
Preventing Extremism by Promoting Rights, Peace & Pluralism

Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms:

Women's Perspectives on Violent Extremism and Security Interventions

"We have had 15 years with counter-terrorism policies in place, but no results."

– Pakistani woman peace activist

Executive Summary

In 2015, violent extremism¹ emerged as a major security concern for the international community. In the various Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) summits and policies that have been developed, the importance of gender analysis and the work of women-led organizations globally and locally, in preventing and countering extremism are highlighted.²

For good reasons: across the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Middle East world, women's rights groups have been warning against the rise of extremism for nearly three decades. They are the first to notice, and often bear the brunt of, these regressive forces. They also recognize the depth and complexity of the problems and the importance of collaboration across sectors and between civil society, states and international actors.

Despite increasingly restricted public space and limited resources across the regions most affected, pro-peace and pro-pluralism women-led organizations have developed innovative approaches to challenge the spreading ideologies and violent practices of state and non-state actors. They engage in prevention and deradicalization work with those vulnerable to recruitment, offer interpretations of religious and cultural tenets that uphold equal rights and coexistence, and attempt to hold political and religious leaders accountable.

Working at the grassroots, nationally and transnationally, they have unique credibility, authenticity and access to address the problems and identify solutions. Their expertise could inform and

The Women's Alliance For Security Leadership (WASL)* brings together existing women rights and peace practitioners, organizations, and networks actively engaged in preventing extremism and promoting peace, rights and pluralism, to enable their systematic and strategic collaboration. WASL partners have deep experience in:

- Providing religious literacy and alternative narratives
- Deradicalization & rehabilitation
- Security sector reform (SSR) and training
- Upholding human rights and gender equality
- Building community resilience and addressing grievances through social and economic programming and
- Promoting a culture of peace and active citizenship.

* 'Wasl' means to 'connect' in Arabic, Urdu and Persian

"The international community is not doing us any favors... Extremism is not our problem only; what happened in Paris is part of the same thing that's happening in Libya."

¹ Agreeing on a shared definition of 'violent extremism' is itself a challenge. The Australian Government has one of the most succinct definitions defining it in brief as the "beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals." For a more detailed discussion see: <https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/aboutus/Pages/what-is-violent-extremism.aspx>

² The UN Secretary General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism calls on all to "Support the establishment of regional and global networks for civil society, youth, women's organizations and religious leaders to enable them to share good practices and experience so as to improve work in their respective communities and promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue." The full text of the Plan of Action is available here: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674

improve international policies and practices.

In its first of a series of policy reports, the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) presents women's perspectives on the security dimensions of the P/CVE agenda including reflections on their own efforts in engaging state and non-state military and security actors and their recommendations for international policies and interventions. The report draws on consultations held in November 2015 with over 70 women's rights and peace practitioners across 15 countries. Findings reveal strikingly common and shared critiques of current P/CVE practices across the Middle East, North Africa and Asia.

Uncomfortable Truths, Unconventional Wisdoms: Women's Perspectives on Violence Extremism and Security Interventions covers four key areas: (1) security concerns for civilians and civil society organizations; (2) experiences and engagement with local police; (3) outreach to militias and experiences of de-radicalization work; and (4) perspectives on international military and security presence and interventions.

Key Findings

1. A Vibrant Civil Society is Vital to Preventing Extremism

Current P/CVE policies are doing more harm than good. Violent extremism will not be erased in any context where the only alternative is an authoritarian state that prohibits dissent and pluralism in expression and actions. Strong, open, and vibrant civil societies are critical to the prevention of extremism, but states, including those strongly allied with Western governments are using the fight against terror and violent extremism to suppress legitimate NGOs, media, opposition political groups, and individuals who criticize state policies and actions. Moreover, the turmoil across the Middle East, North Africa and Asia (MENA/Asia) that is prompting mass displacement also constrains local civil society to organize and deepen expertise and impact as their staff is forced to flee when faced with threats from state and non-state forces.

International rhetoric in support of women's rights and organizations is not matched by action. Women in particular are targeted across geographies and cultural contexts, curtailing their ability to inform the public about basic human rights and equality, or religious tenets that preach respect and coexistence. Extremists are filling the vacuum, spreading their own intolerant ideology, slandering and threatening women human rights defenders (WHRDs).

