

## Concepts and methods

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# **D2.3 Working paper on conceptual, theoretical and methodological issues arising out of the project**



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## Introduction

This policy brief connects and synthesises PREVEX’ emerging insights in terms of the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism (RVE). Building on the programme’s overall achievement to grasp the phenomenon through in-depth and context sensitive case studies of the occurrence and non-occurrence of RVE, it summarises the insight gained and clarifies their potential for a better understanding of the phenomenon and its possible prevention.

Perceived as both an internal and external threat, RVE is commonly addressed as a deviant kind of conflict engagement whose prime features pose a grave security issue. On the one hand, it is considered one of the defining traits of so-called irregular combatants and wars, where the forces and militants in question fight outside the rules of war. On the other hand, it is used to indicate a particular excessive kind of conviction and/or action – a perversion of the conventional mode and means of politics and ideology. RVE is, as such, seen to be set apart from standard conflict engagement by an excess of persuasion and harm, making the designation of people as radical or violent extremists both a legalistic and political issue. It signifies conflict engagement that runs counter to established rules and regulations and, hence, violates both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, the Geneva Conventions, and human rights. Just as it denotes ideological and/or religious fanaticism as both a phenomenon in the world as well as a political ascription. As legal-political categories, RVE is at play when identifying political processes, drafting preventive policies, and working to delegitimise the conflictual practices and perspectives of a defined Other (cf. Ruggiero 2001).

As a more descriptive term, RVE is used to signify a conflictual and political supererogatory. It defines an element of excess within the intersection of violence and belief. The term is almost by default linked to religious and ideological fanaticism, just as it is tied to indiscriminate and disproportionate ways of conducting warfare. However, when researching the groups and people defined as Radical and violent extremists, we very quickly become aware that their motivations and engagements are not necessarily characterised by excess, but most often by its contrary, *lack*. In other words, field-based social scientific research points our attention to radicalisation and violent extremism as related to a shortcoming in life chances, social mobility, livelihoods, safety or security for the people involved (Bøås and Dunn 2017; Vigh & Utas 2017; Jensen & Vigh 2018; Bøås, Osland and Erstad 2019).

PREVEX’ findings are no exception. Rather than ‘the radical’ or ‘the extremist’ referring to a specific type of person, ideology or religion, RVE springs from a specific social situation. Instead of being essentially related to a particular ontologically different other – societal,



ideological or personal – RVE is a set of practices and perspectives related to a specific social circumstance. In this manner, RVE may fruitfully be seen as a social modality. It is a potential mode of politics and violence that is actualised in a given context. RVE is contingent upon social states of being in which non-engagement offers at-risk people little in terms of recognition, security and/or well-being. As such, PREVEX’ research takes its point of departure in the recognition that RVE has no specific colour, culture, ethnicity or religion attached to it but should be seen instead as departing from particular social conditions. While perhaps a truism, this point is important to reiterate as it means that RVE are context-dependent social positions and perspectives rather than monolithic and all-encompassing ones. And, consequently, that if we want to understand and prevent RVE, we need to not focus on the kind of characters that populate such movements but on the kind of societal circumstances that generate them.

On this theoretical and methodological note, PREVEX was designed to illuminate individual, community and societal resilience to RVE by investigating both the occurrence and non-occurrence of violent extremism in ‘enabling environments’ in North Africa, the broader MENA region and the Balkans (cf. Raets 2017). By systematically collecting and analysing RVE both *in situ* and across the various fields PREVEX holds the possibility of moving from the specific to the general and thereby to identify the processes and conditions of resilience that contains translocation potential. In other words, PREVEX investigates the social conditions that work for and against occurrence and non-occurrence both in and across contexts of enabling environments.

While the difference encountered in such an approach are necessarily many, it equally allows the similarities to stand out. RVE departs from the margins. Whether in the global North or South it commonly emerges from within positions of poverty, insecurity and lacking political protection and/or representation. Even the so-called home-grown terrorists – which have been used as examples of not all RVE being related to poverty and marginalisation since many have been relatively well-educated – actually appear to support the claim. Most of the people and groups defined as speak from a marginal position as defendants of an Islamic Umma, a Palestinian cause, or a downtrodden minority, etc. This experience of marginality relates to social, political, and institutional strains entailing that RVE is commonly tied to a lack of voice, security and life chances.

### **On (dys)function and corruption**

The point is that people do not necessarily join a radical or violent extremist group because of religious or ideological fanaticism, but more plausibly because such movements offer mobility,



security and support structures in a situation where no others exist. The allure of such groups may be voiced in religious and political statements promising better distributions of order, power, resources and futures, yet they are attractive to marginal population groups because of an existing lack of well-being, security, institutional coherence and reliability (Roy 2017). In this respect, state failure and institutional frailty are commonly seen as drivers of RVE. A good but often overlooked example of this is the phenomenon of corruption. Systematic corruption reasons widespread popular discontent with public authority and disbelief in institutional management in turn influencing attitudes and behaviours that potentially drives individuals towards criminal organisations and violent political networks that promise access and inclusion.

