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PREVENTING
VIOLENT
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Preventing violent
extremism, North
Africa and the Sahel

**D6.6
Policy brief
summarizing
lessons learnt on
the EU's measures
to prevent violent
extremism in the
region**

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Abstract

How do EU initiatives that are geared to help prevent and counter violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel match the underlying drivers of radicalisation? This PREVEX Policy Brief offers a reading of EU strategies in the backlight of our findings, which stem from fieldwork that was conducted in cases of both occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremist escalation across North Africa and the Sahel. As scholarly literature lays emphasis on how phenomena such as violent extremism are highly context-dependent, it is crucial to understand regional and local dynamics of social change and intermediation. This brief therefore provides an overall assessment of EU P/CVE policies and projects in North Africa and the Sahel, focusing on key contextual policy issues: democratic governance, rule of law, education, gender, reintegration. It argues that EU's emphasis on rule of law is particularly appropriate, while there is room for greater engagement in the fields of education and reintegration – provided that conflict-sensitive lenses are carefully applied. In the fields of democratic governance and gender, instead, a mismatch between general strategies and on-the-ground implementation can be observed. Targeted research in these critical areas of intervention and assistance is highly needed. Overall, our analysis invites to consider radicalisation processes not as social pathology but as ongoing social phenomena that take place in a space where several actors rival for material and ideational resources, and therefore require careful assessment and multi-scalar prioritisation, including at the regional and transnational level.

1. Introduction

The fight against violent extremism is one of EU's top priorities. To this end, in the past few years the EU has designed and deployed a variety of strategies, policies and tools to prevent and counter the rise of violent extremism within and across its borders. The collaborative research project *Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA: Strengthening Resilience in Enabling Environments* (PREVEX) aims to investigate the initiatives and impact of EU action in this domain, with a particular focus on the EU extended neighbourhood.

North Africa and the Sahel[1] are two of the target regions where the EU has set out to concentrate its efforts to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) (EU Parliament and EU Council 2017; EU Council 2020).[2] Focusing on these regions, and particularly on the country-cases of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia, PREVEX researchers have carried out a detailed mapping of, on the one hand, those policies and initiatives sponsored by the EU to explicitly prevent and counter violent extremism; and, on the other hand, the drivers and mechanisms fuelling radicalisation and mobilisation towards – or resilience and resistance to – violent extremism. The findings of these inquiries are summarised in, respectively, the *Policy Brief on the EU and other stakeholders' prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the Maghreb and the Sahel* (PREVEX deliverable D6.1, see Raineri et al. 2020) and the *Working Paper on the 'enabling environments' and drivers of occurrence/non-occurrence of*

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[1] With North Africa we refer to the wider Maghreb region, including the entire Libyan territory. With Sahel, we refer to the sub-Saharan region between Mauritania and Chad. In this brief we use North Africa, the Maghreb and the Sahel to designate the wider Northwestern Africa region.

[2] Alongside the Western Balkans and the Middle East, which are the focus of two parallel PREVEX Policy Briefs.

violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel (PREVEX deliverable D6.2, see Boas et al. 2021). Building on these research results, the present brief aims to offer an appraisal of EU-sponsored P/CVE initiatives in North Africa and the Sahel, and to do so with a view to identifying lessons to be learnt, opportunities for greater engagement, and areas in need for more research.

Previous research findings highlight the complexity of this task. On the one hand, the investigation of the drivers of violent extremism demonstrates the plurality and intricacy of the causal mechanisms underpinning the recruitment potential, the mobilisation capacity and the ideological appeal of violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel. The diversity of the micro-cases across these two regions compounds the well-known difficulty to identify the specific triggers that would make the explaination of causal mechanisms travel across different cases (Bennett and Checkel, 2014), and stresses the need for a cautious interpretation of broad findings and general trends. On the other hand, the well-known fluctuations of the concepts of radicalisation (Sedgwick 2010) and violent extremism (Harris-Hogan and Barrelle 2016), not to mention insurgency and terrorism, are reverberated in EU P/CVE action in North Africa and the Sahel, as EU officers[3] and documents (RUSI 2020) admit.

