



Foreign Aid's Value in Combating Global Terrorism: An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

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Cutting U.S. economic and development aid aimed at countering violent extremism stops terrorism prevention at its source—a costly mistake. Closing USAID and key State Department offices like the Bureau for Conflict and Stabilization Operations strips away cost-effective tools that address root causes of radicalization while abandoning decades of expertise and local partnerships. Investing in governance, stability, and economic opportunity remains a high-return complement to military and police forces.

In an IMF paper on [The Urgency of Conflict Prevention](#), the authors note that prevention policies in countries with recent violence can lead to potential savings of [\\$103 for every dollar spent on prevention](#). This is from avoiding the need to spend money on a future response.

"We can't kill our way to victory here."

- General Thomas D. Waldhauser, Commander,
US Africa Command

Congressional Testimony, March 9, 2017

There is also new evidence of a link between cuts to U.S. foreign assistance programs and rising violence, such as in a recent Center for Global Development paper that draws on newly published academic research. The authors note that even over a short period, USAID cuts in areas of Africa that rely heavily on aid were associated with roughly a [5% rise in conflict events and a 5% increase in fatalities](#). [Science](#) published a study in May 2026 that also suggests that the suddenness of USAID cuts lined up with higher rates of violence. Though not all conflict events and fatalities would be related to violent Islamist extremism, a majority would be, particularly in countries that rely heavily on aid.

From Extremist Strongholds to New Frontlines

Violent extremism crosses borders, as witnessed when groups largely affiliated with ISIS and al-Qaeda carry out terrorist attacks. Despite efforts by the United States and our allies to weaken the central commands of these organizations, their affiliates have proved resilient, settling into communities, controlling territory, and acting as shadow governments. They increasingly fight as hybrid insurgent armies, ambushing convoys, taking over bases, and engaging in long gun battles with soldiers. There were [22,307 fatalities linked to militant groups in Africa](#) from 2024 to 2025; 15,678 of those occurred in battles with government military units.

With [one-third](#) of the world's known critical mineral reserves and [11 of its fastest-growing economies](#), Africa is now the center of ISIS and al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist organizations. Five

countries across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, along with Somalia, face the highest levels of extremist insurgent violence on the continent. [Terrorist groups continue to spread](#), affecting countries across the continent, spreading from Somalia to Kenya; the Democratic Republic of Congo to Uganda; Mozambique to Tanzania; and the Sahel to coastal West Africa.

Violent extremism and terrorism remain a significant threat in the Middle East. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen remain operational and able to attack Israeli and U.S. bases in the region. Islamic State cells are still active in Iraq and Syria, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula continues to threaten Yemen.

In South Asia, the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) continues to [destabilize Pakistan](#), with over 800 attacks in 2025, while ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K) remains a serious threat in Afghanistan and beyond. [ISIS-K has killed or injured hundreds of people](#) in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia, including a deadly attack at a concert hall in Moscow that left 144 dead and more than 500 injured. While unsuccessful to date, ISIS-K has also plotted attacks in Europe. Afghanistan and Pakistan have exchanged cross-border strikes over Afghanistan's sheltering of the TTP, making an unstable region worse.

Like the seven-headed Hydra in Greek mythology, violent extremism is hard to beat; when one group or leader is defeated, two more pop up to replace it. Affiliates gain followers, and splinter groups multiply; "defeated" cells reemerge, and groups expand their reach to Europe and North America through social media and video games. Terrorist groups are turning to organized crime as a growing source of revenue, while new and more effective technologies, such as drones, lower costs and increase the deadliness of their attacks. Violent extremism causes instability, raising the risk of coups, economic decline, increased crime, and reduced trade and access to critical natural resources. To beat violent extremism, like the Hydra, the U.S. and our allies must address the root causes.

Violence Follows Aid Cuts

The current administration gutted American soft power. The U.S. continues to maintain security partnerships with many countries with rising levels of violent extremism. While military cooperation helps countries manage threats within their borders, it fails to address the factors that lead people to join extremist groups. USAID and the State Department's humanitarian and development programming offered critical, complementary prevention-focused interventions. Long-term aid programs tackled problems stemming from the social, economic, and political conditions (i.e., repressive governments, community divisions, lack of jobs) that encourage people to engage in violence and extremism. The United States helped countries to address these issues with programs that encouraged citizen involvement, reduced corruption, improved service provision, and increased employment.

A bipartisan Congressional Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States spent two years studying the problem and reached a clear conclusion: modest preventative investments can reduce the risk of extremist exploitation—and programs should focus on building societies resilient enough "to become self-reliant, better able to resist this scourge, and protect their hard-earned economic and security gains."