WHRDs have to navigate a narrow path of maintaining their independence in the face of immense pressure from governments that want to co-opt their agenda without addressing their demands. Simultaneously in their efforts to limit funding of extremism, many governments have instituted financial restrictions making it impossible for local NGOs to access even the limited international resources that exist. Local organizations face difficulties as they try to operate with flexibility and sustain themselves.

When major powers such as the United States frame women's empowerment and leadership as beneficial to their security interests, they feed into the rhetoric of extremist groups.

Across MENA/Asia and the world governments are forming fully funded shadow NGOs with access to international spaces but advocating regressive messages on rights. In the Arab world, since the 2011 revolutions, women's rights groups have also had to contend with the negative legacies of 'state feminism' espoused by

past regimes. Islamists and extremists deliberately equate them with past regimes or western "immorality" to undermine their credibility, and target those who persist in their activism.

When major powers such as the United States frame women's empowerment and leadership as beneficial to their security interests, they feed into the rhetoric of extremist groups who link gender equality with western interests. Strong rhetoric in the Security Council on the importance of women's organizations (as in Resolution 2242) if

unmatched with a demand for women's security and protection guarantees, signifies that when geo-politics and short-term state interests come into the equation, global commitments to women are still of secondary importance. The overemphasis on women as mothers that warn against extremism can be downright dangerous. They can be accused of being 'instrumentalized' as de facto 'frontline whistleblowers' for western governments. They can also put women peace/rights practitioners at risk.

Recommendations for Supporting Civil Society Effectively:

- 1) **Improve context analysis by consulting with civil society, particularly women's groups** to identify increasing repression and human rights violations as warning signs of extremism; to identify credible and independent CSOs; and to better support the pro-peace and rights forces.
- 2) **Offer political support to women activists** by demonstrating solidarity, seeking guidance from local, independent organizations, and holding governments accountable for repression and failures to support rights, peace, and activism. In particular, engage non-Western states and leaders to reiterate strategic value of a vibrant civil society and ensure protections for activists.
- 3) **Increase technical support to expand fora for civil society** voices including capacity development for journalists to critically cover rights, peace, and activism; supporting existing platforms for women to share their knowledge and perspectives on violent extremism, within and across countries and sectors (notably with parliamentarians), to deepen debate with inclusion of gender and human security dimensions.
- 4) **Provide logistical and financial support to civil society** actors working on peace/CVE and reducing barriers to inter-regional networking (e.g. onerous visa policies). Ensure funding is directed to credible and independent CSOs, especially women-led groups.

2. The Power and Potential of the Police

The police are at the frontlines of the fight against extremist violence. They are the first to see the signs of change within communities and the first to be targeted. As the women participants noted, where police are providing community security and are trusted by local populations, their presence has positive impact. In Sri Lanka for example the combination of 'community policing' training provided with UK government assistance and trainings from local a women's organization on human rights, women, peace and security to 431 police stations, contributed to improved police-community relations and a lowering of gender based violence (GBV).

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But too often, despite the vast resources dedicated to security training across MENA and Asia, the police are treated as the 'poor cousins' of the military, with lower quality training, poor work conditions, and limited resources including pay and equipment. While the responsibilities they shoulder are tremendous, it is not uncommon to hear of police officers working with no pay for months on end. These factors contribute to high drop out rates, corruption and invariably the police being a key source of violence and injustice that further fuels the tide of extremism.

Police impunity is a critical and legitimate public grievance across many countries. In Iraq and Afghanistan internationally trained police have been implicated in corruption, repression, and the sexual abuse of women.³ These transgressions reflect poorly on the states that provided the assistance. In Egypt the police have been accused of everything from petty corruption and crime, to rape, with impunity. The message, rightly or wrongly, conveyed to local

³ Joseph Goldstein, "US Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys of Boys by Afghan Allies," *The New York Times* (September 20, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/world/asia/us-soldiers-told-to-ignore-afghan-allies-abuse-of-boys.html>

communities is that either international actors condone the aggressive actions of the forces they trained or they are not concerned about the security and wellbeing of civilian populations. Extremist groups manipulate these perceptions to generate sympathy and support from local communities.