The policy brief seeks to use PREVEX insights to contribute to the literature and policy debates on promoting and advancing the social and political aspects that support and underlines; create, sustain and maintain peaceful communities and societies. As said, one of the typical yet less recognised hindrances to this can be found in corrupt practices, which offer an interesting window to the ways that 'lack' may be engendered through the state as a site. Such practices, especially when they are more chronic features of societies, are powerful motivators for political action. The Arab Spring and the popular movements in Ukraine and Lebanon were reasoned in widespread despair about the future, lack of economic opportunities and strong resentments against corrupt systems and elites. Although we know corruption and corrupt practices are context-specific, unfold in distinct ways according to the situation, and affect people in different ways, its disproportionality affects those in the margins of the social and political orders, just as it benefits those with resources to manoeuvre and manipulate political systems, institutional practices and behaviours for the interests and ends of specific groups and individuals (Johnston 2005, Heywood 2009, della Porta and Vannucci 2012, Andersen 2018). As Rose-Ackermann states, widespread corruption is a sign that something has gone wrong in the relationship between the state and society (1997). There is a mounting consensus among policymakers and scholars that corruption erodes popular trust in political institutions, undermines generalized trust in others, distorts political participation, and reduces legitimacy (Andersen 2020). This also has implications for RVE and social resilience.

As a phenomenon, corruption is, thus, an interesting example of a process prevalent in situations of RVE, which spoils and strains social, political and institutional well-being. It thrives on and supports inequality and thus conditions violent extremism and criminality. In this respect, it may be seen both as a sign and driver of instability and discontent and, therefore as deeply interlinked to the prevention of RVE (Shelley 2014, UNDP 2017, USIP 2019, EC 2020, Viano 2020). Over time corruption reasons widespread popular discontent with public authority and



disbelief in institutional management over time and spurs anti-societal attitudes and bearings that potentially drive individuals and groups towards criminal organisations and violent political networks.

## The European Policy Approach

Flanked by President Emmanuel Macron and Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, President Michel, commenting on terrorist threats, highlighted how the priority is security but that it is crucial to replace the circle of hate and mistrust with dialogue, understanding, and trust.<sup>1</sup> This duality of deterrence and prevention dominates the 2020 EU Security Union Strategy, which concludes explicitly that there is a strong link between organised crime and corruption. It is roughly estimated that corruption alone costs the EU economy €120 billion per year and that it facilitates crime and extremism within and beyond the union. The strategy therefore links corruption to RVE as a facilitator and driver, seeing it not merely as an economic phenomenon but as one tied to political issues within and beyond the union. “Fighting terrorism starts with addressing the root causes. The polarisation of society, real or perceived discrimination and other psychological and sociological factors can reinforce people’s vulnerability to radical discourse,”<sup>2</sup> the EU commission similarly states. The root causes include the same factors of social marginalisation and humiliation, a sense of grievance and injustice, and a lack of hope for the future, as mentioned above. And the remedying and corrective initiatives and actions encompass methods of promoting pro-social behaviours and early detection of anti-social attitudes, strengthening educational efforts and socio-psychological interventions towards individuals, groups and communities. Especially, education is identified, as a key method of prevention, by the EU expert group on radicalisation, arguing that:

“Education is a cornerstone for effective prevention of radicalisation by strengthening resilience against radicalisation and recruitment. Teachers, educators and youth workers play a crucial role in fostering social

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<sup>1</sup> European Council, ‘Remarks by President Charles Michel after the video conference on Europe’s response to the terrorist threat’, 10 November 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/10/intervention-du-president-charles-michel-a-l-issue-de-la-videoconference-sur-la-reponse-europeenne-a-la-menace-terroriste/>; ‘European Council, ‘A word from President Michel’, 12 November 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/da/european-council/president/news/2020/11/12/20201112-pec-newsletter-4/>

<sup>2</sup> COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the EU Security Union Strategy (2020) p. 16. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0605&from=EN>



inclusion, promoting common democratic values and managing controversial issues with open discussions in safe classrooms.”<sup>3</sup>

In reality, the above details a very old fix to a very modern problem. Outlining education as an all-inclusive panacea that promotes ‘peaceful’ and ‘civilised’ citizenship is an old enlightenment ideal. Currently, the point is that through mass literacy and the teaching of human rights and equality, young people in at-risk societies will inevitably develop into consciences citizens, slowing the spread of RVE. The strategy thereby addresses core societal problems whilst simultaneously avoiding generalising in terms of what makes individuals, groups and communities extremist and violent prone. However, while the expert group has identified the remedying actions to the problems, they nonetheless emphasise the need to increase the understanding of the contextual drivers and individual motivators of involvement. Integral to this work is the capacity of national partners to undertake situated research amongst the people at risk of recruitment and mobilisation in order “(...) to increase support to partner countries and regions in enhancing prevention-related research capacities in order to develop the knowledge of the drivers for violent extremism in the specific context.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, from an EU perspective we currently know what our main remedying action is – education. We know who the frontline workers in daily close contact with the at-risk population will be – teachers. We know what we want to achieve – social inclusion and democratic outlooks. And we have territorialised and situated the location of the problem – the EU and the regional partner countries. We know the basic requirement of success – young people attending education. However, we don’t know what drives people towards extreme politics and/or the recruitment by violent organisations, and why people are motivated to join or leave the organisations.

This is of course where PREVEX’ research makes a difference. In order to investigate, the above questions and identified gaps in the strategy, we have analysed a series of studies on drivers and inhibitors of violent extremism and social resilience, in an attempt to outline and further research the key causes of mobilisation to violent extreme groups and organisations. Thereby, we aim to identify effective remedying actions and preventive measures for violence and ways to promote community resilience.