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There has not been enough time to measure the long-term impacts of cuts to programs addressing the causes of violent extremism and terrorism. However, a clearer picture is beginning to emerge:

- In northern Benin in 2025, the terrorist organization Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) [increased attacks](#) on security forces and park rangers. They also kidnapped and intimidated civilians where USAID once had programs.
- USAID cuts [increased economic vulnerability and hunger in northeastern Nigeria](#) as Boko Haram is resurging.
- Cuts in humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh are leading to the same factors—lack of food, education, or job opportunities—that prove fertile ground for [extremist recruitment](#).
- Community leaders and a UN official on [the Côte d'Ivoire border](#) with Mali warned that an end to USAID's prevention program could push people “into the arms of extremists.”
- More [recent Administration cuts](#) to all remaining humanitarian aid to five countries that are centers of violent extremist insurgencies in Africa, including Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, may create conditions for insurgent recruitment.

[Turning off aid funding worsens local conditions militants can exploit](#), including food insecurity and unemployment, making it easier for them to use incentives and intimidation to recruit members.

Years of expertise are gone. With the destruction of USAID and mass layoffs at the State Department, the U.S. government lost a trove of expertise and resources developed over the past 15 years. Hundreds of USAID, Department of State, contractor, and grantee staff with years of experience designing CVE programs lost their jobs. In addition, contract terminations and workforce reductions led to the firing of thousands of local staff, with a deep understanding of the in-country dynamics that allow terrorism to fester. The U.S. Government lost invaluable ties with civilian leaders and local governments and no longer has the same level of contact with communities under threat. Thousands of documents—country and regional prevention strategies and CVE research on what was working and not working—disappeared overnight.

Case in Point: How Terrorists Cash in on Gold Mines

In Mali and Burkina Faso—two of Africa's most gold-rich nations—religious extremist groups like [JNIM](#) and Islamic State affiliates have embedded themselves in the [artisanal mining economy](#). [JNIM is moving into the Kayes region](#), where some of the largest and most developed gold mines in Mali are located. These terrorist organizations tax miners, protect pits and transport routes, arbitrate disputes, and plug communities into smuggling networks. By controlling the informal economy, these organizations can [finance their operations and legitimize their presence](#).

Targeted U.S. development and economic assistance are among the few scalable tools capable of shrinking that revenue base and reliance on extremist groups for protection. Past programs included: giving small-scale miners legal licenses and co-ops, improving local governance and public services in mining communities, providing alternative livelihoods and youth

employment, and strengthening dispute resolution tools. It also disrupts conflict-mineral flows that feed the transnational organized crime that insurgents rely on for recruitment and coercion.

Modest [investment in mining-hub communities](#) is a cost-effective way to deny extremists cash, influence, and community buy-in while protecting U.S. interests in regional stability and responsible critical-mineral supply chains.

What Congress Should Do

Congress should ensure that development remains at the heart of the U.S. government's approach to preventing and countering violent extremism. Investments that strengthen local institutions, expand economic opportunity, and build community resilience reduce the underlying vulnerabilities that extremist groups exploit. Preserving these capabilities will help prevent future crises, protect U.S. strategic interests, and reduce reliance on more costly military and humanitarian responses.

- Ensure the budgets pair U.S. security cooperation assistance with stable funding for development activities that address the root causes of violent extremism and support post-conflict stabilization in FY27 appropriations.
- Allocate funding for humanitarian aid to refugee and displaced persons camps in the five countries in Africa that experience high levels of violent extremism where the U.S. recently cut aid, and to similar high-risk areas, such as Somali refugee camps in Kenya and Rohingya camps in Bangladesh.
- Hold the Executive Branch accountable for hiring experts in CVE and counter-terrorism, and other staff with the skills necessary to administer prevention-focused development programs across aid sectors that reduce vulnerability to extremist influence.
- Uphold statutes such as the Global Fragility Act (GFA) that address CVE and implement them in line with Congressional intent, maintaining stable topline for peace and security.
- Ensure that the State Department's GFA strategy includes countries that meet the conditions of the Act and where GFA funding is likely to make a reasonable impact.