The majority of resources are targeted at a violent minority, instead of being disbursed for prevention and transformation of the ecosystem and communities in which extremism breeds.

The greatest concern is the opportunity lost. From Afghanistan in 2002 to Tunisia in 2012, Western governments and the international community have funded, trained and equipped police forces, but comparatively little time or money has been dedicated to integrating concepts of human rights, gender sensitivity, civilian protection and service into core missions. There is little if any monitoring of behavior after trainings are completed. As many communities have experienced, without the emphasis on public service the impact of security forces can be negligible or even counter productive.

Recommendations for Improving Policing Policies and Practices:

- 1) **Consult with civil society to ensure** that transparency and inclusion of 'service' to, and protection of all civilians are guiding principles in *security sector reform (SSR)*. In determining security assistance, assess country context and history of police relations with public through participatory stakeholder mapping. Before design of policies and programs, consult to identify critical issues of concern and tailor to the local context the integration of gender sensitivity and human, women's and children's rights into police training.
- 2) **Encourage the implementation of transparent and effective internal justice mechanisms** to convey a clear message of zero-tolerance and punishment for violation of the law. Place human rights lawyers/experts in each police station to inform and guide officers. Do not limit gender sensitivity efforts to the recruitment of female officers. All officers must be adequately trained and held accountable. Protect the rights of detainees, including the right to legal counsel (and provision of counsel by the state if necessary) before any interactions with police (e.g. this is now a requirement in Tunisia).
- 3) **Establish community-police fora to build community trust and support.** Integrate community policing and interactions with women's civil society groups within international policy discussions and dialogues with city and local/provincial leadership. Encourage police to reach out to their communities to establish trust through social/sporting activities.
- 4) **Provide necessary technical support for sustained and systematic civil society** consultations in the design, implementation, and follow up of police trainings, including by inviting local CSOs to provide them (see Sri Lanka case). Share regional and international best practices for community policing and invite women's groups to share community perspectives with police. Include women's groups and civil society in independent monitoring and evaluations especially police-civilian relations regarding minority and marginalized sectors of the population. *Provide technical and financial support for police professionalization* through provision of adequate and timely pay and benefits, and dignified work and living conditions. Support women's groups to engage directly with political, security, and military leaders on improving policing, including providing opportunities for their participation in security sector events.
- 5) **Provide technical and financial support for police professionalization** through provision of adequate and timely pay and benefits, and dignified work and living conditions. Support women's groups to engage directly with political, security, and military leaders on improving policing, including providing opportunities for their participation in security sector events.

3. Militias and the Militarization of Society

Daesh's brutality and expanding control over terrain has captured the world's attention but other militias, rooted in tribal, sect and geographic or allegiances are proliferating unchecked across the region and beyond. Nigeria's Boko Haram has become a 'hydra-headed' operation involved in crime, kidnappings, assassinations, and politics.⁴ In the

⁴ In the 2015 'Global Terrorism Index' the Institute for Economics and Peace notes Boko Haram is now the world's most deadly terrorist organization. For more: <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>

Maldives, extremist groups are recruiting men and women among the island state's 400,000 population. In Tajikistan, petty criminals are radicalized in state prisons. Meanwhile Afghanistan is witnessing the rise of ISIS. Says one Afghan peace activist says, "They make the Taliban look like the good guys."

In every instance, activists link the rise of militias to a mix of oppressive and corrupt governance at the national level.

In Nigeria, a military task force unable to distinguish local actors from Boko Haram became a worse perpetrator of violence. In Iraq, the government legitimized other militias and recruits children in the hope of mobilizing against ISIS, but it has no control over them or the spread of weapons. Regional and international powers are also implicated, for supporting militias with weapons and money, while imposing sanctions on states, sidelining pro-democracy and civil society leaders.

