

## Regional Comparisons

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### **D8.1 Policy brief comparing the EU and other stakeholders’ prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the Balkans and the broader MENA region**



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## Abstract

This policy brief offers a cross-regional comparison of PREVEX findings regarding the efficacy of the EU's PVE efforts. Based upon an amalgamation of PREVEX partners' policy briefs over the Balkans (D5.1), the Maghreb/Sahel (D6.1) and the Middle East (D7.1), two reports on respectively EU's policies and instruments for PVE (D4.1) and the implementation of these (D4.2), further corroborated by an extensive validation background study (D8), we have the following recommendations to the EU:

- **EU – ‘DOs’**
  - Increase cooperation with High Muslim Councils
  - Enhance their standing
  - Empower them to act against IVE
- **EU – ‘DON’Ts’ – A, B, C**
  - Avoid the all-out securitization of everything ‘Islamic’.
  - Block imported Islamic ‘Madhhab’ (Wahabism) from entering European spheres
  - Consult ‘elders’ and rethink funding youth projects that lack proven PVE-impact

## Overview of findings

As the extensive research conducted by PREVEX partners suggests, one major element that could contribute to widening the efficacy of the EU's PVE efforts in the MENA, Maghreb/Sahel and the Balkans regions would be an enhanced focus on increasing the faculties and potencies of consultation (**‘Shura’**) in these areas. This fundamental Quranic value, which is universally shared by all Muslim societies, is the single most important antidote to authoritarianism and the strongest force available to bring about what the foremost Middle Eastern historian Bernard Lewis termed as **‘power from within as opposed to power from above’**.<sup>1</sup> Consultation, and the efforts to support it, breeds both moderation and an enhanced sense of responsibility of leaderships towards their constituents. Ultimately, it also leads to an enhanced vision of coexistence by Muslims with non-Muslims.

A second important measure for EU's PVE efforts, is minimizing the role of Hanbali-Wahabi-Salafism on the continent. The single most detrimental factor working against the EU's PVE efforts concerns Saudi-based extremism as stemming from its Islamic stratum of **Hanbali-Wahabi-Salafism, and its entry into European regional spheres**. Interestingly, the PREVEX research done so far indicates that the entry of Wahabi-Salafism implied a distinct potential towards extremization, fundamentalism, and an eventual resort to violence. The single most

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<sup>1</sup> The residual positive effects of ‘Shura’ have been further confirmed by the additional background research conducted by the authors of this report under Work Package 8. The positive effects of ‘Shura’ have also been confirmed in two auxiliary research papers over Islamism in Ethiopia and in Israel, which have gone beyond PREVEX' immediate geographical envelope.



important PVE action that the EU can take, for the sake both of its own citizens and those of the Muslim societies in its immediate regional vicinities, would be to block the negative and poisonous influences that this secretive and retrograde Islamic school of thought ('Madhhab') carries. To be sure, there is not a single Muslim society in the EU's immediate vicinity that indigenously and traditionally adheres to the Hanbali-Wahabi Madhhab – all Europe's direct Islamic neighbours espouse the relatively tolerant Hanafi, Maliki, or Shafiite Sunni Madhhab. The EU should redouble its efforts to ensure that things remain this way, and block Hanbali-Wahabi importations.

### The 'DOs': support Islamic consultation ('Shura').

The principle of consultation ('Shura') is universally recognized as *the* fundamental governance principle of any (and all) Muslim societies that abide by true Islamic legal principles.<sup>2</sup> So central is 'Shura' to Islam that it is virtually the only general governance principle to merit one of the Holy Qur'an's suras being named after it (Sura 42: Consultation – 'Ash-Shura'), where the absolute prerequisite demand for consultation is to be found.

The moral, religious, and historical power of this Qur'anic injunction can hardly be overstated. When amalgamated with the pattern of behaviour exemplified by The Prophet himself, who repeatedly resorted to consultation with his companions<sup>3</sup>, and once this also became the officially designated ruling behaviour of the first four Caliphs of the Islamic Community<sup>4</sup>, 'Shura' quickly evolved into a Muslim *Suprema Lex* – mutual to all good governance structures.

While the principle of consultation applies to rulers' prerogative to exercise it with different organs of society (e.g., chambers of commerce, professional guilds, general staff of the armed forces, legal bar associations, municipal leaderships etc.) it vis-à-vis High Muslim Councils<sup>5</sup> that rulers' consultation is seen as an absolute religious and legal duty.

