

BRAVEⁱnsight

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BUILDING A NETWORK TO DISRUPT AND DEFEAT A NETWORK

How the BRAVE Network Counters Radicalization and Strengthens
Community-Led Prevention



Sh. Ramadhan Aula

CSCR Secretary General/Director



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Introduction

Violent extremism is sustained not only by ideology but also by social relationships, networks of trust, the formation of identity, and locally embedded systems of influence. Conventional responses that rely predominantly on state-centric enforcement may therefore struggle to reach the relational and community dimensions of radicalization. This paper examines the BRAVE (Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism) Network, a flagship initiative established in Kenya in 2015 by the Center for Sustainable Conflict Resolution (CSCR). CSCR main leaders, spearheading the programs included Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Dr Mustafa Y Ali (who is also the Convenor for BRAVE), and this author. Drawing on the BRAVE model as presented by CSCR, the paper argues that community-based prevention networks offer a practical means of detecting early warning signs, providing credible religious guidance, challenging extremist narratives, and strengthening locally owned processes of prevention and reintegration. It offers a comparative conceptual account of extremist networks and the BRAVE Network, examining their structures, sources of legitimacy, modes of influence, and engagement with vulnerable populations. It also considers where BRAVE is reported to operate, the lessons learned, the challenges of implementation, and recommendations for policy.

The analysis is descriptive and practice-oriented; it does not purport to offer a statistically causal evaluation of BRAVE's impact. It concludes that sustainable prevention demands more than the disruption of extremist structures: it requires trusted, visible, culturally legitimate, and community-owned alternatives.



Violent extremism poses a complex challenge to both security and governance, because its emergence and persistence are shaped by an interplay of ideological, social, political, economic, and relational factors. This paper identifies several vulnerabilities in Kenya's violent extremism landscape, among them crises of identity, real or perceived marginalization, the misinterpretation of scripture, and the continuing threat posed by extremist organizations such as Al-Shabaab, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda. It also stresses that recruitment is not confined to a handful of traditionally recognized locations; recruitment risks may arise in established and non-traditional settings alike.

A central proposition of this paper is that violent extremism operates through networks. Ideologues, religious authorities, recruiters, influencers, local connectors, peers, and targeted individuals each occupy distinct positions within a recruitment ecosystem. Beneath them lies a less visible layer of support that may include financiers, sympathizers, safe-house providers, traffickers, and online propagandists. These relationships are frequently decentralized, built on trust, adaptive, and embedded in ordinary social life, and they

are reinforced by narratives that claim religious or identity-based legitimacy.

The implications for prevention policy are considerable. If extremist influence is networked, a response composed solely of isolated interventions or late-stage enforcement is unlikely to reach the pathways through which individuals encounter, interpret, and act upon extremist narratives. The BRAVE Network offers an alternative: a network of trusted religious and community leaders who work within their communities to identify risks, offer credible guidance, mobilize early intervention, and disseminate counter-, positive, and alternative narratives.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the logic and operational features of the BRAVE Network and to explain how one network, rooted in the community, can be positioned to disrupt the influence of another. The term 'disrupt' is used broadly here: it refers not solely to law-enforcement action but to weakening recruitment pathways, eroding the credibility of extremist messaging, encouraging early reporting, and strengthening protective relationships.

Kenya's Violent Extremism Context

Extremist ideologies and local grievances together give rise to a set of interrelated vulnerabilities that may heighten exposure to violent extremist narratives. These include crises of identity; marginalization, whether materially experienced or socially perceived; the misinterpretation of religious texts; and the persistent presence and influence of extremist organizations. The geographical breadth of the threat compounds these risks. None of these factors, however, should be understood as an automatic cause of radicalization. Rather, they create conditions in which recruiters can more easily present extremist groups as sources of belonging, purpose, status, justice, or religious authenticity.

Consequently, recruitment hotspots have widened to include areas not traditionally regarded as at risk. This has practical implications: prevention cannot be confined to locations already identified as high-risk. It must also remain attentive to shifting patterns of mobility, online influence, social connection, and local grievance.