As a practice, the EU's P/CVE efforts can be divided into P/CVE-specific and PCVE-relevant initiatives. Leveraging conceptual ambivalence to avoid irking local sensitivity about 'sovereign prerogatives', EU initiatives are sometimes found to pragmatically include P/CVE goals under different but concurring policy domains (i.e., education, development, peacebuilding, security cooperation). This provides a sober invitation against a reductionist assessment that, by focusing only on explicitly labelled initiatives, may miss important projects; but it also provides a potential alibi for analytical vagueness, which paves the way to endless debates about policy success. The challenge to isolate the P/CVE-specific component within the larger context of EU integrated action, then, hinders the accurate assessment of the actual impact of preventative measures against violent extremism.

Building on these preliminary observations, this brief discusses the EU's P/CVE policies and initiatives in North Africa and the Sahel with a view to providing wide-ranging analytical insights, and not a *stricto sensu* technical assessment. In appraising those latest political and security developments in the region, which are likely to affect the dynamics of radicalisation and violent extremist mobilisation, the analysis lays emphasis on some policy areas deserving special attention, either because they highlight the impact of EU interventions, or because they provide opportunities for greater, more focused engagement.

2. Matching analytical drivers with policy responses

EU support has been instrumental for the adoption and/or implementation of the national P/CVE policies currently existing in four of the six countries investigated in this report, namely Mali, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia. At the same time, the EU has sponsored a host of programmes and projects aimed at preventing and countering violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel. PREVEX research has highlighted the overall preponderance, among different

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[3] Key stakeholder dialogue between PREVEX researchers and EU officers, March 2021.

policy frames that acknowledge the P/CVE nature of assistance, of a security narrative whereby programmes and projects see law enforcement apparatuses and criminal justice systems as the main partners of P/CVE co-operation (Raineri et al. 2020). Emphasis on the repressive dimension is suggestive of the existence of a degree of conflation of counter-terrorism and P/CVE. At the same time, traditional development goals appear to play only an ancillary, unfocused role in EU-sponsored P/CVE initiatives in North Africa and the Sahel. More broadly, the side-lining of the diagnostic and preventative dimensions of P/CVE can be interpreted as resulting from the virtual absence of a comprehensive and coherent theory of change that guides policy formulation, programme design and assessment.

Building on these observations, to what extent are P/CVE strategies, programmes and projects up to the challenges facing North Africa and Sahel countries? Is there a match between violent extremism's drivers and EU-sponsored responses? How much have P/CVE initiatives contributed to preventing the manifestations of extremism and the strengthening of societal resilience in North Africa and the Sahel? By contrasting the findings of the PREVEX research consortium (Raineri et al. 2020; Boas et al. 2021) with the latest political and security developments in the region, the section below distils some lessons learnt and identifies opportunities for policy engagement in selected key domains: democracy, rule of law, education; gender and reintegration.

2.1. Democratic governance challenged

The comparative analysis of the cases of occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremist escalation in North Africa and the Sahel offers a clear indication regarding one of the main drivers of radicalisation: the structural disenfranchisement of marginal groups – by age, ethnicity, religion, social status, geographic origin, etc. – provides an enabling environment for violent extremist discourses and practices to take root and thrive. By contrast, perhaps unsurprisingly, violent extremist discourses and practices are put in jeopardy by the presence of solid and accessible mechanisms connecting rule-makers (political elites) and rule-takers (subaltern groups) – such as civil society organisations, trade unions, party politics, free (social) media and social movements. By enabling social and political intermediation, in a way that might run counter the logic of social segmentation and deep-rooted clientelism, such institutions and organizations contribute to diffusing power, defusing the escalation of local disputes, and enhancing the sense of belonging and ownership. While they can at times help prevent or redress real or perceived abuse, their main value is arguably not transactional, but symbolic, in as much as they enshrine a form of recognition of equal dignity and worth inherent to democratic citizenship. This finding is perhaps unsurprising, echoing as it does a revered strand of political science (Hirschman 1970) whereby the lack of mechanisms to voice discontent incentivises the resort to more radical options, such as the exit from and disruption of the social consortium – of which violent extremism can be considered a manifestation, especially when – in presence of criminalisation and repression – it locally feeds the recruitment mechanisms of global jihadist centrals.