Indeed in at least three examples, pointed to by PREVEX partners, rulers' consultation and cooperation with High Muslim councils and senior religious authorities have yielded rather remarkable PVE results:

- **In Morocco** which has: 'developed an ambitious P/CVE agenda, which has set the standard for much of the region' (PREVEX D6.1, p.10), work with ministries of Islamic affairs (in both Morocco and Mali), along with the Ulama Councils and the Mohammadian League of Scholars, has had major and long-standing positive consequences, and has even demonstrated the positive ability and potential for cooperation of outsiders with high clerical authorities.
- **In Egypt** much the same can be said of the activities of the Al-Azhar Observatory –

<sup>2</sup> Formally known as **Sharia**, the fundamental religious concept of Islam—namely, its law.

<sup>3</sup> The companions of the Islamic prophet Muhammad are formally known as 'Sahabah'.

<sup>4</sup> The Rashidun Caliphs, often called "the Rashidun", is a term used in Sunni Islam to refer to the first four caliphs following the death of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, namely: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman ibn Affan and Ali of the Rashidun Caliphate, the first caliphate.

<sup>5</sup> Known as 'Majlis ash-Shura' (Arabic: مجلس الشورى), an advisory or consultative council.



especially regarding its curtailing effects over Islamic extremism, (as clearly recognized in 2019 by the EU’s own counterterrorism coordinator – PREVEX D7.1, p.12).

- **In the Balkans**, High Muslim Councils have remained steadfast in their faith in the superiority of the local, age-old, Hanafi Islamic traditions in this region, as they have insisted on their supremacy over and above any new entry by other non-indigenous Islamic schools – notably, Saudi-backed Hanbali-Wahabi-Salafi ones, also known as ‘Para-jamaats’ (‘parallel communities’ – PREVEX D5.1, p.15 n.57-8).

Another aspect of ‘Shura’s potential for enhancement of the EU’s PVE efforts concerns its potential to limit and hold autocracy at bay. As highlighted by PREVEX Report D7.1 (PVE strategies in the Middle East), the EU has been confronted with an excruciating dilemma. Through its cooperation with (and, indeed, funding of) PVE efforts by authoritarian regimes in MENA, these autocratic regimes are further strengthened in their oppressive actions against their own societies – thus betraying the EU’s own ‘normative powers’ in the areas of human rights and democratic thinking (PREVEX D7.1, p.7). This conundrum is perhaps most acutely felt in the EU’s cooperation with Egypt, whose regime is accused of having ‘little interest in social, economic, or political conditions for radicalization and violence’ (D7.1, p.13).

It is against the backdrop of this dilemma that one must view the emphasis on the need for an enhanced EU focus on supporting, funding, and cooperating with consultative bodies in Muslim societies. For beyond the religious-cultural significance borne by consultation, its crucial importance lies in the fact that it is, after all, the most important democratic foundation of any Islamic society.

### Application to EU Policy

The EU has dynamically acquired experience in anti-radicalization policy and adopted a great deal of counter-terrorism legislation over the last two decades (PREVEX D4.2, p.4). The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 has consolidated the EU’s competence in this field, where full respect of fundamental rights has been at the heart of its work. In the wake of terror attacks in Autumn 2020, European Council President Michel and Commission President von der Leyen in several speeches highlighted the sanctity of freedom and freedom of religion and explained that without security, those values cannot be protected (PREVEX D4.3, p.3). President Michel highlighted how the priority is security, but that, at the same, it is crucial to replace the circle of hate and mistrust with dialogue, understanding, and trust (PREVEX D4.3, p.4). The PVE agenda is, as former research by PREVEX scholars found, quite a recent phenomenon in most member states across the EU (PREVEX D4.1).

The 2015 European Agenda on Security highlighted that EU actions against terrorism should address the root causes of extremism through preventive measures. In this context, it recalled the key role of the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), stressing that – where possible – the experience and expertise gained through the Network should be mobilized in priority third countries, notably Turkey, the MENA and the Western Balkans (PREVEX D4.1). In 2016, to address the international dimensions of PVE, one of the lines of action involved



supporting third countries in tackling the underlying factors of radicalization “by identifying drivers for youth extremism, empowering women, promoting community dialogue, strengthening local actors or improving the media and education capacities to counter radicalizing ideologies (PREVEX D4.1). The community local level is stressed at the heart of preventive strategies, yet cooperation and consultation with High Muslim Councils as proposed in this policy brief, has never been explicitly mentioned among EU’s PVE efforts.

