

Preventing violent extremism in the Middle East

D7.3

Workshop: European Café Debate and presentation of initial findings from the Middle East cases



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On 3 February 2021 from 13:00 to 14:30, the Center for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po (Paris) hosted a public café debate webinar under the title ‘Café debate webinar: Countering violent extremism in the Middle East’ in which thirteen people participated.

The backdrop of the event was provided by the publication of the ‘D7.1 Policy brief summarising the EU and other stakeholder’s prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the region, Middle East’. The overall message that emanated from the webinar was the importance of a holistic approach to counter terrorism (CT) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) in the MENA. The discussion focused on to what extent CT and PVE efforts in the MENA alone can say anything about the EU’s foreign policies and whether the EU has, in fact, moved towards a ‘security first’ approach.

Morten Bøås, Principal Investigator of PREVEX and research professor at NUPI, welcomed the audience, set the scene, and introduced the panelists. **Georges Fahmi** (European University Institute, Florence) and **Kamaran Palani** (Middle East Research Institute, Erbil) presented findings from the PREVEX policy brief. **Andréas Hatzidiakos**, policy officer (EEAS), provided his perspectives, complemented by **Kerstin lo Schmid**, Crisis Response Planner (FPI), and **María Sánchez Gil-Cepeda**, Programme Manager-Counterterrorism (FPI). The ensuing debate was moderated by Morten Bøås.

Fahmi kicked off the presentations by looking for the causes of EU policies in the MENA. He did so by first assessing and presenting the main findings of the policy brief and the methodology employed. He argued that the various PVE approaches of the EU are determined by what is deemed feasible and most urgent in the eyes of EU policymakers and local stakeholders – and demonstrated the division of PVE funding given to its projects on the ground. He concluded that the EU has moved towards a ‘security first’ approach in the MENA in the last decade with less focus on human rights and democracy promotion. This is not merely based on the allocation of funding for PVE projects, but also because other non-securitized projects appropriate a logic of securitization.

Turning to cross-cutting issues and challenges, **Palani** argued that the PVE approaches of the EU’s key partners in the MENA largely rely on repression and religious reform. Commencing with the example of Lebanon and its national PVE strategies, Palani proceeded to Egypt, which has little interest in social, economic, or political conditions for radicalization and instead prioritizes a securitization-oriented policy combined with religious reform and co-optation.



Indeed, **Fahmi** later argued that this was typical insofar as this applied to the PVE approach of Iraq, as well. **Palani** ended the presentation by recommending the EU to strengthen its normative projects with a focus on good governance and democracy, and reassessing the level, and nature, of its funding to authoritarian or sectarian regimes and authorities in MENA.

Hatzidiakos followed up by emphasizing that there is a lack of acknowledgements coming from the Commission, which is the main funder of these PVE projects. He described how the EU is engaging with key partners in the MENA and are dependent on partners and local ownership. There is a fine line between what the EU can implement through these projects without imposing their policies. It is important to distinguish between CT and PVE as the latter is a far broader category of action; the policy brief focuses too greatly on CT projects while recommending new policies for PVE. **Hatzidiakos** disagreed that the EU is solely moving towards a securitized approach.

These comments were complemented by **Io Schmid** and **Gil-Cepeda**, who noted that there are ongoing conceptual discussions on differences between PVE and CT. **Io Schmid** acknowledged that there is a tendency to be somewhat alarmist when analyzing terrorism. Looking at the policy paper, the contradiction between ‘feeling good or feeling safe’ seems somewhat artificial as a holistic approach is required with CT and PVE being interdependent. It is important to recognize that the EU’s efforts on CT and PVE are a part of a greater picture – the projects in the MENA are only a sliver of that. The idea that the EU is moving towards a ‘security-centered’ approach is based on a small part of what the EU is doing. **Gil-Cepeda** continued by discussing the numbers and methods of categorization from CT-MORSE presented in the policy brief and noted that one had to take into account all projects implemented – also those helping civil society – in order to get the full picture of what the EU is doing.



Questions by audience in webinar

Andréas Hatzidiakos:

- How was the CTE and PVE programmes categorized considering their difference with PVE being a much larger category?
- Has the research group considered the possibility that the programmes mentioned in the policy brief have more to do with CT than PVE?

Kerstin lo Schmid:

- Is it possible to look at securitization in PVE in a longer-term perspective to observe any change?



Annex 1: List of people signing up for the webinar

List of Participants	Affiliation
Morten Bøås	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)
Kamaran Palani	Middle East Research Institute (MERI)
Georges Fahmi	European University Institute (EUI)
María Sánchez Gil-Cepeda	Programme Manager-Counterterrorism Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI)
Kerstin lo Schmid	Crisis Response Planner (FPI)
Andréas Hatzidiakos	Security Defense Policy – CT Division (EEAS)
Erik Skare	CERI Science Po
Viljar Haavik	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)
Dlawer Ala'Aldeen	Middle East Research Institute (MERI)
Axel Rudi	University of Copenhagen (UCPH)
Johanna-Maria Hülser	Berghof Foundation
Marie Kortam	Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH)
Henriette Ullavik Erstad	OSCE