From this point of view, the process of democratic involution and backsliding that is observed in North Africa and the Sahel[4] does not forebode well: as a matter of fact, the deterioration of democratic space, along with the perception of 'no way through' for demands that are often met with repression, can and does incentivise radicalisation and violent extremism. It is a widely accepted fact that ten years after the so-called Arab Spring, hopes for democratisation in the broader MENA region are today grim, while authoritarianism and militarism are generally on the rise.

In North Africa, political stalemates and a severe economic stagnation – aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic – are jeopardising the democratic ambitions ignited by the Tunisian revolution, long acclaimed as the one proving resilient. The elected President, Kais Saied, has de facto seized power in mid-2021, divesting the authority of democratic institutions and actors, including the Parliament, the parties – most notably the Islamist party Ennahda – and the trade unions.[5] In Libya, democratic institutions are still wanted: political divides run deep and fuel polarisation and conflicts, with a not-so-latent risk of crisis escalation. Outbursts of violence have frustrated the mediation processes ushered by the international community, preventing the holding of much-awaited democratic elections in 2019 and 2021. In Morocco and Algeria democratic advances were registered but remain overall controversial, and highlight the challenges facing both political systems, taken between stability imperatives and widespread expectations of change, as well as persistent human rights shortcomings.

In the broader Sahel, where armed violence is on the rise, civilians are increasingly targeted and jihadist insurgencies are in control of large portions of the region, four successful *coups d'état* have taken place (twice in Mali, then Chad and Guinea) during the past decade, exposing the fragility and the lack of legitimacy of local institutions. In Mali, in particular, a military junta has progressively marginalised civilian authorities and reduced the room of manoeuvre of opposition groups, including civil society organisations, political parties and religious associations. The rarefaction of social intermediation bodies between the populace and the leaders suggests the populist drift of the Malian transition, to which rampant nationalism and militarism provide a 'sovereignist' twist while ensuring a certain degree of popular support. The worsening security conditions brought about by jihadist insurgencies could impair relatively successful democratic transitions in Niger and Burkina Faso, where entire districts are de facto beyond reach and control. Escalating tensions run the risk of fuelling the contestation by sectors of the security apparatuses, which is mounting in both countries.

Overall, the EU has often been accused of having traded its initial strong emphasis on liberal transformations and democratic convergence with a more cautious adaptive approach, that is couched in the language of *principled pragmatism* but that, in the end, might appear to be less principled and less pragmatic than hoped. The macro-regional strategies framing EU engagement with North Africa and the Sahel – that is, respectively, the European

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[4] See for instance, Freedom House (https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores) or International IDEA (https://www.idea.int).

[5] One single example may illustrate the ongoing discursive shift: the President symbolically chose a new date as Revolution Day: from January 14, the day in which autocrat Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled the country amid unprecedented mass protests – to December 17, the day when street seller Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in frustration over corruption, joblessness and repression.

Neighbourhood Policy and the EU Strategy for the Sahel – strongly emphasize security cooperation with incumbent governments, with a lesser stress on their democratic credentials. Similarly, the ongoing discussions that aim at advancing a EU "Comprehensive Strategy with Africa" underscore the preoccupation for the growing geopolitical competition over the African continent (Faleg and Pelleschi 2020), in which the emergence of a more hard-nosed, 'realist-inspired' focus on power politics heralds a progressive marginalisation of policy objectives cast in the mould of 'liberal peace'. While in theory, the shift towards political stability and stabilisation may look consistent with EU's P/CVE agenda, in practice a focus on (state) security to the detriment of democracy may achieve only short-term goals, while deteriorating those mechanisms that help reduce the middle- and long-term vulnerability of local communities to the threat of radicalisation and mobilisation towards jihadism. By indirectly upholding the African drift to militarism (Gelot and Sandor 2019), then, the EU could inadvertently prop up those authoritarian, predatory, dysfunctional, and abusive behaviors by local regimes, whose detrimental impact to P/CVE objectives is well documented (UNDP, 2017; Iyekekpolo 2020).