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<sup>3</sup> High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R) Final Report (2018). P. 12. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files\\_en?file=2020-09/20180613\\_final-report-radicalisation.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files_en?file=2020-09/20180613_final-report-radicalisation.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> High-Level Commission Expert Group on Radicalisation (HLCEG-R) Final Report (2018). P. 13. [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files\\_en?file=2020-09/20180613\\_final-report-radicalisation.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files_en?file=2020-09/20180613_final-report-radicalisation.pdf)



## PREVEX' cross-cutting research findings

Previous PREVEX publications have analysed the policies of the EU and the policies and practices of four member countries focussed on preventing violent extremism. In working paper D4.1, entitled 'On EU's policies and instruments for PVE',<sup>5</sup> the authors conclude that the "core target of PVE strategies in the European Union, especially since 2011, is Islamist extremism. (...) the war in Syria and the rise of ISIS has turned attention in Europe mainly towards religious violent radicalisation." And that; "(...) Islamist jihadist ideology is generally perceived as the core driver of violent extremism." (pp. 50). It identifies prevention, as a core component of counter-terrorism strategies and further states that "the local level is at the heart of preventive strategies that aim at non-occurrence of violent extremism (...) [and that] while governmental actors generally see extremist ideology (and religion) as a core driver of radicalisation, civil society tends to highlight the importance of socio-economic factors in fostering an 'enabling environment'." (pp51). We can thus deduct three important insights from the analysis. First, the EU and the member states identify ideology as the main challenge and driver of peoples involvement and mobilisation for violent extremism: Second, there is a measure of disagreement and discrepancy between how states and civil society see and hence addresses radicalisation processes: And, thirdly, in conclusion, that drivers of PVE need more research.

The PREVEX working paper D4.2, 'On the implementation of the EU's policies',<sup>6</sup> touches upon a similar issue as it states that; "there is still a lack of a common European policy across much of the PVE board; this is primarily because there is no real consensus about the roots of radicalization" (pp. 25). Furthermore, the paper points to the need for increased cooperation and alignment of activities based on best practices between member states. For example, establishing a joint (...) which enables state authorities to assess what terrorism-related information has been passed on to other authorities, thereby allowing a systemised view of the chain of information-sharing." (pp. 26). The paper concludes that PVE must not solely rely on police and intelligence work, but also need to include a strong social work and family support strategy. It proposes that; "the European Commission could reinforce its co-operation with member states to align priorities in tackling the root causes of violent extremism and offer social care and other forms of assistance, for instance to facilitate the re-integration of former foreign fighters." (pp. 26).

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/D4.1\\_Working-paper-on-the-EU%E2%80%99s-policies-and-instruments-for-PVE-FINAL-2.pdf](https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/D4.1_Working-paper-on-the-EU%E2%80%99s-policies-and-instruments-for-PVE-FINAL-2.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/D4.2-Working-paper-on-the-implementation-of-the-EUs-policies.pdf>



To ensure relevant preventive activities and break top down and siloed approaches, there is a need to establish a platform to share good practices and blend with locally orientated approaches. To effectively work in a local environment affected by RVE, we need to involve local actors. However, the “main challenge is the co-ordination of all these local efforts and projects and to ensure that relevant information and experience is shared within the prevention community and to identify blind spots of prevention work” (pp. 27).

We can deduct three important issues from the paper. First, extreme religious ideology is the main challenge and core driver of political extremism and radical violent behaviours. Second, religion and religious actors are perceived as both factors of radicalisation and de-radicalization. Nonetheless, religion is at the centre of the prevention of violent extremism. Third, although religion and religious actors are important, it is necessary to involve local actors and civil society that understands and can work within an enabling environment in the preventive efforts. However, there is still no conclusive evidence of what works and drives people towards RVE. Finally, the authors argue that preventing violent extremism strategies need to engage with religious communities to " tackle the phenomenon of ‘Islamist separatism’”. This leads us back to the idea that RVE is spurred on by ideological and religious excess in relation to which cooperation with Muslim organisations is a way of working towards religious moderation in relation to political movements (Ibid.).

PREVEX’ policy brief D4.3 focuses on the implementation of EU’s policies. Noticing that there is still little consensus about the roots of radicalisation, the authors look at the role of religion in relation to RVE and note that the diversity of religious influence on the issue “could be an opportunity to open spaces for Islamic theology research and teaching institutions (...)” (pp. 10). This would allow the EU to engage in a trusting dialogue with Muslim organisations in its efforts to counteract radicalisation processes by aligning political leadership, Islamic religious communities, and civil society in the agenda.

However, the policy brief equally broadens its scope to focus on other aspects of the prevention of RVE, such as establishing a common anti-terrorism database to ensure information sharing among the different national security services in the EU: Working to improve the inclusion of social work and family support in PVE initiatives as effective measures against RVE and to facilitate the re-integration of former foreign fighters: And, finally, the establishment of a platform to share best practices and knowledge of viable locally orientated approaches. Such a platform would enable the EU to assist in coordinating local efforts and projects to ensure that relevant information and experience are shared within the prevention community and law enforcement agencies. The point is, thus, that positive feedback loops could help to “improve



traditional top-down methods and break siloed approaches” (pp. 11-12). The emphasis on knowledge sharing and coordination of efforts across ministries and state institutions furthermore flags the fact that prevention and preventive measures should not merely be thought along a single axis but be a coordination of heterogeneous initiatives involving police authorities, social workers, schools and families and other caregivers.

We can learn two important things from this study. Firstly, that information about people, organisations and relations is important for preventive measures. Secondly, trust in and connection with families and religious communities is essential in gathering information, promoting dialogue and ensuring broader societal inclusion. They work as essential components to develop adequate and relevant measures tackling the root causes of violent extremism, including state-sponsored social work.