In this context, community leaders, and trusted religious leaders in particular, are often well placed to notice subtle changes in attitudes, relationships, language, or behaviour before a situation escalates. Their value lies not only in their proximity but also in the cultural and religious legitimacy that allows them to challenge extremist interpretations without reinforcing perceptions of external coercion.

Violent Extremism as a Networked Phenomenon

A layered recruitment structure

The structure of a violent extremist network typically comprises an ideologue or religious authority, recruiters and influencers, local connectors such as friends and peers, and the individuals being targeted. Recruitment, in other words, is seldom a

single direct exchange between an organization and an isolated individual; influence often travels through several relational intermediaries. The network further relies on a hidden support layer that may include financiers, sympathizers, enablers (including safe-house providers), traffickers, and online propagandists. Distinguishing the visible recruitment pathway from this less visible support system is analytically useful, for it underlines the need to understand the wider ecosystem in which recruitment and mobilization take place. Networks of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) share the following characteristics:

- ❑ **Decentralization:** influence and activity are distributed among multiple actors rather than controlled through a single visible hierarchy.
- ❑ **Trust-based relationships:** effective recruitment relies on interpersonal credibility, friendship, kinship, peer association, or perceived religious authority.
- ❑ **Adaptability:** methods, messages, and points of contact are modified in response to changing circumstances.
- ❑ **Hidden yet embedded influence:** highly influential operations may be concealed within ordinary social settings and relationships.
- ❑ **Narrative-driven mobilization:** ideological narratives help to interpret grievances, define identity, and justify action.

Taken together, these characteristics suggest that prevention must engage both with the content of extremist narratives and with the social conditions

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that allow those narratives to circulate. A response that addresses the message but not the messenger, or the messenger but not the surrounding web of relationships, is likely to have limited reach.

The BRAVE Network: Origins, Purpose, and Operating Logic

BRAVE (Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism) is a flagship programme of the Center for Sustainable Conflict Resolution (CSCR), established in 2015. The network was established across five

strategic regions of Kenya and is made up principally of trusted religious and community leaders and experts.

BRAVE was founded by Dr Mustafa Y. Ali, its Convenor. Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome and this author (Sheikh Ramadhan Aula) lead regularly and programmatically bring together its religious and community leaders across the regions. The network's Deep Dialogue programme, which engages directly with contested religious concepts, is led by Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome as Lead Scholar.



The BRAVE model is designed to harness community legitimacy as a resource for prevention. Its principal functions are to identify early warning signs of radicalization, provide credible religious guidance, intervene at community level, and disseminate counter-, positive, and alternative narratives. These functions make the network at once a preventive mechanism and a channel for community dialogue.

Theory of Change, Core Pillars and Components

The BRAVE theory of change may be summarized as follows: when communities are equipped with accurate knowledge for countering radicalization, empowered through trusted leadership, and supported by structured networks, they are better placed to recognize early signs of

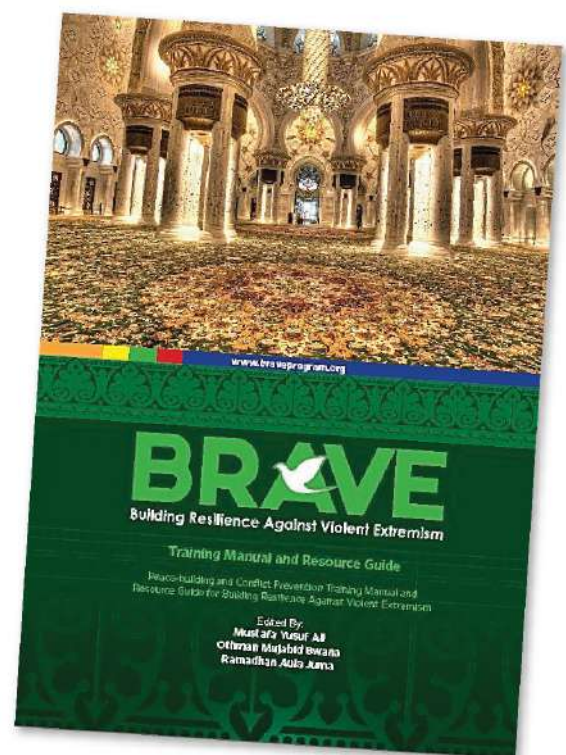
radicalization, challenge extremist narratives, and prevent recruitment.