From this perspective, the new *European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel*, approved in April 2021, marks a positive turning point. Echoing repeated calls by the research and aid communities, the new Strategy lays stronger emphasis on the governance dimension (i.e., the promotion of 'good governance') including upholding human rights, fighting corruption, fostering social inclusion – to help stabilize the region. This approach implicitly recognizes that a strategic engagement centered on security and development only – whether separately or taken jointly, in the form of their nexus – is inadequate to meet the mounting of increasingly complex challenges and threats, particularly with regard to the prevention and the countering of violent extremism.

While representing a promising step in the right direction, the new EU Sahel strategy may nonetheless prove insufficient to orient action towards achieving the EU ambitious goals in the region. On the one hand, one can identify the risk associated with a reductionist interpretation of good governance promotion, if the latter in practice boils down to urging local partners to hold multi-party elections at regular intervals. Our research shows that, to uphold P/CVE in the context of broader stabilisation goals, the commitment to good governance should shed light on the participatory dimension of democracy, helping strengthen mechanisms of social intermediation and power diffusion, with a view to at least offsetting deeply rooted clientelism, reducing substantive inequalities, and fostering meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes. On the other hand, inasmuch as the idea of partnership is not only rhetoric, the EU cannot afford the luxury of confining the promotion of good governance and democratic accountability to the relationship with Sahelian states only. This would invigorate charges of paternalism and double-standards, while leaving unaddressed the structural problems that fuel violent extremism in the other regions, not least North Africa.

2.2. More rule of law, less war on terror

PREVEX research findings corroborate the hypothesis explored in previous studies in highlighting that the quality of the rule of law is a strong indicator of whether enabling

environments will tend to veer towards either vulnerability or resilience vis-à-vis radical propaganda and violent extremism. Importantly, in assessing the quality of the rule of law, both sides of the coin should be carefully considered: the prevalence (or not) of criminal, informal and extralegal dynamics; and the (un)even administration and enforcement of the law *vis-à-vis* offenders.

Regarding the latter, research on the drivers of violent extremism has long established that the (perceptions of) abuse and discrimination by law enforcement and state security apparatuses is one of the most significant mechanisms of jihadist mobilisation in Africa: North Africa and the Sahel make no exception (Pellerin 2017; UNDP 2017; Ben Arab Mustapha 2018; Raineri 2020). Regarding the former, the literature highlights how contexts of widespread micro-criminality and/or extra-legality provide a fertile ground for violent extremism to take root, in North Africa and the Sahel just as much as in Europe (Basra and Neumann 2016). This is because radicalisation can be framed as a process of ideological reorientation, which nevertheless allows for a comfortable degree of behavioural continuity. It typically provides a trajectory of moral redemption and an opportunity for 'historical agency' by leveraging the skills of marginalised subjects living on informal subsistence and petty criminality, in the name of divine justice. Overall, then, the poor quality of the rule of law can stimulate both the supply and demand of radical discourses and practices, and is strongly linked to the rise of violent extremism.

Building on these observations, the EU's emphasis on, and support to, rule of law should be considered particularly relevant and appropriate. PREVEX analysis across countries suggests that the EU-sponsored programmes and projects in North Africa and the Sahel delineate an emerging P/CVE policy model, chiefly focused responding to violent extremism by supporting (and shaping) local criminal justice systems, in the name of the pursuit of the rule of law. To achieve this, the EU has devoted considerable efforts to enhancing the capacity of security apparatuses in North Africa and the Sahel, strengthening the judicialization of law enforcement, improving detention systems, stepping up intelligence collection and information sharing to prevent crime (Raineri et al. 2020). By steering away from the 'global war on terror' policy model, the EU's security cooperation in North Africa and the Sahel has privileged a response to violent extremism that is subject to, rather than exempt from, the rule of law. Our research suggests that this approach, in keeping with the 'do no harm' principle of international cooperation, is likely to bear fruits by building long-term resilience to violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel.

2.3. The education sector: high risks, high benefits

In countries demographically characterized by 'youth bulge' and 'youth not in education, employment or training' (NEET), education plays no doubt a key role: as a matter of fact, how it may help or hinder the prevention of extremism is widely debated. In scholarly and policy circles education is increasingly regarded as a space for radicalisation and violent extremism to take root, as well as an arena where counter-radicalisation strategies can be deployed (Ragazzi 2017; UNESCO 2017). Overall, the relationship between education and radicalisation is far from straightforward (Brockhoff et al. 2015) and remains highly context-dependent (Danzell et

al. 2018).