### **PREVEX’ regional research findings**

PREVEX’ more extensive cross-cutting policy analyses have been substantiated by several in-depth research endeavours dedicated to conducting field based *in situ* explorations of the occurrence and non-occurrence of RVE. In this manner, the programme has moved between the specific and the general in clarifying the dynamics at play and fathoming the contextual aspects of the larger phenomenon.

#### *Western Balkans*

In the working Paper D5.2 ‘On enabling environments, drivers, and occurrence/non- occurrence of violent extremism, the Balkans’, the authors state that;

“violent extremism in the West Balkans should be understood in two different, and in some instances intertwined aspects: as religiously driven, above all Islamist extremism, which came to a head following the military clashes and the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq; and as ethnonationalist (far-right or politically motivated) extremism, which saw its peak during the Yugoslav wars of succession in the 1990s and whose influence remains strong or dominant.” (pp. 5).

The region-specific policy document is important as it details the compounding and intersecting factors that underlie much RVE and localises issues of resilience and non-occurrence. In sum, it states, “(...) resilience is systemic for it does not depend on one single factor of resilience, but rather on the overall interconnection of factors and the way in which actors play a role in shaping those factors. To understand efficient local resilience-building, we have, in this regard, to empirically grasp the local drivers of RVE or the way that larger drivers impact upon the local



and clarify the specific grievances that can be identified in relation to the communities affected. Alternatively, mapping out lessons learned from previously proven practices can also help stakeholders identify replicable approaches or potential areas for intervention” (pp. 86).

In conclusion, the paper has three interesting outputs. On the one hand, it clarifies that; “(...) RVE in the region has been motivated, driven and shaped by a combination of factors and nurtured by three different discourses: 1) the humanitarian idea to help the suffering people in Syria against a brutal dictatorship; 2) the responsibility towards the umma and the call for jihad, and; 3) the opportunity to provide an “in-group” to those who lacked a sense of belonging. This attention to the multiple rather than singular also entails that instead of placing the main emphasis on religious fanaticism, social exclusion and marginalisation are singled out as the major factors of radicalisation. Economic hardships may, in this manner, contribute to RVE as a push factor, as hardship makes people search for alternatives, just as economic gains or livelihoods may have been a major pull factor for some as ideas of future positions of well-being and provision are enticing for those without it. However, poverty and economic grievances can be regarded as neither a leading nor a stand-alone driver of RVE. A more intersectional approach is needed enabling us to research the conjuncture of factors, including how, for example, economic positions and religious affiliations align with alienation and prejudices against one’s social, ethnic or religious background and a consequent lack of representation in institutions and authorities. In a similar vein, the Western Balkan case shows that solutions should be found in a combination of factors, including the support for moderate versions of religious conviction; a countering of radical narratives on an institutional, financial and rhetorical level; and an emphasis on schooling and education as preventive alternatives to RVE.

With this nuanced analysis of the Western Balkan case as an example, the authors list a variety of strategic recommendations that are attuned to the issue's complexity. These include “adopting a multi-agency and holistic approach for countering RVE; combining hard and soft policies as well as state- and civil society-driven program; working on the ground with local authorities and strengthening existing capacities. Just as reducing unemployment and political corruption – two factors closely linked in many contexts – stand out as crucial as they can substantially alleviate the social frustrations, which constitute the fertile soil for RVE.

We can deduct four important issues from analysing the occurrence and non-occurrence of RVE in the Western Balkans. Firstly, both the mobilisation of youths and the preventive measures to counter radicalisation is diverse and context-bound. Secondly, we need to recognise local needs, capacities and priorities in designing programmes and projects to address situated enabling factors. Thirdly, religious institutions and local religious leaders play a significant role in



mitigating attempts at radicalisation and promoting social and religious tolerance, supporting social cohesion across ethnic and religious boundaries. Fourthly, socio-economic factors of employment and livelihood play an important role for social cohesion and inclusion, and political and bureaucratic corruption are key factors for social frustrations that undermine the trust in governments, governance and institutions.

In the policy brief D5.6 on Summarizing lessons learnt on the EU's measures to prevent violent extremism in the region, the authors outline three main drivers of RVE that shape enabling environments. This includes societal factors, such as socio-economic conditions, social exclusion and marginalisation, trust in institutions, and societal divides. Equally, political factors are key as political mal performance, and polarisation or manipulation of ethnic and religious grievances for political ends relate to the occurrence and support of RVE. Just as religious or ideological indoctrination plays a part (pp. 6-7). While the socio-economic, political and religious dimensions of RVE are laid out, the authors use the case study to identify resilience factors. Social cohesion and civic values – supported, for example, by religious leaders and traditional figures of authority – are at the core of preventive measures and interventions, just as preventive measures have benefited from initiatives of awareness-raising and communicating the threat of the phenomenon. The paper list the following recommendations for future EU initiatives and actions:

- In order to prevent RVE we need to target the negative socio-economic conditions and political corruption that underwire much of the WB populations' grievances.
- The version of Islam that is 'traditional' in the region should receive state support to exert effective jurisdiction and control on their communities.
- Authorities and local community leaders should be strengthened in spreading counter-narratives within their communities (jamaats).
- In the more divided societies of the region, communal isolation should be countered by programs aimed at creating "inclusive environments" through continuous dialogue and inter-communal socialization.
- Notions of RVE need to focus on more than Islamist violence. Right-wing ethnonationalism, especially in BiH, Kosovo, and Serbia, are significant matters of concern and "authorities and civil society organizations alike should be encouraged to counteract more firmly all forms of extremism" (pp. 3-14).