Given its long-standing importance to Islam and its demonstrated success in Morocco, the Balkans, and the Middle East, the EU should significantly increase its participation, support, and cooperation with High Muslim Councils and other similar bodies with consultative status. The EU should not shy away from engaging actively with high religious bodies within its neighbouring geographical (and nautical) vicinity, provided that such an engagement is accepted (either officially or, most probably, tacitly) by central regimes. Cooperation with High Muslim Councils will undoubtedly be most welcome in the Balkans and in states that are in line for EU membership – including ones with Muslim majorities (i.e., Albania and Kosovo). It will probably be welcomed by some states in the Maghreb/Sahel, and most likely opposed or even blocked by certain states in the MENA region. That said, efforts should be made towards a clear and unequivocal, eye-to-eye, respectful dialogue between Europe and these high Muslim bodies. If and when conducted, such a dialogue should be seen from an EU standpoint as an integral part of the Union’s activities in favour of democracy and good governance – an EU effort to increase ‘powers from within’ Muslim societies over those from above. Furthermore, and probably most importantly, if and when it is conducted, such an effort for dialogue, cooperation, and the support of High Muslim Councils should be executed with the highest degree of emotional generosity possible – as per the time-honoured democratic heritage that these councils represent in the eyes of so many Muslims.

## The ‘DON’Ts’

### Avoid the all-out securitization of everything ‘Islamic’

If there is one ‘red thread’ that runs through PREVEX’s field reports, it is the pinpointing of the highly contentious EU tendency to securitize much of its approach towards Muslim-majority countries, especially in the Middle East (PREVEX D7.1, pp.5–8). This is coupled with an overt lack of a comprehensive PVE strategy, which in turn has resulted in an uncoordinated approach stemming from ‘what the main power players in the region allow’ (PREVEX D7.1, p.5). The absence of a coherent strategy is equally pertinent within the Balkan context (PREVEX D5.1, p.7) – indeed, the EU even lacks a commonly agreed-upon definition of terrorism or VE. Alas, the Union’s normative promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law have ‘been gradually replaced by a securitization-canted co-operation with key partners’ (especially since 2015 – PREVEX D7.1, p.5).

### Block imported ‘Madhhab’ (Wabahism) from entering European spheres

This second ‘DON’T’, which clearly emerges from all PREVEX research, and which is confirmed by a deep and long-standing consensus amongst experts, concerns the blocking of



entry of Hanbali-Wahabism and its interpretations of Islam into European spheres. This necessity is so obvious that one wonders why more is not being done to tackle this point.

When comparing aspects of IVE in the three regions examined by PREVEX – the Balkans, the Middle East and the Maghreb/Sahel – one must take note of a cardinal fact. In virtually all cases where IVE was detected – it was either implicitly or explicitly associated with Hanbali-Wahabism which emanates from Saudi Arabia, yet whose followers amount to less than 5% of all Sunni Muslims (and less than 2% of the world’s Muslims in total). Broadly speaking, Muslim populations of the three regions surveyed by PREVEX adhere to the four great schools of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence<sup>6</sup>: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, and Hanbali-Wahabism. Of these schools, the Hanafi is the most tolerant of Muslim schools (and encompasses roughly 45 % of the world’s Sunni Muslims), while the Hanbali-Wahabi school is by far – the most retrograde and violent. This adherence to Madhhab determines the extent to which Muslims can religiously accommodate non-Muslims within their geographical spheres, and the extent to which their Islamic jurisprudential thought is allowed to widen its readings of its scriptural origins.

Of all the issues of concern for the EU regarding PVE, few are more pertinent than the framing of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is here where one sees the crucial importance of Madhhab for the articulation of such relations – from the Muslim perspective. Indeed, in the Balkans states such as Albania or Kosovo (both overtly Hanafi), despite their Muslim majorities, insist on declaring themselves as ‘multi-confessional’. Beyond Europe, it is Morocco that has set the benchmark in terms of its vision of non-Muslims as indigenous and indispensable parts of its own heritage, as evident in its new constitution, validated via referendum in 2011. Article 2 of the Constitution’s preamble defines Morocco as a Muslim land governed by Maliki Islam, whose king’s religious authority (‘Amir al-Mu’minin’) directly derives from his Sharifi lineage of descent from The Prophet. That said, the state explicitly carries the responsibility to protect its non-Muslim peoples, being forged as it were:

...by the convergence of its Arab-Islamist, Berber and Saharan-Hassanic components, nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusian, Hebraic and Mediterranean influences. The pre-eminence accorded to the Muslim religion...is consistent with the attachment of the Moroccan people to the values of openness, of moderation, of tolerance and of dialog for mutual understanding (PREVEX D8.001 p.16 n.27).

Evidently, Moroccan non-Muslim Jews (‘Hebraic’) and Christians (‘Andalusian’) form an integral part of the Moroccan nation. Contrast this new Moroccan constitution with the fact that up until 2004 in Saudi Arabia, Jews were officially and legally barred from entering that kingdom country, and one begins to understand just the wide difference between Maliki and Hanbali Islam. Suffice it to recall that even today, Saudi Hanbali-Wahabism maintains an

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<sup>6</sup> Also known as ‘Madhhab’, a school of thought within fiqh.



absolute prohibition on non-Muslims' entry of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina – something unheard of anywhere else in the Muslim world.