Recent findings from PREVEX research help provide indications on the role of education (as well as lack thereof) in strengthening either the resilience or the vulnerability to radicalisation of the youth in North Africa and the Sahel (Boas et al. 2021). Preliminary data suggest that an explicit struggle for hegemony exists among different projects of political Islam in the region, and that exposure to Islamic literacy does not per se amount to a boost of radicalisation processes, but may in fact deflect jihadists' inflammatory rhetoric, avert the exacerbation of cognitive radicalisation processes, and prevent violent extremism from taking root. Interestingly, the positive impact of religious education on individual and collective resilience to violent extremism does not appear to depend significantly on how 'moderate' or conservative religious training is. Schooling by both 'traditional' (Sufi, Maliki) and 'reformist' (Salafist) denominations of Islam seems to provide a bulwark against jihadist propaganda and indoctrination. It is rather the thinness or outright lack of previous religious training which appears to increase vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism's rhetoric, being arguably correlated with the onset of pro-jihadist mobilisation. Existing scholarship suggests in fact that the Islamic competence of many jihadists in North Africa and the Sahel is quite shallow, and that religious beliefs are not a primary driver of early mobilisation (Boas et al. 2021), as for instance the case of ISGS explicitly indicates (Raineri 2020). Nevertheless, religion can become a more important radicalisation vector throughout time, owing to processes of norms socialisation.

A caveat remains in order: conclusive evidence is still wanting, and there is a need for additional and more targeted research on this topic. At the same time, these incidental findings highlight that the problem is definitely not only cognitive. A reading from a political economy angle sheds light on the problematic status of customary religious trainings delivered by traditional marabouts in informal Koranic schools. In poor rural settings, especially in the Sahel, this is a popular schooling option, owing to its compatibility with local livelihoods, and often to the lack of alternatives. Marabouts provide teachings into the rudiments of religious precepts, in exchange for a modest monthly stipend, not seldom paid for by the students' own labour. Cases of abuses and exploitation have been often documented, and the generally poor 'training of the trainers' raises doubts on quality of the religious education thus delivered. Moreover, traditional Koranic schools are largely informal. The lack of state recognition impairs the students' access to the job market and nurtures widespread feelings of abandonment. It is therefore unsurprising that Koranic schools' alumni feature prominently among the rank-and-file recruits of jihadist groups, especially in Central Sahel. On the one hand, the controversial pedagogy offered by customary Koranic schools arguably increases the youth disposition towards dogmatism, submissiveness, and violence, while a shallow Islamic literacy undermines the resilience to jihadist indoctrination. On the other hand, the lack of job opportunities for Koranic schools' trainees boosts the attractiveness of rebel formations who, like the jihadists, call for the violent subversion of the social order and provide material and symbolic incentives to remunerate their supporters.

The case of traditional Koranic schools therefore highlights the key role of education in

preventing the rise of violent extremism. Education and religious literacy programmes greatly contribute to promoting and bridging social integration, public recognition, religious enfranchisement and ultimately political entanglement. In this perspective, a political-economy analysis suggests that the regulation of the informal supply of Islamic education in North Africa and the Sahel has become a pressing issue, which a P/CVE framing could help prioritise. This provides an opportunity for greater EU engagement, one that skilfully exploits available tools through a discreet but nonetheless resolute investment.

Noteworthy, P/CVE framing at strategic level in this sector should not imply P/CVE labelling. Research suggests that an explicit P/CVE focus in educational cooperation may be at times unadvisable, both to avoid irking local sensitivities and to prevent the overall securitisation of education. The incorporation of education in counterinsurgency tactics for 'winning hearts and minds', in fact, has very often fuelled tensions between 'Western secular' and 'Islamic' models of education (Danzell et al. 2018). This may also lead to an increase in attacks against students, teachers, and education institutions. In most of these cases, girls' education and their right and access to education has been particularly targeted by violent extremism groups (GCPEA 2020). For example, the organisation Hedayah claims that for education programs to be effective in P/CVE, they should aim to be holistic, comprehensive and multi-sectorial, while labelling activities under the P/CVE tag might be counter-productive (Zeiger 2014).

