

# Preventing violent extremism, the Middle East

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## **D7.5 Policy brief summarizing lessons learnt on the EU's measures to prevent violent extremism in the region**



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## Introduction

There are a number of grievances attributed as drivers of violent extremism. Poverty, autocratic governance and human rights violations, precarious masculinities, or the lack of education, mentioning just some, all create what we may term “enabling environments” – areas in which various factors create a conducive situation where segments of its population become prone to violent extremism. Still, the majority living in such enabling environments and experiencing these grievances do *not* engage in any acts of violence or join any extremist organizations. This begs the question, why do some communities display far greater resilience to violent extremist ideologies than others?

In our newly released PREVEX working paper analyzing the drivers, occurrence, and non-occurrence of violent extremism in the MENA region, we study four cases of the non-occurrence of violent extremism in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we analyze why segments among disenfranchised Islamist Egyptian youth, the majority of Jordanian jihadists, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and the Syrian village Swedan in the Deir Ez-Zor province have displayed a far greater resilience to carrying out violent extremism than others. We assess the role and importance of local community and religious leaders, the role of tribal affiliation, ideological exposure, good governance and political inclusion, poverty and marginalization, and state repression.

We address both a scholarly puzzle and a policy problem. If the aforementioned grievances create enabling environments conducive to violent extremism, why is it that the majority in these situations actually abstain from violence and reject extremist ideologies? What does that tell us about the role and dynamics of enabling environments? The policy problem relates to how one evaluates, weighs, and approaches populations in enabling environments and who are thus perceived to be prone to violent extremism. Put bluntly, should a population residing in an enabling environment be treated as future extremists or terrorists, to wit, a problem in need of securitization? Necessarily, these findings have consequences for how we perceive the feasibility of past and current EU funding programs intended to prevent violent extremism in the Middle East.

## The EU’s measures to prevent violent extremism in MENA

The EU’s PvE programs in MENA can be categorized as either i) preventing radicalization (promoting moderate voices, fighting hate speech, etc.), ii) implementing good governance (instilling liberal values and institutions against violent extremism with a focus on democracy rather than stability), iii) improving societal cohesion (opportunities, conflict resolution, inter-religious dialogue, youth empowerment, etc.), iv) stakeholder capacity building (PvE training workshops for EU or key partner stakeholders, information gathering, co-ordination enhancement etc.), v) or securitizing population segments and related infrastructure (securing airports and borders, training and cooperating with MENA law enforcement and intelligence services, etc.).

The Union prioritizes various categories of PvE programs differently, however, as the majority of them focus on societal cohesion and securitization while PvE funding projects that stress democracy promotion, liberal values, and human rights in the Middle East, on the other hand, constitute no more than approximately one tenth of overall projects, despite the insistence on its importance in CT documents of the EU. Still, while a greater number of EU funding

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Skare, Ahmad Mhidi, Georges Fahmi, Nouran Ahmed, Kamaran Palani, Myriam Ababsa, Olivier Roy and Dlawer Ala’Aldeen, “Working Paper on Enabling Environments, Drivers, and the Occurrence and Non-Occurrence of Violent Extremism in MENA”, forthcoming.



projects work with societal cohesion through youth empowerment and inter-religious dialogue, securitization efforts nevertheless receive the most funding – both in relative and absolute terms.<sup>2</sup>

As such, we argued that the EU has moved towards a ‘security first’ centered PvE approach in the Middle East in the last decade and is correspondingly declining as a ‘normative’ power focusing on spreading and strengthening human rights, good governance, and democracy. We are thus currently witnessing a gradual transition towards an increasingly realist-oriented security paradigm undermining other concerns in the region. This is not particularly controversial as we are witnessing the same EU policy development in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup> This conclusion is not merely based on which projects the EU chooses to fund and prioritize, but also on the fact that the line between securitization and societal cohesion is being blurred, and social projects are now less premised on spreading human rights and democratic thinking as a goal in itself. That is, awareness of human rights or the strengthening of democratic practices are not facilitated in local communities because it creates better societies, but because it stops violent extremism.

Certainly, one should not underestimate the impact, trauma, and urgency felt by the terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and 2016, as illustrated by the shift in public EU narrative in its Global Strategy of 2016.<sup>4</sup> Still, fear alone ignores the importance of third country perspectives, as EU funding projects and policies must also be negotiated with authoritarian key partners in the region despite any good European intentions. In fact, when attempting to counter terrorism or preventing violent extremism, MENA regimes have traditionally favored repression combined with religious reform rather than implementing policies for better governance. This is the case because they, largely, do not threaten the positions and interests of key partners. On the contrary, they contribute to regime stability by securing infrastructure and strengthening police and security forces.

