

Preventing violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel

D6.5 Key Stakeholder Dialogue



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The members of PREVEX Work Package (WP) 6 organised an online workshop to engage in a dialogue with key stakeholders on the main findings of PREVEX WP6 first deliverable, the Policy Brief on “EU and other stakeholders’ prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the Maghreb and the Sahel”. The workshop, titled “Preventing Violent Extremism in the Maghreb and the Sahel: Debating the role of the EU”, took place on 3rd of March 2021, from 3.00 to 5.00 pm CET. It was hosted by PREVEX WP6 leader Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies (SSSA) and organised jointly with the other members of the WP6 including the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), the University of Copenhagen, Al-Akhwan University of Ifrane, the Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa (ARGA), and the University of Leipzig.

Aiming to ensure a favorable environment for open engagement and frank discussions, the workshop was open to invited participants only, and it was entirely held under Chatham House rule. Overall, 35 participants joined the workshop, including EU Officers from the European External Action Service, the Commission, and EU Delegations and Missions in the Maghreb and the Sahel, as well as scholars and academics of the PREVEX consortium and partner research institutions, and a variety of experts from a selection of European and African think tanks working on preventing/countering violent extremism (P/CVE), including.

The workshop was opened by the introductory remarks of PREVEX consortium members, who introduced the overall PREVEX research project and contributed to situating this discussion in the broader framework of the project’s time span and cross-case comparability.

Kickstarting the actual discussion, PREVEX researchers went on to introduce the main findings of the latest PREVEX research on the EU and other stakeholders’ strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism in the Maghreb and the Sahel. Overall, the research revealed that security-centred discourses and approaches have tended to prevail in EU’s P/CVE strategies vis-à-vis these regions. A conflation of counter-terrorism and P/CVE was frequently observed, to the advantage of short-term repressive measures. Nevertheless, the EU attempts to steer away from the “global war on terror” type of approach. Rather, the model that emerges from EU actions, policies and discourses is centred on “criminal justice”, with a particular emphasis on law enforcement cooperation and judicial system effectiveness. From this perspective, a lack of clear blueprints dictated from Brussels and the reluctance of the EU to take the lead in the P/CVE agenda may have had a favourable impact in terms of constructive engagement with local authorities, context sensitivity, and local ownership. But it has also often enabled other stakeholders in the Maghreb and the Sahel, including both national authorities and international partners, to shape the P/CVE agenda in these regions in accordance with their own interests and views, sometimes to the detriment of EU priorities and leadership. Furthermore, the EU appears to rely on the unverified assumption that P/CVE initiatives can coexist, and arguably concur, with a number of other priorities that EU foreign action pursues, such as fighting climate change, upholding human rights, mainstreaming gender, fostering development, and others. In fact, however, considering the shortage of concrete mid-level policy instruments to ensure the effective implementation, monitoring and evaluation of EU P/CVE projects and policies, these competing priorities could lead EU P/CVE to be subordinated to, or diluted within, other strategic objectives. These findings prompted the recommendations to develop mid-level policy tools and adequate theories of change to bridge the observed gap between intentions and



implementations, and to further uphold the centrality of good governance in P/CVE cooperation.

These observations stimulated a lively debate. Some international officers challenged the idea that strategies, narratives and policies of securitization are the predominant frame of EU's P/CVE actions in the Maghreb and the Sahel. From this perspective prevention, rather than repression, has been at the core of EU's P/CVE action at least since 2012, when a variety of conflict prevention projects were reframed and refocused as part of the growing EU priorities on violent extremism; and since 2020, a whole-of-society approach to violent extremism is being developed by the EU, with a particular focus precisely on the Maghreb and the Sahel.

It was also added that the EU Commission is devoting considerable efforts to foster the development, institutionalisation and appropriation of mid-level policy tools such as trainings, indicators and templates. Especially designed for development professionals, these tools are meant to ensure that EU P/CVE strategies and broad orientations adopted in Brussels are effectively and coherently implemented on the ground. Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that the availability of a more refined theory of change would be crucial for P/CVE actions and projects to be more focused and effective.