2.4. The need for a holistic gender perspective

There is today increasing recognition that gender dynamics could be a crucial factor weighing in favour of community resilience - or, alternatively, vulnerability, to radicalisation and violent extremism. The ongoing jihadist insurgencies in North Africa and the Sahel make no exception, as illustrated by the growing efforts that violent extremist groups in the region appear to deploy, both in discourse and in practice, to ensure the control and disciplining of women in line with their strict gender ideology (El Taraboulsi-McCarthy and George 2020). PREVEX research (Boas et al. 2021), too, corroborates the view that gender dynamics provide a valuable entry point to understand the drivers of de/radicalisation in North Africa and the Sahel: widespread social norms related to the ideals of masculinity and femininity help explain the appeal of violent extremist rhetoric vis-à-vis young men (and sometimes women) across the region. By contrast, contexts characterised by a greater gender equality, such as urban Tunisia or Burkina Faso, appear to feature a stronger societal resilience to violent extremism.

Building on the UN's calls to better understand women's role in violent extremism (UN 2015, 2019), the EU has over the past few years increasingly recognised the importance of gender in P/CVE programming. The EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security 2019-2024 (EU Council 2019) includes a commendable pledge to integrate a gender perspective in all the EU strategies, programmes and projects on P/CVE. This is also translated in more actionable guidelines providing recommendations to EU development professional on how to integrate P/CVE and gender in EU programming.

Nonetheless, while these commitments demonstrate a noticeable policy focus at strategic level, on the ground, practices related to gender in P/CVE programmes' design,

implementation and evaluation have not significantly changed. Quantitatively, only a small, if not negligible fraction of the overall P/CVE initiatives sponsored by the EU in North Africa and the Sahel feature a gender-specific or gender-relevant component (Raineri et al. 2020). A more fine-grained, qualitative analysis of existing projects, too, demonstrates persisting gaps regarding the meaningful inclusion of women and gender analysis in the EU P/CVE programming (White 2020). For instance, some of the shortcomings highlighted for STRIVE Horn of Africa – EU P/CVE flagship program – appear to apply also to the Sahel EU STRIVE P/CVE project (EU Commission 2019), as well as to the SALAM project in Tunisia. These initiatives tend to flatten gender equality as women's empowerment. The failure to tackle structural social norms, such as gender values and discriminating notions of masculinity and femininity, leaves important avenues of de/mobilisation unaddressed and deprives EU P/CVE action of a powerful lever. Jihadist radical propaganda, in fact, has been found to resonate with customary gender norms, which therefore represent an enabling factor of pro-violent extremist mobilisation. At the same time, a gender sensitive P/CVE agenda needs to be carefully balanced against context- and conflict sensitivity considerations, as conflating violent extremism prevention with women empowerment may undermine the traction of P/CVE initiatives in conservative societies (RUSI 2017).

Importantly, recent research findings on gender and P/CVE point out the significance of intersectional differences related not only to gender but also, more holistically, to social class, ethnic origin, and urban-rural divides (Pearson et al. 2020). As context-specific drivers help explain the expansion of violent extremism, it is essential that the EU be more attentive to developing locally tailored programmes that allow for a fair inclusion of all sectors of the society, including most notably different categories of women whose interests, needs and views vis-à-vis violent extremism may be strikingly different. So far, instead, the (admittedly few) EU-sponsored programmes of P/CVE in North Africa and the Sahel featuring a specific gender component have appeared to rely disproportionately on the inputs by, and point of view of, women leaders, hailing from educated, bourgeois, urban milieus. A more encompassing, intersectional approach to diversity (gender, ethnic, social, etc.) can not only help enable the participation of diverse groups of women in all the stages of P/CVE projects' cycle, but also avoid stigmatising specific communities, such as for instance landless Fulani pastoralists.

The EU's overall attention to the inclusion of gender in P/CVE strategizing is therefore encouraging, yet it needs to be complemented by additional efforts to ensure a coherent and thorough implementation.