### Why violent extremism does *not* erupt in the enabling environments in MENA?

Why is it that the majority residing in enabling environments and who are exposed to drivers of violent extremism show a considerable degree of resilience against it? In our working paper, we employ in-depth and context-sensitive cases from Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Our research reveals that there were three main drivers of violent extremism in all cases: i) autocratic rule and the absence of good governance, ii) a deterioration of economic and social conditions, iii) and intra-tribal competition being instrumentalized by jihadist groups. Still, there were equally important factors causing the non-occurrence of violent extremism in these enabling environments. These were i) ideological countercurrents, ii) material and social costs, iii) the implementation of good governance, democratic inclusion, and improved economic conditions.

Our Egyptian case, for example, shows how Egyptian Islamist youth who became

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<sup>2</sup> Erik Skare, Kamaran Palani, Stéphane Lacroix, Tine Gade, Dlawer Ala‘Aldeen, Kjetil Selvik, Olivier Roy, “Policy brief summarising the EU and other stakeholder’s prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the region, Middle East,” H2020-SC6-Governance-2019, December 31, 2021, [https://www.prevox-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PREVEX-D7.1-Policy-Brief-the-Middle-East\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.prevox-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PREVEX-D7.1-Policy-Brief-the-Middle-East_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Morten Bøås and Pernille Rieker, *EUNSPACK Executive Summary of the Final Report & Selected Policy Recommendations. A Conflict-Sensitive Unpacking of the EU Comprehensive Approach to Conflict and Crisis Mechanisms* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Nathalie Tocci, ‘From European Security Strategy to the EU Global Strategy: explaining the journey’, *International Politics* 54 (2017), p. 489; see also Steven Blockmans, Loes Debuysere, Georges Fahmi, Magnus Langset Trøan, Pernille Rieker, and Olivier Roy, “D4.1. Working paper on EU’s policies and instruments PvE,” <https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5db795160&appId=PPGMS> [accessed 08.12.2021].



disenfranchised following the ouster of Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi in July 2013, and who considered violent actions had two main concerns that led them to renounce such an option. The first factor was the power disparity between them and the security forces they faced, which made many of them believe it was impossible to triumph militarily. The second factor was the lack of local support, which, most often, was the case within families. One member of the Brotherhood, for example, was rejected by a part of his family after he was released from prison. Other members were shocked to find that they were attacked by the residents of their neighborhoods to prevent them from protesting there. This high level of popular resentment combined with the inherent imbalance between clandestine armed groups and Egyptian state security forced made the costs greater than the benefits.

Material and social costs had a similar impact on the non-occurrence of violent extremism in Jordan. Jordanian authorities also instrumentalize traditional societal patterns by applying discreet pressures on the family, kin, and clan of individuals suspected of being affiliated with salafi-jihadi environments to pressure “their” jihadists to repent or, at least, request kinship groups to formally condemn their “bad apples”. The tribe of al-Zarqawi, for example, the Khalayla-Bani Hassan, issued a petition on November 20, 2005, condemning him for the bombings of three hotels in Amman, signed by his brother Sayel Fadel Nazzal al-Khalayla. There is, consequently, intended to be a significant social cost of turning to violent extremism in a society in which tribalism still persists.

Still, the non-occurrence of violent extremism in Egyptian and Jordanian enabling environments also depend on religious countercurrents that are perceived as legitimate by those undergoing a radicalization process. In Egypt, for example, a decisive factor was the heavy presence and impact of voices within the movement deemed politically and religiously legitimate that rejected the use of violence. One example of such voices came from within the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, Jordanian authorities have also instrumentalized jihadi ideologues such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filastini. Still active on social networks and giving interviews to journalists and researchers, al-Maqdisi used this newly gained freedom to publicly condemn the excessive violence. Later, al-Maqdisi called for all jihadists to split from IS and pleaded the late IS leader al-Baghdadi to spare the life of the aforementioned pilot Mu‘adh al-Kasasba. While the newly found “moderate” attitude of al-Maqdisi certainly cost him the support of the radical Jordanian jihadists, it did contribute to a decline in jihadi fervor as there are few jihadist theoreticians with greater religious credentials.