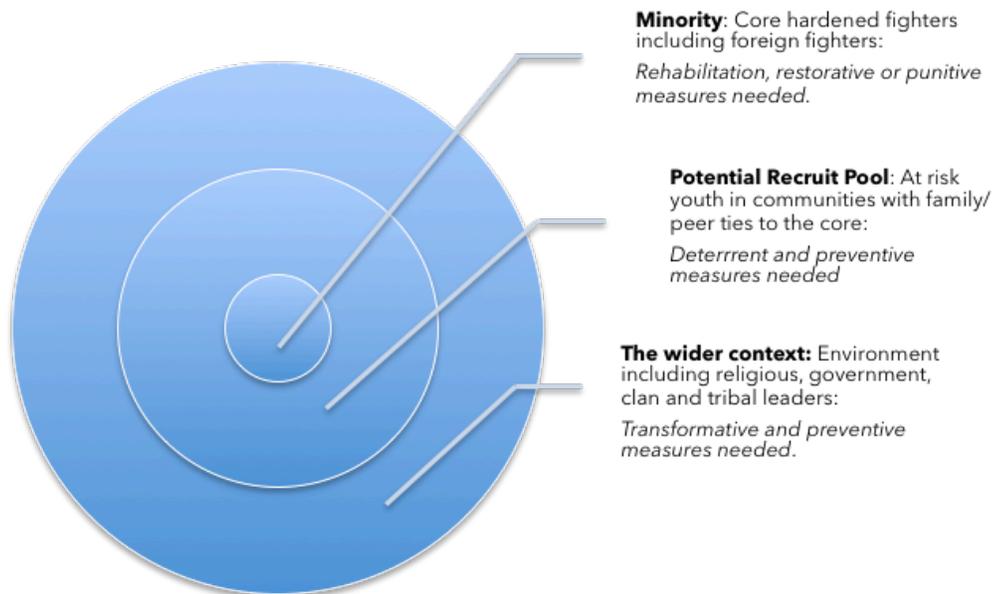
"We don't want relief only, we need projects to engage teenagers in productive ways, not through fighting."

Communities need to be transformed: P/CVE strategies that target the violent minority are not sufficient.

The heavy-handed securitized P/CVE approach means that the majority of resources are targeted at a violent minority, instead of being disbursed for prevention and transformation of

the eco-system and communities in which extremism breeds. From Tunisia to Afghanistan, the persistent lack of opportunity in the formal economic sphere coupled with experiences of state injustice and corruption, and the allure of religious justice, heightens the vulnerability of young men and boys to being recruited into militias. There is always a ready pool of recruits. The core minority can always tap into a wider pool of people. If the broader context and population are not addressed, the stream of young men and women at risk of recruitment into the cycle of violence will grow. Preventive and deterrent measures directed at the core source pool, and more transformative socio-economic interventions directed at the community are therefore critical (See diagram).

Three Tiered Approach to Countering Violent Extremism



Women are leading the way. Despite worsening security conditions, from Nigeria to Pakistan, Iraq to Syria, women are leading efforts to deradicalize and prevent recruitment, while transforming their communities. In Tajikistan, female lawyers are attempting to stem the flow of fighters to Afghanistan. In Pakistan and Syria they are working with

teenagers, teaching a mix of peace education including religion and civic activism to build resilience against the lure of extremism.

Women peacebuilders use similar strategies for deradicalization across regions, but each is also tailored to the specificities of their local context. They adhere to cultural practices ranging from their dress and engagement with local tribal or religious leaders, to the use of religious and cultural texts and language to first build trust and access the militias. They offer a mix of individual psycho-social support and group activities to strengthen belonging and pride in their community and livelihood skills. The efforts are still small scale but effective.⁵

Their work is difficult. By taking a stand, they put themselves at risk, including of attacks on their identity such as accusations of being infidels. They are wary of government and international actors that attempt to co-opt and control them and they are tired of the pressure put on them to 'do this and that' when governments are not being proactive or effective. Their simple message is to focus on community based economic and social development including support for small and medium sized businesses: "We don't want relief only, we need projects to engage teenagers in productive ways, not through fighting."