2.5. Reintegrating to prevent relapse

What happens when former jihadists defect and seek a return to civilian life? The question is fraught with ethical, legal and political challenges, and there is no straightforward answer. Nevertheless, pressing on-the-ground developments urge decision-makers to provide a concrete response. Albeit at different levels, all the countries investigated in this report are now faced with the challenge of flows of violent extremists dropping out of their formations, abandoning the *brousse* and the *maquis*, and seeking reintegration into civilian life. The triggers and shape of these processes of attempted disengagement may differ, and often include a combination of

military pressure and political incentives, combined with the draining of mobilisation opportunities abroad and disillusionment at home. Be it as it may, our research attests the presence of large pools of (former) jihadist fighters, flankers and sympathisers who are ready to lay down weapons. The urgency of the matter differs, depending on the country and the local context: it looks very high in places like Niger and Tunisia, while in Mali and Libya it is possibly less of an immediate priority, but still in need of consideration and preparation. While state responses vary – from neglect and denial to a more or less formalised engagement – this situation provides a valuable window of opportunity for international partners to foster social integration. Although the demobilisation and reintegration of former jihadists are not strictly speaking part of a P/CVE agenda, one may argue that they contribute substantially to preventing further escalation in as much as they help mitigate the risk of a relapse into conflict and violent extremism.

The scholarly and policy literature linking violent extremism and DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration) is still in its infancy (Hansen and Lid 2020) and provides limited guidance on how to ensure successful reintegration of former violent extremists into civilian life. Nevertheless, the diversity of the strategies and pilot projects experimented at global level – and reverberated in North Africa and the Sahel – makes it possible to identify at least two models, or ideal-types, of reintegration of demobilised violent extremists: for sake of argument, let us call them a 'Saudi model' and an 'American model' (Gunaratna and Hussin 2018). Both models are ostensibly premised on the idea that reintegration is possible, but conditional on successful 'de-radicalisation' of the demobilised individual. De-radicalisation, in turn, is imagined to require the supply of incentives and drivers of the same kind, but reverse sign, of those leading to radicalisation. In this sense, the 'Saudi model' stresses the centrality of cognitive (ideological, religious, communicational) drivers in the processes of de/radicalisation; the 'American model' lays more emphasis on the material (economic) drivers. As a result, the 'Saudi model' entrusts de-radicalisation to initiatives of moral persuasion, normative socialisation and cognitive reprogramming of the radicalised subject, while the 'American model' appears to confide more in the provision of jobs, economic incentives and statutory goods to counter radicalisation. PREVEX research shows that the matching between these initiatives and the actual drivers of violent extremism observed in North Africa and the Sahel remains questionable (Boas et al. 2021).

Facing the growing demand of reintegration by former jihadists, de-radicalisation (pilot) projects have sprung up in several countries across North Africa and the Sahel. Within this proliferation, though, the EU is conspicuous by its absence. This may be due to the important distinction that remains to be made between *de-radicalisation*, which is seen as theoretically and practically problematic, and *reintegration*: based on exiting armed groups (demobilisation), the latter is seen as a desirable social goal. It is unclear, though, whether the EU has a clear position on the reintegration of former jihadists North Africa and the Sahel, or on the specific policy model and related measures to be pursued. While direct engagement in the domain of de-radicalisation may be politically sensitive and possibly counterproductive, the EU could provide critical support to nationally-owned strategies of demobilisation and reintegration of

former jihadist fighters, led and designed by North African and Sahelian authorities. Leveraging and scaling-up successful local experiences, such as the ones implemented in past years in Algeria and Tunisia, is arguably conducive to maximising both the acceptance and the effectiveness of the EU in the key P/CVE domain of jihadist defectors' reintegration.

3. Policy implications and recommendations: Toward a multi-scalar approach?

The EU has deployed a complex and articulated set of initiatives to prevent and counter violent extremism in Northwest Africa. While in this wide region the 'cycle of violence' does not appear to be receding at the pace that could be expected in light of the P/CVE initiatives already implemented, and violent extremism fuels the expansive insurgency dynamics that sweep the Sahel, EU officials must be given credit for a deep work of learning-by-doing and policy improvement through fine-tuning. As a matter of fact, the EU's P/CVE strategies in the region have adapted and evolved, in a discernible attempt to keep pace with rapidly changing circumstances on the ground, and heed inputs by scholars, think tanks and practitioners. The greater sensitivity to governance (especially in the Sahel), the strong emphasis on rule of law, and the inclusion of gender in P/CVE programming, all amount to promising signs of progress in EU P/CVE engagement in North Africa and the Sahel. It remains to be seen to what extent EU officials will be able to translate these broad strategic orientations into more actionable policies and projects.