Last, good governance, democratic inclusion, and improved economic conditions are decisive to avoid violent extremism in enabling environments. The KRI, for example, developed into a remarkable case of the non-occurrence resilient because, first, the US-led invasion in 2003 which offered opportunities for Kurdish administrative unification. While the majority of Sunni Arabs in Iraq, including the residents of the Nineveh Province, voted against the new Iraqi constitution, the Kurds voted in favor – thus demonstrating the two different political trajectories of the provinces. Second, the Kurdish Islamist parties, which previously engaged in violent confrontations with the Kurdish ruling parties, integrated into the new political process after 2003. The Islamic political parties disarmed their members and actively engaged in this process. The success of reintegrating Islamists into the new political process after 2003 is thus a possible explanation to the non-occurrence of violent extremism in the KRI. Last, economic conditions improved considerably in the KRI post-2003 as they won their share of the national budget. This contributed to reducing unemployment rates to unprecedented lows, reducing emigration levels among youth, and improving education infrastructure in the region.

Similarly, the Syrian province Deir ez-Zor became an attractive target for violent extremist groups who sought access to, and revenues from, these resources. As the prospects of



fossil fuel revenue triggered inter-tribal competition and violent conflicts, jihadist and local tribes developed a symbiotic relationship through which each side tried to exploit the other. In the period when IS controlled Deir Ez-Zor, there were hardly any tribes who did not join the organization in notable numbers. Only a few of them were resilient to the pressure from IS. The Syrian village Swedan is one such example, which disengaged from localized conflicts that intensified with the rise of tribal armed groups affiliated with jihadists. Although more research is required to fully understand the tribal dynamics of Deir Ez-Zor and the non-occurrence of violent extremism there, part of the answer was provided by the village’s tribal leaders. As he noted in an interview, de-escalation was an inherited cultural norm which meant that disputes rarely caused violence so common among the other tribes. When he was asked why violent extremism did not occur in Swedan, one Swedan notable and close relative to the Jabhat al-Nusra-affiliated Ghassan Rakkad noted: “We did not need to ally with anyone to take revenge,” adding, “[and] we did not need the oil”.<sup>5</sup>

### What does this mean for the EU’s PVE policies in the MENA?

We argue that there has been a persisting blind spot in the existing scholarship and research on violent extremism. Although this research has been pioneering in its own right, the sole focus on the *occurrence* of violent extremism has often meant that scholars have concerned themselves with the minutiae of the problem to such an extent that one often overlooks the situation as a whole (one cannot see the forest for the trees). While there for decades has been a thorough and expansive scholarly discussion about *what* the drivers of violent extremism are, it may be more fruitful to discuss how these drivers affect various population segments differently and why they do so. The majority in enabling environments *do not* engage in violent extremism, and many of those who undergo a process of radicalization do not either.

This has important implications for the EU’s PVE and CT policies in the region. First, by focusing solely on the drivers of violent extremism (what goes wrong), one has traditionally missed what goes right and why it does so. The PVE and CT policies of MENA regimes have consequently been reactive instead of preventive – without the required macro-structural reforms to deal with the issue in the mid- and long-term. In extenso, one should be careful not securitizing target populations perceived as particularly prone to terrorism and violent extremism by implementing PVE programs indiscriminately in enabling environments (justified by the rationale that this is where violent extremism *occurs*). Specifically, one should avoid targeting specific ethnic and religious groups and transform them from political subjects expressing legitimate grievances to security issues<sup>6</sup> receiving disproportionate attention through a geographical clustering of international programs. Mainly, securitization may cause alienation and cognitive dissonance on the ground as whole segments in enabling environments are defined as a “problem” for the rest. Research on the drivers of *non-occurrence* is still in its infancy; we do still not fully understand why the majority in enabling environments do not engage in violent extremism despite experiencing many, if not all, of the same grievances. Studying the non-occurrence of violent extremism – and focusing on the resilience of local communities and their experiences – are thus fruitful precisely because it enables us to move from framing a target population as “part of the problem” to potentially being “part of the solution”.

The non-occurrence of violent extremism in MENA has thus far-reaching consequences

<sup>5</sup> Swedan notable, interview with Ahmad Mhidi, Swedan, September 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 25-26.