### *North Africa and the Sahel*

The working paper D6.2 on enabling environments, drivers, and occurrence/non- occurrence of violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel, Morocco and Tunisia are different cases representing occurrence or non-occurrence of RVE. In the two Maghreb countries, RVE has been limited in scope despite the existence of extremist discourses and calls for engagement. Both Morocco and Tunisia have been victims of jihadi-related bombings. Yet, despite embarking upon different moves to de-escalate and prevent further terrorism, neither country has seen an escalation of the conflict (pp. 12-13). The authors attribute this to contextual factors, such as “histories of politics, places, people, and violence” and suggest that “poverty, marginalisation, and the lack of economic opportunities at the margins of the state are key drivers of violent extremism” in the regions in question (pp. 62). As seen in the earlier empirical cases from the Western Balkans, the ethnographic insights show that *excess* is thus, once again, clearly related to *lack* rather than a surplus. In this respect, the people who join radical or violent extremist groups appear to be pushed by lacking livelihoods and social possibilities rather than pulled in by religious fanaticism. In short, the authors state that; “the core of our conclusions: key drivers of violent extremism are not religion or ideology, but poverty, marginalisation and alienation from the state. Hence, stakeholders should focus their PVE in this direction”.

While religion, however, is disregarded as a cause of RVE, it is, similarly to the Balkans, seen as a potential cure as the authors state that “[m]oderate religious authority that remains legitimate in the eyes of socially conservative populations seems to be a bastion of resilience to violent extremism” (pp. 63). Consequently, the paper advances five policy implications related to Morocco, Tunisia, Niger, and Mali, which may be summarised as, 1) a call for dialogue, 2) an increased focus on social conditions and development, 3) increased attention to good governance and a functioning state, 4) respect for traditional authority and local modes or reconciliation and conflict resolution, and, finally, 5) increased support for local politico-religious structures and institutions (pp. 65).

The role of politico-religious institutions is highlighted in all four countries, addressed as both a preventive and reconciliatory force. Equally, when combined with a lack of negative state experience and limited economic options, the dissatisfaction with national and local decision-making structures appears as a cross-cutting concern. In other words, issues of development, livelihood and unemployment emerge, once again, as crucial to understanding the processes and dynamics of mobilisation and radicalisation. Although corruption does not play a prominent role in the conclusion and recommendations, it is, as in the Balkan case, a central feature in the



analysis of the political conditions at the study sites producing grievances and dissatisfaction with state governance (pp. 14) – especially concerning Niger and Mali (pp. 16, 31).

In Policy brief D6.6, summarising lessons learnt from the EU’s measures to prevent violent extremism in North Africa and the Sahel, the authors further focus on the connection between lacking development goals and RVE. This time, however, the focus is on the EU action and the effects of counter-terrorism measures. Development initiatives “play only an ancillary, unfocused role in EU-sponsored P/CVE initiatives in North Africa and the Sahel,” the authors state, continuing that “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” (pp. 5). The point is that lessening structural disenfranchisement and furthering the inclusion of groups marginalised by, for example, age, ethnicity, religion, social status, and geographic origin is akin to removing the prime drivers of RVE. Social, economic and political inclusion are essential dimensions of non-occurrence. As the paper makes clear, in relation to the latter;

“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 to the logic of social segmentation and deep-rooted clientelism, such institutions and organisations contribute to diffusing power, defusing the escalation of local disputes, and enhancing the sense of belonging and ownership” (pp. 5).

While the EU’s focus on securing the rule of law and engaging in security sector reforms is seen as part of the solution, as it has made P/CVE initiatives subject to the law rather than exempt from it, more focus needs to be paid to the root causes of marginalisation and exclusion. In other words, while the EU’s ‘do no harm’ principle of international cooperation is seen as a road to long-term dejection of RVE (pp. 8), traditional development and education issues are equally needed. In conclusion, the paper thus states that “(...) 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” (pp. 13).



## *The Middle East*

Many of the dynamics identified in the case of RVE in the Western Balkans, North Africa and the Sahel are equally noticeable in the PREVEX Working Paper D7.2 on enabling environments, drivers and occurrence/non-occurrence of violent extremism in the Middle East. We can learn two key issues from the study. First, authoritarianism and corruption are the main drivers of extremism and should be at the centre of preventive measures. Second, preventive measures, activities and interventions should be careful not to securitise entire populations or groups in the targeted societies. The key issue is not to further and sustain grievances and discontent with state and international actors. More specifically, the authors argue “that three main factors intersect in relation to the occurrence or non-occurrence of violent extremism: 1) ideology, 2) material and social costs, 3) good governance, democratic inclusions, and an economy from which all prosper” (pp. 5). While the other case-specific PREVEX studies focus primarily on drivers and possibilities of preventing or counteracting RVE as social phenomena, the Middle Eastern case additionally directs the authors’ attention to the reasoning of radicalised individuals and the finer details of the process by which people turn to RVE. In this manner, the paper states that “[w]hile it is a social phenomenon shaped by structural political and socio-economic factors, taking up arms is an individual decision and is shaped by personal factors such as religious convictions combined with the personal understanding of the costs associated with this decision for both him/her and his/her family” (pp. 39). The developing discontent that settles in people who are at risk of radicalisation becomes, in this manner, politicised leading to acts of violence against the forces identified as being the cause of their grievances. The paper holds, in this manner, that processes of RVE should be understood in relation to the specific actors involved, the institutional setting surrounding it, and, not least, the “resources and power asymmetries that facilitate and shape various forms of enabling environments” (pp. 11). As the paper is attentive to the actors engaged in RVE, it is more attuned to the ideological dimension of RVE. Socio-economic and political grievances are, as such recognised as drivers. Still, we also need to grasp the decisions and situated logic that moves the people engaged from the acceptance of violence to the act of violence. In this respect, preventing violent extremism requires the creation of an ideological counter-current that is more convincing than the jihadist narrative in question, voiced by people perceived as more legitimate or trustworthy than those proposing an RVE agenda (pp. 39).