The importance of context- and conflict-sensitivity was also stressed. The EU reportedly strives to tailor its P/CVE strategies in accordance with the needs and demands of each specific target country, so as to maximise local ownership and participatory approaches. It is precisely to avoid irking local sensitivities that many projects are not publicly labelled as P/CVE, even if they are designed to help prevent and counter violent extremism. In the Maghreb and the Sahel, many projects on education, development, human rights and others may be part of this category.

It was noted how this observation calls into question the sampling methodology adopted in the WP6 Policy Brief's mapping of EU's P/CVE actions in the Maghreb and the Sahel. By looking at projects and actions specifically labelled as P/CVE, the Brief may have failed to account for other projects that are P/CVE relevant, but that are not defined as such. Had they been given due consideration, the argument goes, the apparent predominance of security-oriented projects and actions could have been rebalanced in favour of other approaches and narratives, including good governance and development.

The debate prompted the reaction by a discussant from an influential think tank, who is well-versed on P/CVE issues in both the Maghreb and the Sahel. The discussant acknowledged that debates on P/CVE often face issues of mislabelling. On the one hand, in the absence of a clear and nuanced definition of violent extremism and radicalisation, the identification of the most suitable policies and actions to foster prevention and counter violent extremism remain embedded in ideological assumptions. Conceptual overstretch may also pave the way to manipulations and abusive interpretations, which may in turn enable the restriction of civil liberties and undermine good governance. On the other hand, there remains an ambiguity about the conceptual boundaries of P/CVE. If anything, from education to agriculture, from prisons reform to border controls, can be considered P/CVE, and even without being labelled as such, then the analytical content and distinctiveness of P/CVE is much diluted. That would make of P/CVE a buzzword, perhaps politically convenient, but unlikely to inform specific policies and to help achieve concrete objectives. The conflation of classical development projects with P/CVE goals is a case in point: the available scholarly literature does not provide convincing



evidence of the assumption, common to much EU strategizing in the Sahel and the Maghreb, that socio-economic development contributes to preventing and countering violent extremism. In contrast, the discussant argued, EU P/CVE efforts should lay emphasis on capacity building and good governance, shifting EU's priorities from security and stabilisation to conflict transformation and regional institution building.

Many of the previous points were reiterated and illustrated with additional examples during the rest of the debate, concurring to the emergence of a consensus among the participants. Participants working in/on the Maghreb and the Sahel evoked examples of EU-sponsored projects that were designed to serve a P/CVE agenda, even if they were not designated as such in official communications for reasons of political sensitivity. While some of these projects were indeed included in the mapping of the Policy Brief, some of them were left out in accordance with the Brief's sampling methodology. Other experts, for their part, further highlighted the overwhelming emphasis on promoting security and stability through P/CVE actions and projects. The Sahel is often put forward as a clear example of this, owing to the proliferation of EU-sponsored missions and initiatives mainstreaming security, including EUTM, EUCAP Sahel, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, the Sahel Coalition and the Sahel Partnership, as well as local stabilisation plans such as Mali's PSDGs. In view of the upcoming adoption of a new Sahel Strategy by the EU, think tank experts recommended that a greater place should be given to the promotion of good governance and human rights, also as a way to foster greater policy coherence and coordination, and avoid duplications and overlaps with other international stakeholders.

In conclusion, all participants tended to agree that the shortage of assessment tools of P/CVE strategies still poses a challenge to an effective and evidence-based approach to violent extremism. While the views about the most effective approaches to preventing and countering violent extremism may diverge, all participants agreed that exercises of this kind can only be productive, both as a way to foster accountability and constructive criticism of the policy strategies employed, and to promote scholarly discussions on the methodologies, concepts and theories that are best suited to apprehending the challenges of P/CVE