This logic places prevention, community ownership, and sustainability at the heart of the intervention. It assumes that knowledge is more likely to translate into action when it is delivered by trusted actors and reinforced through enduring relationships rather than one-off awareness activities. It also depends on the strong pillars on which the network is anchored:

- ❑ Correcting ideological misconceptions: addressing inaccurate or extremist interpretations of religious texts and concepts, notably through the Deep Dialogue programme.
- ❑ Community awareness: strengthening public understanding of radicalization risks, vulnerabilities, and options for prevention.
- ❑ Network building: creating sustainable relationships among religious and community actors.
- ❑ Early warning systems: supporting mechanisms for identifying and reporting indicators of vulnerability or recruitment.
- ❑ Capacity strengthening: systematically enhancing the ability of trusted religious leaders to respond constructively.

BRAVE Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism

Training Manual & Resource Guide



The model's core components are the development of a BRAVE manual, the establishment of the BRAVE Network, ideological pushback, and community engagement. Together, they reflect an approach

that combines knowledge products, institutionalized relationships, direct engagement with narratives, and locally grounded activity.

Building a Counter-Network: BRAVE and Extremist Network Dynamics

The defining strategic feature of BRAVE is its effort to counter extremist networks with a community-based network, rather than relying solely on isolated programmes or reactive interventions. The

two systems may operate within the same social environment, yet they pursue different ends and draw on different forms of legitimacy.

Dimension	Extremist network	BRAVE network
Relational basis	Secrecy and selective trust	Publicly visible trust and community relationships
Narrative function	Misinterpreted religious justification and ideological indoctrination	Credible scriptural interpretation and counter, positive, and alternative narratives
Targeting and reach	Vulnerable populations reached through recruiters, influencers, and peers	Communities engaged proactively through trusted leaders
Primary mechanisms	Recruitment cells, peer influence, hidden support structures	Early detection, trusted intervention, awareness, and network coordination
Legitimacy	Claimed ideological or identity-based authority	Cultural, religious, and community legitimacy
Strategic effect	Expands extremist influence and recruitment pathways	Seeks to reduce vulnerability and interrupt recruitment pathways

This comparison should not be read as implying that the two networks are symmetrical in purpose or ethical standing. Its analytical value lies in recognizing that prevention can be more effective when it engages the same relational terrain on which extremist influence is built.

The BRAVE Network counts trusted voices, community embeddedness, timely and actionable information, and cultural and religious legitimacy among its distinctive assets. These assets can open access to information and conversations that formal institutions may struggle to reach. They may also narrow the distance between prevention actors and those experiencing confusion, exclusion, or exposure to extremist narratives.

The network approach shifts attention from isolated interventions to an ecosystem of sustained

relationships. Rather than treating awareness sessions, religious messaging, early warning, and reintegration as separate activities, the BRAVE model links them through a continuing network, creating room for referral, feedback, learning, and coordinated response.

Key Success Factors and Lessons Learned

Key success factors

The BRAVE Network, a distinctive initiative, owes its successes to the following factors:

- **Community ownership:** prevention is more effective and sustainable when communities take part in defining both problems and solutions.

- ❑ Religious legitimacy: credible religious leaders challenge extremist interpretations in language that communities recognize as legitimate.
- ❑ Sustained engagement: trust demands continuity, not merely short-term project activity.
- ❑ Network structure: connected actors can share information, refer cases, and reinforce one another's work.
- ❑ Integration with DDDR processes: prevention networks can contribute to processes of disengagement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and reconciliation.