At the same time, the insights gained in the drivers of violent extremist mobilisation and demobilisation suggest that more and better knowledge is needed on the key role that different types of education (upstream) and the social reintegration of jihadist defectors (downstream) have in increasing societal resilience to violent extremism. The cooperation with North Africa and Sahel authorities in these domains is currently led by state and non-state actors which do not necessarily share EU's interests, values and approaches. On the background of an international and local struggle for hegemony among different agendas that seek to connect religion (i.e., Islam) and politics, a greater EU engagement would be more welcome if it were earmarked to promote social cohesion *lato sensu,* rather than counter radicalisation per se. Put otherwise, the EU should steer away from the risk of being seen as weaponizing schooling and securitising education, and try instead to promote greater social cohesion within inherently diverse societies through education. On a more tactical level, success stories in the fields of education (including academic freedom) and reintegration of former combatants are indispensable tools to be employed and deployed in the struggle for narratives, as they counter the typical tropes of radicalisation and *embrigadement* narratives.

The context-dependence of successful P/CVE is such that more targeted research and evaluation is needed to provide a systematic, fine-grained assessment of the impact of the EU-sponsored P/CVE initiatives in North Africa and the Sahel. The exploratory political scrutiny carried out in this policy brief suggests that for P/CVE initiatives to be effective, they need to be based on a sound understanding of radicalisation and violent extremism as social phenomena, and not mere pathologies. From this perspective, the appropriate level of analysis is not one that focuses on individual deviance, but one that captures social cleavages instead.

The analysis of the cognitive-ideational drivers of radicalisation thus needs to be combined with a micro-political economy analysis that is sensitive to material and reputational incentives.

Two main observations follow from this approach. First, mechanisms of social intermediation appear to play a crucial role in mitigating the threat of extremist polarisation and violent escalation. The reach and strength of political, civic and religious associations help bridge existing social gaps and foster inclusion. Interestingly, this is also true for religious groups bearing strict conservative views: while challenging the political status quo and incumbent religious leaderships, these groups (Salafists, Wahhabis, etc.) tend to reject the violent seizure of power. By contrast, they are often engaged in a dialogue which contributes to defusing the destabilising potential of radical extremist options. Yet, the democratic backsliding observed across the region runs the risk of severely undermining the capacity of mid-level institutions and organisations to voice the discontent of marginalised groups. At the same time, borrowing Hirschman's dichotomy mentioned above, 'exit' options are constrained by the enhancing of border controls and the clamp-down on migratory flows. This calls into question the compatibility of the EU goals of preventing and countering violent extremism, promoting stability through security cooperation, and fighting irregular migration in North Africa and the Sahel.

Second, our analysis highlights the challenge of identifying the appropriate level of aggregation to devise and implement P/CVE strategies in North Africa and the Sahel. While the debate between globalist and localist approaches to Africa's jihadism rages (Lounnas 2019; Thurston 2020), our research suggests that, on the one hand, there exists a transnational space of radicalisation, fuelled by cross-border flows of ideologies, fighters, funds and weapons between North Africa and the Sahel; yet on the other hand, micro-level drivers appear instrumental in explaining the different cases of occurrence and non-occurrence across the region. Within this cacophony, the EU response risks being substantially different not only from one case to another, but more in general between North Africa and the Sahel. Such decoupling is apparently based on the (perception of) the 'strength' or 'weakness' of the state involved. Yet, the categories of state strength and weakness, which arguably influence the imaginary of EU policy-makers, are problematic and deserve being debated, especially in a region where the shadow of the European colonial legacy remains politically salient. At the same time, the regional, trans-Saharan dimension risks being missed, thereby contradicting the recent thrust of the EU to engage Africa as a unitary space and actor.

Overall, both concluding observations point to the same direction: clearer multi-scalar prioritisation that includes the macro-regional level would help strengthening of the salience and impact of the EU P/CVE engagement in North Africa and the Sahel regions, especially in a scenario where dynamic of criminalisation may be altered by political negotiations with armed groups.

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