

Preventing violent extremism in the Middle East

D7.4 Key stakeholder dialogue



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On 4 February 2021 from 13:00 to 14:30, the Center for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po (Paris), hosted a key stakeholder webinar under the title ‘Key stakeholder dialogue on the EU’s CT/PVE approach in MENA’.

The backdrop of the event was provided by the publication of the ‘D7.1 Policy brief summarising the EU and other stakeholder’s prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the region, Middle East’. The overall message that emanated from the webinar was the importance of a holistic approach to counter terrorism (CT) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) in the MENA. The discussion focused on to what extent CT and PVE efforts in the MENA alone can say anything about the EU’s foreign policies and whether the EU has, in fact, moved towards a ‘security first’ approach.

Morten Bøås, Principal Investigator of PREVEX and research professor at NUPI, welcomed the audience, set the scene, and introduced the panelists. **Georges Fahmi** (European University Institute, Florence) and **Kamaran Palani** (Middle East Research Institute, Erbil) presented findings from the PREVEX policy brief. **Gilles de Kerchove**, EU counter-terrorism coordinator, provided his perspectives from his field, which were added to by the EU’s general consul **Vincent-Guillaume Poupeau** in Erbil. The ensuing debate was moderated by Morten Bøås.

Fahmi kicked off the presentations by looking for the causes of EU policies in the MENA and understanding them. He did so by first assessing and presenting the main findings of the policy brief and the methodology employed. He argued that the various PVE approaches of the EU are determined by what is deemed feasible and most urgent in the eyes of EU policymakers and local stakeholders – and demonstrated the division of PVE funding given to its projects on the ground. He concluded that the EU has moved towards a ‘security first’ approach in the MENA during the last decade with less focus on human rights and democracy promotion. This is not merely based on the allocation of funding for PVE projects, but also because other non-securitized projects appropriate a logic of securitization.

Turning to cross-cutting issues and challenges, **Palani** recalled the fact that the PVE approaches of the EU’s key partners in the MENA largely rely on repression and religious reform. Commencing with the example of Lebanon and its national PVE strategies, Palani proceeded to Egypt, which has little interest in social, economic, or political conditions for radicalization and instead prioritizes a securitization-oriented policy combined with religious reform and co-



option. Indeed, **Fahmi** later argued that this was typical insofar as this applied to the PVE approach of Iraq, as well. **Palani** ended the presentation by recommending that the EU should strengthen its normative projects with a focus on good governance and democracy, and reassessing the level, and nature, of its funding to authoritarian or sectarian regimes and authorities in the MENA.

Mr. De Kerchove continued by commenting on the policy brief and stressing the need for differentiation between the MENA countries depending on current challenges and needs. He disputed the policy brief's definition of PVE and whether it could be defined instead as CT policies. There is, thus, an issue of how one can categorize the various EU funding projects in the MENA, addressing terrorism and violent extremism – is it a preventing violent extremism measure or a countering terrorism effort? It is important that one addresses ideology, structure, and motivations in order to solve the problem. **De Kerchove** acknowledged the dilemma, which the EU is facing when possibly enabling authoritarian regimes. The question is: Should we not engage with those we do not like?

Mr. Poupeau provided his insights and noted that the EU was pursuing a broad PVE approach. Agricultural projects, for example, can be perceived as a PVE project given that it provides incomes, jobs, and growth. We want people to be happy and stay in Iraq, but they need options. Indeed, the EU is very much a soft power. One should also remember to take into account that there are direct and indirect ways to address terrorism and violent extremism, and socio-economic causes should not be underestimated as they play an important part.



Questions during the webinar

Gilles de Kerchove:

- Have you considered that your categories for PVE-projects lack nuance? For example, a project working on strengthening border control can involve a conditionality of demanding parliamentary oversight and thereby strengthen human rights. PVE is not training the police and so forth, that is CT (PVE is soft). Problem with categorisation. Measures categorised under the security heading can be designed to have economic and social impact.
- The problem of engaging with autocratic governments. Should the EU engage? We are not naive and know that autocratic governments want to instrumentalise C/PVE policies to secure their power, but does that mean that we should engage with them at all?
- What exactly do you mean by PVE and can you distinguish it more clearly from CT and CVE? PVE is a very broad category that perhaps today encompass too much.
- Have you considered the bigger picture where the EU-funds and projects aimed at PVE are relatively small compared to the EU's full engagement in the Middle East and other regions? For example, in the Sahel, the EU-engagement is massive and a lot of it can be helpful to PVE while not being directly aimed at PVE.

Vincent-Guillaume Poupeau:

- How can we avoid marginalising some youths when attempting to engage with them?
- What do you mean by social drivers of violent extremism? And do you not think that so much more than PVE-projects have an impact on the social drivers of violent extremism?



Annex 1: List of participants

Participants	Affiliation
Vincent-Guillaume Poupeau	EU Liaison Office (Erbil)
Gilles de Kerchove	EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
Elie Cavigneaux	Policy coordination manager (Council of the European Union)
Kamaran Palani	Middle East Research Institute (MERI)
Georges Fahmi	European University Institute (EUI)
Morten Bøås	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI)
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