Lessons learned

Among the lessons learned from the BRAVE Network are the following:

- ❑ Early prevention may prove more constructive than waiting until radicalization has reached an advanced stage.
- ❑ Religious leaders are critical actors wherever religious narratives shape identity and social belonging.
- ❑ Trust can create forms of access and influence that enforcement alone may not provide.
- ❑ Networks can offer greater continuity and reach than isolated interventions.

The broader lesson is that community prevention should be understood as infrastructure rather than

as a single activity. Such infrastructure requires relationships, defined roles, communication channels, leadership development, resources, and mechanisms for accountability and learning.

Implementation Challenges

Four major challenges have been identified: the sustainability of networks, limited resources, coordination with government actors, and cascading the approach to sub-county level. Each has implications for programme design.

- ❑ Sustainability: the network may struggle to endure if participation depends exclusively on short-term funding or on a small number of individuals.
- ❑ Resources: training, communication, travel, safeguarding, documentation, and referral systems all require predictable support. Without continuous capacity building, the network risks falling behind the dynamic nature of violent extremism.
- ❑ Growth and scale: expanding the network demands continual adaptation to local contexts rather than the simple replication of a uniform model.

A further operational consideration is the need to protect confidentiality, avoid stigmatization, and ensure that early warning systems do not become instruments for profiling communities. Effective prevention requires clear safeguards, proportionate responses, and confidence that information will be handled responsibly.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

Drawing on the BRAVE model and the challenges identified above, the following recommendations are proposed:

- ❑ **Institutionalize community networks within DDDR policy.** Formal policy frameworks should recognize the contribution of trusted community and religious networks to

disengagement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and reconciliation, while defining roles, safeguards, and referral procedures.

- ❑ **Invest in religious literacy and narrative resilience.** Training should strengthen the capacity of religious leaders and community educators to explain contested concepts accurately and to communicate counter-, positive, and alternative narratives in locally credible ways.
- ❑ **Support long-term reintegration pathways.** Community networks should be connected to sustained psychosocial, livelihood, family, educational, and social reintegration support, with attention to both returnees and affected communities.
- ❑ **Develop measurable monitoring and evaluation systems.** Programmes should track outputs and outcomes through transparent indicators such as network functionality, referrals, response times, participant reach, changes in knowledge, and evidence of reduced vulnerability.
- ❑ **Strengthen county and sub-county level coordination.** Expansion should be accompanied by locally adapted coordination platforms linking religious leaders, civil society, county authorities, national agencies, and relevant service providers.
- ❑ **Embed safeguarding and accountability.** Early warning and community intervention mechanisms should include confidentiality protocols, non-discrimination principles, informed referral, and procedures for addressing misuse of information.

Conclusion

The BRAVE Network offers a community-centred approach to understanding and responding to violent extremist influence. Its central proposition is that a networked threat demands a networked response. By bringing together trusted religious and community leaders, BRAVE seeks to identify early warning signs, provide credible religious guidance, engage communities proactively, and weaken the social and narrative pathways through which recruitment occurs.

The model's reported strengths (community ownership, religious legitimacy, embeddedness, sustained engagement, and network coordination) underline the importance of trust as a strategic resource in prevention. At the same time, sustainability, resourcing, coordination, scale, and the generation of evidence remain pressing concerns. The future value of the approach will depend not only on sustaining networks but also on documenting their results, protecting the rights and dignity of communities, and integrating prevention with broader systems of rehabilitation and reintegration.

The underlying message of the BRAVE approach is that disrupting extremist networks involves more than dismantling structures. It also requires strengthening credible, constructive, and locally owned alternatives that offer belonging, guidance, resilience, and pathways away from violence.



CSCR
CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE CONFLICT RESOLUTION
THE PEACE CENTER

📍 Durham Road • Nairobi, Kenya

☎ +254 722 763 794 | @ info@cscrcenter.org

f @jihadforall | ✕ @PeaceCenter_ | 🌐 www.cscrcenter.org