In the Policy brief D7.5, summarising lessons learnt on the EU’s measures to prevent violent extremism in the region, the Middle East, the research reveals three main drivers of violent extremism in the region; 1) autocratic rule and the absence of good governance, 2) a deterioration of economic and social conditions, 3) and intra-tribal competition being



instrumentalised by jihadist groups. However, the occurrence of RVE is being counteracted by ideological counter currents and the material and social costs of RVE and attempts to implement “good governance, democratic inclusion, and improved economic conditions” (pp. 4).

Furthermore, the paper holds that these counter-currents provide a valuable line of research as “[s]tudying 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” (pp. 6). The authors propose four 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.
- 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.
- It is necessary to develop sub-national or regional strategies to counter and prevent violent extremism in the MENA region. (...), 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. 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” (pp. 8).

### *Cross-regional comparison*

In the Background study D8: Cross-regional comparison of ‘DOs and DON’Ts’ in the EU’s PVE Measures: Balkans, Maghreb/Sahel & Middle East, and the policy brief D8.1: Comparing the EU and other stakeholders’ prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the Balkans and the broader MENA region, the various insights emerging from the policy and case studies are connected with a view to “what has been successful and what has proven detrimental to the EU’s preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts”. As has equally become clear in this paper, a range of similar concerns and possibilities emerge from PREVEX’ empirical studies. Despite the



profound difference between the societies and cases in question, the comparative study reveals, more specifically, two clearly positive approaches in relation to the prevention of RVE.

First, “dialogue programmes’ – also known as strategic and consultative ‘talk-shops’” are, the paper argues, “the most important tool to apply in conditions in which faith-based societies are experiencing violent ruptures based on religiously generated ideology” (pp. 18). Based on a reading of the Northern Ireland conflict, they state that; “it was inter-faith dialogue in that period that laid the groundwork for the 1998 ‘Good Friday Agreement’ (...)” (pp. 17). This approach should inspire and be “applied to the EU’s PVE efforts in all of its three neighbouring regions: the Balkans, the Maghreb, and the Middle East” (pp. 17), targeting mainly the mid-range leaders instead of top political leadership or grassroots based leaders, as they are in a position to change society and religious sentiments from within (pp. 17).

Secondly, a “consistent factor contributing to the reduction of IVE, its prevention, and the amelioration of societies that have already been contaminated by it” is identified in the case studies as “interventions by advisory bodies, and especially by High Muslim Advisory Councils” (pp. 10). The force seen to be a driver of RVE, i.e., radical Islamism, is identified as part of its prevention in the shape of more moderate teaching. In D8.1, this perspective is further elaborated with the following 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” (pp. 9).

This focus on a more moderate teaching of Islam as a preventive measure enables EU policies to avoid linking Islam with RVE per se and creates a favourable position for the religious community in countering the problem. However, a specific version of Islam is equally singled out as a problem, and the report specifies that the spread of Hanbali-Wahabism in European spheres should be curtailed, clarifying that;



“(…) European Islam is (and has always been) first and foremost Hanafi in terms of its belonging to one of the four Sunni Islamic legal schools of thought (‘Madhhab’). (…). Yet what is, and always has been, entirely alien to European Islam is Hanbali-Wahabi Islam – especially in its most extreme and vile form of Salafi-Wahabism. So, while Hanafi Islam forms an integral and inseparable part of European history and culture, Hanbali Islam was virtually non-existent on the continent until the last quarter of the 20th century” (pp. 12).

Having identified a specific European version of Islam as well as a negative external one, it is argued that the EU should support; “(…) the indigenous forms of Islam in each society in the proximity of Europe – be they Hanafi traditions in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, [or] Maliki traditions in the Maghreb/Sahel and Egypt” (pp. 17).

Another problem identified by the authors in the comparative study is a tendency within EU’s PVE funding priorities to; “(…) overfund youth programmes.” This is seen as problematic given that “there is no proven evidence that they have any impact (Ibid.)” While the generational dynamics within processes of mobilisation and organised violence are well-documented and have pointed our attention to the common precarious social position of young men who constitute the bulk of the people that engage in RVE, it is nonetheless clear that gaining a proper understanding of RVE and the turn to violence demands an intersectional approach. That analytical agenda captures the conjuncture between co-existing and simultaneous strands of marginality. The authors thus conclude that; “(…) youth programmes have become the ‘lowest-common-denominator go-to’ that can immediately be agreed on for implementation” (pp. 17) and argue for a less narrow target in relation to EU preventive measures.