FAQs

Q. What are the drivers of violent extremism and terrorism?

Numerous factors that can vary depending on the context drive violent extremism. The two most significant drivers are state repression — including human rights abuses by security forces — and the denial of civil and political rights. Other important factors include, but are not limited to:

- Inter-group conflicts and grievances
- Economic inequality when it overlaps with group or regional identity
- Competing economic interests that then converge with group and religious identity (as seen with farmer-herder conflicts in increasingly water-scarce areas of Nigeria and the Sahel)
- Extreme poverty and lack of opportunity
- State corruption and weak public services
- Religious ideology
- Resentment toward the West (specifically the United States and Israel)
- History of neglect, psychological abuse, and/or peer pressure, especially among youth
- Pervasive terrorist social media outreach
- Forced recruiting, kidnapping, and intimidation (e.g., Boko Haram)
- Need for personal and family protection, particularly in lightly policed border areas
- Terrorist groups' offers of financial incentives, such as salaries and loans

Q. Which laws currently addressing violent extremism are due for reauthorization?

A variety of traditional development programs can address elements of CVE; however, some laws directed funds specifically for this purpose. These include:

- **Global Fragility Act** funding authorization expired in 2024
- **Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA)** expired in December 2025
- The **Women, Peace, and Security Act** of 2017 is not up for reauthorization, but the current Administration has not been meeting its statutory requirement to report annually to Congress (by October 31st) on WPS Act implementation

Q. What is the Global Fragility Act and how can it be strengthened?

Congress passed the Global Fragility Act (GFA) as part of the 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act, and President Trump signed it into law on December 20, 2019. The GFA is a whole-of-government approach to preventing and reducing violent conflict. One year after passing the GFA, the U.S. government released its first-ever comprehensive strategy to tackle and prevent spiraling global conflict. The State Department led on foreign policy and diplomatic efforts, USAID led on development and humanitarian work, and the Department of Defense provided support as needed. In 2023, the President transmitted plans to Congress to implement the strategy, including country plans for Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, and coastal West Africa (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo).

The Administration could strengthen implementation by reexamining priority countries. This will help ensure the whole-of-government approach to preventing conflict, reducing violent extremism, and promoting stability in high-risk areas—including coastal West Africa and Mozambique—

continues. In the meantime, hold the Administration accountable for continued funding to priority countries unless and until it certifies to Congress that a country no longer meets fragility indicators.

While State could also consider Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Syria for inclusion, Pakistan and Nigeria would require significantly greater effort and resources. Reauthorizations, or a parallel authorization, would permit implementation of longer-term prevention and mitigation programs in countries where violence is prevalent. The word “fragility” in the name is not attractive to recipient countries. Re-emphasizing and ensuring funding to the Prevention and Stabilization Fund and WPS Fund could ease this.

Q. What is the Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) and how does it relate to CVE?

Congress enacted MEPPA in December 2020 and provided \$250 million over five years for peacebuilding and Palestinian economic development programs, the largest investment ever in the region’s peacemakers. With the dismantling of USAID, the Administration terminated nearly all MEPPA-funded programs. The FY 2026 Joint Explanatory Statement directed \$37.5 million for MEPPA, demonstrating broad bipartisan support. Congress should continue to appropriate funding for MEPPA in FY 2027 and beyond, while also ensuring the State Department spends the funds and hires the needed staff and expertise to implement the program. By bringing together Palestinians and Israelis to work on issues of common concern, MEPPA programs were helping to build a constituency for peace as an antidote to the increase in violence and radicalization we are seeing on both sides.

Q. How much USAID funding was going toward countering violent extremism before January 2025?

It is not possible to easily pinpoint USAID spending on countering violent extremism, because projects that addressed CVE often had multiple aims. The Agency also divided these sums among many countries spanning Mauritania and Benin in coastal West Africa to Indonesia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia, reflecting the wide range of potential CVE threats around the world.

Q. Why did the Administration cut humanitarian aid to certain African countries and how does that relate to VE?

A [leaked internal State Department email](#) stated that they were cutting off money to seven African countries because “there is no strong nexus between the humanitarian response and U.S. national interests.” This action may reflect the sense that little can be done to bring the five countries listed, which are home to violent extremist groups, back from the brink. These cuts, however, may lead to increased refugee flows into neighboring countries, which may also fuel new grievances and widen the conflict belt (including toward West African coastal states). Extremist groups typically use a “shadow governance” playbook—taxation, dispute resolution, protection, access to food and markets—to recruit new members and consolidate power and influence. When humanitarian support disappears, they become comparatively more capable of positioning themselves as the only functioning provider (or the gatekeeper) for people in need. This may also increase the number of crises that official security forces must manage (e.g., food

riots), making the efforts of security forces less effective in handling the violent extremist threat.

Q. What are some examples of USAID programs that were effective at preventing and countering violent extremism?

- Youth skills-building, civic engagement, and employment
- Anti-corruption programs
- Improved public services (cross over with sector programs like education, health, and agriculture)
- Strengthened citizen participation in local governance
- Building tolerance between antagonistic communities
- Strengthening local media to address misinformation

In Mauritania, for example, the Nafoor project sought to counter violent extremism using youth development strategies and training to prevent radicalization of youth.