Recommendations to Advance Prevention and Reduce Militarization:

- 1) **Recognize and support the unique and specialized work of women peacebuilders** in deradicalization and broader civic engagement and mobilization, by inviting them to dialogues and planning of international policies and programs, enabling access to funding and provision of protection, (when at risk from state and non-state actors) and expedited travel assistance.
- 2) **Focus attention and resources into research and knowledge development on foreign fighters**, including where, how, and why they are recruited, how they infiltrate local militias and movements, how they garner local support, and what factors can contribute to their departure or loss of support in host communities; and share findings with local women's organizations.
- 3) **Encourage governments to support scaling up of CSOs deradicalization & civic engagement programs.**
- 4) **Be consistent in denouncing, defunding, and limiting the spread of extremist groups** and their ideologies, including through imposing tougher banking controls and penalties (per existing policies) against countries that enable financial transfers for extremist movements, passage of foreign fighters and trafficking of weapons; and challenging states that allow the spread of violent ideologies, particularly overt misogyny and intolerance towards minorities) that is taking place through media and school curricula
- 5) **Integrate the goals of social cohesion**, inclusion of marginalized groups, and economic development into all multilateral and bilateral policies, programs and projects. Support community-level participatory processes that include at-risk youth to determine effective and sustainable economic development and social service programs needed to prevent radicalization and support rehabilitation.

4. International Security Interventions: The Gap Between Intentions and Outcomes

Skepticism, pragmatism, and frustration prevail when women peacebuilders assess international military and security presence in their countries. They are fully aware of the geo-political dynamics that propel international interventions. As Libyans and Lebanese, Tunisians and Yemenis, they are quick to acknowledge the global nature of extremist violence and need for

"You can't be a state signatory to an international convention or member of coalition against terrorism but smuggle or support militias unilaterally,"

⁵ One Iraqi peacebuilder is able to demobilize 20% of the militia fighters she has contacted, with nearly none returning to violence once they participate in her programs. PAIMAN Alumni Trust in Pakistan has also developed a successful and comprehensive deradicalization program for vulnerable youth.

international cooperation, but they are also skeptical of interventions justified under the 'anti-terrorism' umbrella, noting how states, such as Saudi Arabia, have been instigators of the ideologies that foment extreme violence. They recall the duplicitous policies of national governments in creating the conditions in which extremist violence flourishes. They are also quick to point out that the fight against extremism has given governments the latitude to shut down dissent and commit violence with impunity and continued support from international actors.

"If we are a peaceful movement against arms, we cannot advocate for armed intervention. We can't have it both ways."

– Community Organizer

Double standards in foreign policy are no longer tenable, and they feed the narrative of extremists. Given global connectivity and social media, people are well aware and rapidly informed of the double standards of governments that claim the mantle of anti-terrorism yet act in self-interest. "You can't be a state signatory to an international convention or member of coalition against terrorism but smuggle or support militias unilaterally," says a Libyan reflecting on the role of Gulf Arab states in funding and arming militias in her country. Others point to the Western countries that champion arms sales to authoritarian and violent regimes. There is anger and pain at the silence of Western governments in the face of gross human rights violations in their countries.

Whether the intentions are good or not, for many women peacebuilders the experiences of foreign military presence to date have been negative. "Can any international actor guarantee that they will only attack ISIS or Assad?" Asks a Syrian woman. Afghans who have experienced decades of foreign interventions and interferences echo these sentiments. "We appreciate the governments that support us," says one Afghan peacebuilder, "but there was also much harm. International presence in some areas led to masses of people joining the Taliban." The perception among WHRDs and peacebuilders is that many of the most powerful foreign actors are not assisting locals to bring social cohesion and unity. Instead they instrumentalize different political, ethnic, religious or ideological factions to pursue their own goals, to the detriment of the country.

Military interventions feed the conflict. Whether the intentions are good or not, for many women peacebuilders the experiences of foreign military presence to date have been negative. "Can any international actor guarantee that they will only attack ISIS or Assad?" Asks a Syrian woman. Afghans who have experienced decades of foreign interventions and interferences echo these sentiments. "We appreciate the governments that support us," says one Afghan peacebuilder, "but there was also much harm. International presence in some areas led to masses of people joining the Taliban." The perception among WHRDs and peacebuilders is that many of the most powerful foreign actors are not assisting locals to bring social cohesion and unity. Instead they instrumentalize different political, ethnic, religious or ideological factions to pursue their own goals, to the detriment of the country.