There is an interesting tension in the described approaches between the religious and the socio-economic. The emphasis on religious discourse and outlooks as a mitigating measure pays little attention to the socio-economic conditions of poverty, absence of state services and resources, and distrust in conventional political structures and management of institutions allocating resources and providing services, which is core to many of the empirical findings. The conditions of the widespread discontent, especially amongst the youth with bleak life opportunities, caused by the discrepancy between value expectations (goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are entitled) and value capabilities (what goods and conditions of life they actually get). Furthermore, religious-based leadership and mid-aged generational authority are commonly precisely what many youths identify as obstacles to political participation, culprits of corrupt practices, and part of the autocratic rule and in control of state institutions.



The point is, however, that RVE is not only related to Islam, youth or poverty, and a preventive strategy needs to work so that the different factors of marginalisation compound in the given area in question. We need, in other words, an approach that is clear about the social dynamics at play in RVE as well as flexible enough to grasp and deal with the various ways these intersect. Yet perhaps the core of the EU's trouble with its preventive work with RVE stems from the problematic lack of a comprehensive PVE strategy of the Union. This has, the comparison reveals, resulted in an uncoordinated approach that lacks agreed-upon goals and even a shared definition of terrorism or VE. In other words, there is a lack of conceptual clarity in the EU approach to the phenomenon to the point where there is no agreement on what substantiates the problem and, hence, how best to deal with it. This is probably also why the EU's original and ambitious goal of promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law has, as the authors state, been gradually replaced by a securitisation approach "evident in the Union's expenditure, with merely 10% of its entire PVE budget being allocated for projects that focus on good governance, democratic development and sustainability [of efforts (ed.)]" (pp. 10-11).

PREVEX' studies focus on the enabling factors and preventive possibilities surrounding RVE. As we have seen, various matters of concern have been isolated and analysed in the research, from the positive effect of teaching and education to the work of counter-narratives and religious moderation, to an approach that centres on relieving social and economic and political marginalisation. What has become clear is that we need a larger comprehensive EU strategy for PVE, and that this strategy needs to include case-specific field-based research enabling us to understand the personal frustrations of those turning to violence and engaging in RVE. As a social modality, violent extremism is a last resort. We need to move away from the idea that violence is easy, Randall Collins tells us (2009), as the empirical research clearly details that people struggle to engage in violent acts.

Similarly, the loss of any alternative for hope and the chronicity of crisis often leads many to turn to political extremism. As such, no amount of religious moderation or education will make up for the absence of security, opportunity or prospective livelihoods. Therefore, as the studies show, we also need to pay considerable attention to increased material and social costs and effective implementation of good governance to ensure democratic inclusion and improved economic conditions, especially for those on the margins of the political and social orders. In other words, we need to 1) promote inclusive dialogue, 2) change the vital socio-economic elements of enabling environments for violent extremism, and 3) work to increase political inclusion and representation and address institutional and political corruption.



## **Resonance with major multi-sited studies on the issue of RVE and PVE?**

In 2017, the UNDP published the report “The Journey to Extremism”; “(...) in which it, similarly to PREVEX’s survey material in Mali and Niger, aims to generate an improved understanding of the incentives and drivers of violent extremism, as expressed by recruits to the continent’s [i.e., Africa’s (ed.)] deadliest groups themselves” (pp. ix). The objective was to understand; “(...) the dynamics of the recruitment process, from its initial conditions and factors, through to the ‘tipping point’ that triggered particular individuals to take the step of joining a violent extremist group where others did not. Analysis of these findings yields new insights into pathways for more effective policy and programming responses” (pp. 4). In its aims and findings, the UN reports resonate with PREVEX research, especially the findings of the surveys in Mali and Niger. The survey completed 718 individual interviews, including 495 individuals who voluntarily joined violent extremist groups and 78 individuals recruited by force. A secondary reference group included 145 individuals with no affiliation to violent extremist groups. Respondents were located at the time of interview in Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan, with smaller numbers in Cameroon and Niger. Interviews were conducted with former members of Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and recruits to ISIL (pp. 23). The research set concludes that; “(...)71 percent pointed to ‘government action’, including ‘killing of a family member or friend’ or ‘arrest of a family member or friend’, as the incident that prompted them to join. And it shows that; “(...) State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse (pp. 5).

Amongst the factors for violent extremism were a lack of parental involvement, lower civic engagement and happiness in childhood, and a relative lack of exposure to people of other religions and ethnicities (pp 4-5). Similarly, the PREVEX findings, the UNDP results; “(...) clearly differentiate between perceptions about religion and its significance as a reason for joining violent extremist groups, and actual religious literacy. Fifty-one percent of respondents selected religion as a reason for joining. However, as many as 57 percent of the respondents also admitted to limited or no understanding of religious texts. Indeed, higher than average years of religious schooling appears to have been a source of resilience” (pp.5). As such, all the above points substantiate the PREVEX findings that the EU hard security responses in all likelihood have failed and will fail in relation to PVE in Europe and beyond.

Furthermore, supporting PREVEX’ understanding of enabling environments, the research underscores; “(...) the relevance of economic factors as drivers of recruitment. (...) Employment is the single most frequently cited ‘immediate need’ faced at the time of joining” (pp. 5). This is an important finding that shows a clear distinction between the turn to violence in



welfare and non-welfare systems and emphasises the importance of relative poverty and opportunities within systems and situations. Furthermore, the research identifies that a “(...) sense of grievance towards, and limited confidence in, government is widespread in the regions of Africa associated with the highest incidence of violent extremism” (p. 5), with 78 per cent of respondents rating low levels of trust in the police, politicians and military as a core push factor. The grievances against government and state security actors are underlined by the fact that; “(...) respondents who were aware of initiatives to prevent people from joining slowed down the pace of recruitment. Forty-eight percent of those who joined violent extremist groups were aware of PVE initiatives, however, identified distrust of those delivering these programmes as one of the primary reasons for not taking part” (pp. 6). Again, supporting the PREVEX findings that the conventional approaches to prevention, and design of preventive measures, are not working to counter the coaxing and recruitment of the at-risk individuals. The research concludes that; “(...) improved public policy and delivery of good governance by African governments confronted with violent extremism will ultimately represent a far more effective source of counter-terrorism and PVE than continued overconcentration on security-focused interventions” (pp. 7). Again, this is substantiated by the findings of the PREVEX research as well as the pitfalls of legitimacy that arises when; “(...) framing development interventions as PVE in highly charged political contexts” (pp. 8).