for the success rate of the EU's PvE and CT policies in the region. First, because the majority population does not engage in violent extremism despite being subject to its drivers, there is an inherent risk of alienating the target population. One example of EU PvE programs that may be counterproductive due to their geographical are those focusing on societal cohesion in Lebanon, for example, because they are largely organized in localities with a Sunni majority – with the associated possibility of stigma against specific religious groupings. This could potentially heighten sectarian tensions in a country where “the [Lebanese] army’s main mission has been to fight against Sunni jihadi groups”, with a number of associated questions about Hezbollah’s influence over the military.<sup>7</sup> A unidirectional focus is similarly risky in other countries such as Iraq where Iraqi Shiite militias are not just military actors, but also political players with offices in government, parliament, and local Iraqi politics.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the key partners with which the EU must cooperate with should not be underestimated as decisive drivers of violent extremism. As the Egyptian, Iraqi, and, partly, the Syrian cases highlight: MENA regimes are the key to deradicalization and preventing violent extremism. Still, these regimes are more concerned with preserving their own privileges, interests, and power than implementing the required macro-structural reforms. More often than not, MENA regimes prefer persistent repression to stop any form of discontent from being vocally expressed. The same applies to the religious reform of so-called “moderate Islam” that many MENA leaders now try to implement in their own societies – from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) via Saudi Arabia to Egypt. While we demonstrate in our working paper that religious countercurrents are necessary to facilitate the non-occurrence of violent extremism, it should be carefully noted that the attempt to modify, amend, or structurally change the religious and ideological fabric in the region is a fickle endeavor. While alternative voices contribute to disengaging those undergoing a radicalization process, these ideological and religious currents must nevertheless be perceived as legitimate, to wit, independent of existing oppressive power structures in the region. It is not given that the EU’s support for the Hedaya Center in Abu Dhabi or the funding of Sunni Lebanese institutions will have the intended impact if residents of enabling environments perceive these efforts to strengthen mere “regime mouthpieces”.

Last, each of our cases show that there is no “size fits all” when it comes to PvE policies because each of the enabling analyzed in our working paper are shaped by qualitatively different historical dynamics, state-civil society relations, drivers of violent extremism, and factors facilitating the non-occurrence of violent extremism. If the EU PvE policies are to move from framing a target population from being “part of the problem” to potentially being “part of the solution”, it is mandatory that local stakeholders share the ownership of the process instead of merely ticking the boxes of EU goals and aspirations. EU policy makers working on this issue are highly aware of this issue. As one EU diplomat interviewed for our policy brief lamented:

These countries use all the words that sound nice to the ear of the EU bureaucrats, but it does not lead to anything. So there is a nice paper published, such as in Iraq, where we received a nice PvE booklet, which on the face of it is perfect, with all the words of the EU resolutions. Yet, they have no impact in real life and are just to tick the boxes of EU expectations.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tine Gade and Nayla Moussa, ‘The Lebanese army after the Syrian crisis: Alienating the Sunni Community?’, in Are John Knudsen and Tine Gade (eds), *Civil-military relations in Lebanon: Conflict, cohesion, and confessionalism in a divided society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 41-42.

<sup>8</sup> Cigar, *Iraq’s Shia warlords and their militias*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>9</sup> EU diplomat [anonymized], interview with Erik Skare, *WhatsApp*, 06 October 2020.



## Policy recommendations

- The “hard approach” of the MENA regimes against violent extremism does not address the long-term roots of radicalization. The “soft approach”, on the other hand, supposes that traditional notables and religious leaders are perceived as legitimate in the eyes of disgruntled youths and not as mere tools of the state to maintain order and security. This legitimacy depends on social and political reforms, as the most effective bulwark against extremism is the civil society. Yet, civil society can only fully function, however, if there exists a political space with a freedom of expression, elections, and political freedoms in which youth are free to channel their grievances.
- The independence of state religious institutions needs to be strengthened. While socio-economic and political grievances may lead youth to political radicalization, it is the framework put forward by salafi-jihadism that translates radicalization into violent action. Limiting the influence of these religious ideas should be an integral part of any counter-violent-radicalization strategy. Although many religious scholars in the MENA region have tried to counter the jihadi literature on excommunication and jihad with lengthy refutations, they often lack the legitimacy jihadi figureheads enjoy in the eyes of radicalized youth. Instead, the former is perceived as mere regime mouthpieces. Limiting the influence of these ideas requires not only a religious response but voices that are deemed legitimate by those radicalized.
- It is necessary to develop sub-national or regional strategies to counter and prevent violent extremism in the MENA region. The different regions of Iraq, for example, have different needs and are, most importantly, undergoing different socio-economic and political transitions. Developing strategies to each region will make all local stakeholders share the ownership of the process and should not be viewed as simply “ticking the boxes”. Instead, specific regions and provinces need realistic and context-tailored and targeted interventions with clear plans for implementation on the ground.
- It is necessary to provide long-term investments in the justice systems of the region. As the Syrian case demonstrates, legitimate and effective justice institutions would offer an alternative to tribal violence, if coupled with disarmament. Ensuring education and economic opportunity is equally important, which, in turn, requires effective local governance institutions. This is particularly the case in areas that have suffered from decades of political and economic marginalization by the central state.