### Consult 'elders' and rethink funding youth projects that lack proven PVE-impact

The final 'DON'T' to emerge from PREVEX's contemporary research concerns the EU's PVE funding priorities, and the Union's tendency to overfund youth programmes at the expense of 'harder' dialogue programmes with more senior members of Muslim societies (for example, High Muslim Councils). This primary focus on youth projects has been the signal trait of the EU's PVE funding priorities in the Middle East and the Maghreb/Sahel, somewhat in contrast to its work in the Balkans. As data on its Middle East expenditure clearly shows, almost half of all the Union's funding of societal-cohesion programmes (45% to be exact) is allocated to youth projects (PREVEX D7.1, pp.8–10, Figure 3). Comparable funding trends are also visible in the EU's work in the Maghreb/Sahel.

The crucial problem with financing youth programmes as a means towards PVE is that there is no proven evidence that they have any impact. As PREVEX scholars have observed regarding the EU's funding of youth programmes in Tunisia, while much effort goes into youth education and development as activities supportive of the Union's PVE agenda, 'there is a lack of a convincing theory of change and assessment tools to back up this claim' (PREVEX D6.1, p.15). Similar disappointing conclusions are drawn vis-à-vis the EU's work in Niger (PREVEX D6.1, p.12). Given the Union's sensitive relationships with autocratic regimes in the Middle East, youth programmes have become the 'lowest-common-denominator go-to' that can immediately be agreed on for implementation (PREVEX D7.1, p.10).

In contrast to such youth-focused initiatives, both the authors of this report, as well as the majority of PREVEX project partners are entirely and affirmatively convinced that 'dialogue programmes' – also known as 'strategic and consultative talk-shops' – might arguably be *the* most important tool to apply in conditions in which faith-based societies are experiencing violent ruptures based on religiously generated ideology. Sceptics, who scorn so-called 'soft' inter-faith dialogue efforts, in favour of 'harder' securitized measures, would do well to seriously consider Europe's own historical record in relation to its hardest faith-based conflict: Northern Ireland. Nowhere were harder security measures applied more brutally, and with more bloodshed, than in Derry, West Belfast, and County Armagh from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. The resulting physical and mental decimation of Northern Irish communities – and their respective, collective traumas – should remain as a stark warning to all securitization pundits who believe solely in 'hard measures'.

Conversely, one should remember the great success story that inter-faith dialogue and strategic 'talk-shops' brought about in Northern Ireland from 1991 onwards under efforts within the framework of the Community Relations Council (D8.001 n.30-31). At the end of the day, it was inter-faith dialogue in that period that laid the groundwork for the 1998 'Good Friday Agreement' – not the other way around. The faith-based premises of that treaty are aptly present in its very name.

Let there be no doubt. Much of the EU's focus on youth projects was very well merited,



given the tectonic shift which seemed to come about with the so-called Arab Spring – a seismic youth-driven societal movement *par excellence*. Yet with the cotemporaneous benefit of hindsight, some 12 years later, one can safely conclude that it is mid-aged society which has taken an ever-stronger hold over the Arab world, most notably in Tunisia and Egypt – the paragons of the youth-driven popular uprisings in the region. Tunisia’s recent clear decline in democratic governance back, and Egypt’s Sisi regime which has dwarfed Mubarak’s in terms of its levels of state-based oppression – these have provided the answers to Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-arson in Ben Arous’ market in Tunisia, or to the demonstrations in Cairo’s Tahrir square. Given this radical change, and the resurgence of mid-aged driven leaderships in the Arab world, the EU’s PVE policies seem to beg for realignment – more towards dialogue with older bodies such as High Muslim Councils, and perhaps less so vis-à-vis youth-driven projects.

## Recommendations

- Increase EU’s engagement with High Muslim Councils and clerical leaderships, when possible, via direct engagement and dialogue, and otherwise indirectly (via national governments), so as to enhance the potencies of their consultative role in society (‘Shura’) and involve them further in PVE efforts.
- Support mid-level bodies in society that execute consultative faculties (‘Shura’): Bar Associations, Chambers of Commerce, regional religious leaderships, professional guilds, and associations.
- Avoid the all-out securitization of everything ‘Islamic’. Not all Islamists are fundamentalists, and not all fundamentalists are terrorists.
- Block imported non-indigenous Saudi Hanbali-Wahabism from entering European spheres.
- Divert attention away from youth and more towards mid-aged bodies in society whose engagement in PVE has higher chances of yielding impact.



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