The report concludes with a line of reconditions, 21 in all, within five key programming entry points: family circumstances, childhood happiness and education, religious ideologies, economic factors, state and citizenship and the ‘tipping point’ (pp. 9). The most important for the PREVEX research are.

- “Upgrading school curricula and teaching quality, enabling the development of critical thinking, social cohesion, peace education and civic engagement values from childhood.
- Supporting and amplifying the voices of traditional religious leaders who challenge misinterpretations of Islam and preach religious tolerance and inter-faith cohesiveness.
- Investing in the economic regeneration of at-risk areas, upgrading infrastructure, access to markets and financial services, removing obstacles to entrepreneurship, and prioritizing job-creation opportunities; Improving service delivery across the spectrum of security and other basic services provided by the state, integrating citizens’ oversight and engagement as part of delivery.
- Implementing counter-messaging programmes that are highly contextualized in vernacular cultures, emphasizing peer-group factors and influences, and delivered through DVDs, SMS,



radio and community centres, avoiding over-reliance on the Internet, and drawing on trusted local organizations as ‘messengers’; and interestingly;

- Amplifying the effectiveness of anti-corruption campaigns with renewed emphasis on building state-citizen confidence and accountability, ending impunity for officials” (pp. 9).

However, similarly to the PREVEX research, the report identifies limited consensus on how different types of development programmes deliver PVE results and argues for the necessity for policy responses to be more effectively coordinated across the expanding plethora of actors engaged, concluding; “(...) at present, the PVE space is crowded with players often working with a contrasting understanding of priorities” (pp. 8). In unison the various bodies of work show how a grounded empirical approach to occurrence and non-occurrence of RVE can inform the design of contextually relevant, adequate and feasible preventive measures and actions, which may, in turn, promote individual, community and social resilience. Taken together, they form a comprehensive and solid set of findings offering a list of actionable and operational recommendations that could effectuate positive changes across context.

## Conclusion

RVE and PVE have been on the international agenda for decades. The key questions have been how to understand the connections and influences of political, social and economic conditions (participation, voice, inclusion and opportunities), world-views and ideologies (religious and/or political) and social relations and ties (family, social networks and organisations) on the values, attitudes and practices (prejudices, biases and othering etc.) of individuals, primarily youths, forming identities and communities. This with a particular focus on the processes and dynamics in the individualised turn to violence – actualising beliefs into concrete actions harming the enemy other and targeting communities and individuals. PREVEX’ research has identified general factors that condition enabling environments and reason for widespread discontent and distrust towards state representatives and institutions. It has clarified the key factors of enabling environments and argued for a better understanding of their intersection. The policy papers produced have dwelled, on the one hand, on the religious and ideological dimensions of RVP. They have shown that PVE, in many, cases requires the production and dissemination of counter-narratives – as ideational alternatives to radical doctrines; the targeted support of moderate religious and ideological voices; and a strengthening of traditional religious and political figures and structures. Religion is, in this manner, both a potential inhibiting factor of RVE and maybe a motivational one. On the other side, preventive measures and initiatives should not securitise entire communities and groups of peoples, which through specialised knowledge,



organisations and targeted programmes categorise peoples and groups of peoples as threats to society and to state that needs to be corrected and/or curtailed. Religious interpretations and ideologies emphasising inclusivity, recognition and respect for diversity seem to be key for PVE.

Another result that stands out clearly in PREVEX' work is that poverty and inequality, marginalisation from social and political orders, lack of voice and representation, and absence of state services create conducive enabling environments, as they result in discontent and feelings of abandonment, making radical voices stand out as alternative orders and providers of possibilities. The two areas overlap in the process of RVE, as the material lack, and the resulting poverty and hardship make people susceptible to excessive ideological alternatives.

In conclusion, we wish to end this policy note on the same note that we started it and dwell on issues of corruption and its relation to RVE. PREVEX studies identify corruption and lack of basic services as important factors in creating localised discontent and widespread distrust in state representatives and institutions. In many ways, corruption comes to connect the factors creating enabling environments (Rose-Ackermann 1997; Viano 2020), including poverty and inequality, marginalisation, lack of voice and representation, and predatory state institutions. Furthermore, corruption is especially detrimental to individuals and communities on the margins of social and political orders. Corruption stands out as a key example of the factors creating and maintaining enabling environments. Addressing such practices thus potentially tackles both actors and systems. It targets the practices of politicians, administrators and citizens and changes the workings of states and institutions. Yet, despite knowing its detrimental effects on individuals and societies, addressing society-wide corruption has until now not been a specific recommendation within PVE programmes. Due to an unwillingness to upset political partners and undermine collaborations on sensitive issues, PVE programmes have been less likely to put pressure on cooperating states and governments demanding that they curtail corruption than they are in assisting hard security measures targeting the already marginal.



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