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"Don't just arm us to kill, help us talk"

– Syrian Activist

Send peacekeepers not war-makers. Despite their skepticism, many women peacebuilders are also pragmatic, recognizing that while having foreign militaries in their countries is never ideal, it is at times necessary. However, they make a clear distinction between military presences for combat versus peacekeeping with a clear mandate: to maintain ceasefires, uphold rule of law, and give confidence to the public in situations where insecurity has been rife—provided they do not exploit local populations. In the case of Syria, many activists who led peaceful protests are calling for 'peaceful armies.'

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Many want well-trained national armies that put citizens' protection first to protect state borders against the mix of arms trafficking and foreign interventions that seed extremism and allow militias to proliferate. But the fear of militarized dictatorships is also concern across the board. Ultimately though, there is consensus around one critical point: countries need armies for defensive purposes under a democratic civilian leadership that adhere to human rights laws and norms. A doctrinal and paradigm shift is needed in the concept of security: from forces using violence and supporting oppressive regimes to upholding and protecting the rights of the civilian population and being held accountable to them. International actors must take heed: if they fund, equip, and train regimes, yet remain silent when they are abusive, they are perceived to be guilty by association.

Local civil society actors are frustrated by the inability of the international community to acknowledge its own weaknesses and failures, From Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003 to Libya 2011, they point to harm the international community has done through mismanagement, limited understanding of local dynamics, short term approaches, and misjudgments such as disbanding the Iraqi army or claiming Libya's 'liberation' a success just as extremist militias were

spreading throughout the country. As one peacebuilder notes, “We are not a project. It is matter of life for millions of people.”

Second, they are angered that time and again the foreign political and financial support given to armed groups, which fuels disputes and violence, far outweighs efforts and resources dedicated to promoting dialogue or negotiations, even though ultimately most conflicts need a political settlement and societal processes to achieve peace.

Finally, they are frustrated by the mismatch between rhetoric and reality. Women’s organizations and local ownership may be praised by world leaders and referenced in international policy documents, but in reality civil society is being hollowed out. Yet experience demonstrates that internationally and nationally driven strategies are rarely effective if they exclude communities and organizations that have a track record and vested interest in preventing violence and promoting rights and pluralism. By contrast inclusive processes deepen local ownership and accountability, and reduce corruption among all parties.

Recommendations for Effective International Intervention:

- 1) Integrate human rights-based doctrine and oversight to ensure security interventions adhere to human rights norms, including the women, peace, and security agenda in policies and actions. Include attention to the gender dimensions (i.e. differing experiences of local women and men) in crisis management and prevention efforts.
- 2) Stop arms sales and transfers to countries at war or perpetrating violence against their own citizens; make security assistance conditional on greater inclusion of local communities and independent civil society in monitoring and oversight.
- 3) Put greater emphasis, resources, and time into developing inclusive political negotiations and nonviolent solutions, instead of primarily funding armed groups and warfare.
- 4) Enable the UN to provide robust oversight of international interventions with local civil society involvement, to ensure coherence, consistency, and cooperation among countries offering assistance so they are not pursuing their own agendas or conflicting strategies, particularly involving trainings for the security and justice sectors.
- 5) Support national public surveys and grassroots consultations to identify the shared hopes and aspirations of the moderate majority, and draw on them to develop comprehensive country assistance programs for governance, economic and social development.
- 6) Integrate social cohesion and respect for pluralism into all security, justice, governance and development programs by including marginalized groups (e.g. youth/women/minorities in program design and implementation).
- 7) Support civil society alliances and capacity development to share knowledge and practices cross-sectorally and across countries (e.g. civil society, security sector, media and legislatures).

Conclusions

Across the range of countries, the messages to their foreign counterparts are similar: local, national and international actors need each other to combat extremism. No sector can do it alone. States must uphold human rights principles otherwise they are fueling the problems. Anti-extremism strategies must include comprehensive viable alternatives that address legitimate grievances. Local perspectives and experiences are crucial in improving international responses to end radicalization and bring sustainable peace. As for international actors, if peace is the goal, they must root their approaches in fundamental human rights, prioritize inclusivity at all levels. Instead of ignoring them, they should draw on the strengths and will of those who are already committed and contributing.

Local, national and international actors need each other to combat extremism. No sector can do it alone.

For more information on WASL or ICAN, please contact info@icanpeacework.org and see www.WASL_global.net