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From Europe to Maghreb and back: A new cooperation method in P/CVE[1]

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The aftermath of 9/11 prompted the European Union (EU) to rethink its counter-terrorism strategy, setting among its priorities preventing radicalisation and strengthening the cooperation with its near periphery in North of Africa, particularly the Maghreb countries. This approach reflected the European concerns regarding al-Qaeda's (AQ) increasing societal and political influence, North African connections of terrorists who have carried out attacks within Europe, and more recently the establishment as well as development of the Islamic State (IS), the foreign fighters flow and the returnees phenomenon. The signature of the Valencia Action Plan in April 2002 aimed at covering such European concerns, and definitely achieved certain goals: It managed to reinforce local security capabilities in Maghreb, it increased the exchange of information among EU and Maghrebi intelligence services, and successful carried out joint actions to fight terrorism. Among others, a recent case of international cooperation is the counter-terrorism operation carried out last 19th of March 2020, when a terrorist cell, whose head was from Tunisian, was dismantled.
While in terms of operational support the cooperation is fluent, actions towards prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism need to be improved.

Common P/CVE trends in EU and Maghreb

EU and Maghreb share common issues and trends regarding jihadist extremism. Firstly, in both regions radicalised individuals are moved by the same **jihadist ideology** and terrorist groups, mainly AQ and IS. In addition, they both have been suffered the flow of **foreign fighters** who have gone to fight with IS in Syria and Iraq. By the end of 2017, 5,778 fighters had travelled from Western Europe while 5,356 from the Maghreb (Barrett, 2017: 11). Now that the caliphate has been military defeated, they are both dealing with **returnees** (women and children included), debating on whether to repatriate them, to allow them to return and eventually prosecute them or leave them in **refugee camps**. The latter, together with prisons, is proving to be a real breeding ground

for radicalisation. A clear example is the case of Al-Hawl refugee camp, where the most radical women have overtaken a part of the site and rule the space with the hardest rule of Sharia law existing (Vale, 2019: 6-7). As for **prisons**, although considered a marginal phenomenon in terms of numbers, the presence of detained terrorists, penitentiary bad conditions and the increasing **crime-terror nexus** still present a threat to society. Even more now that IS included a discourse of solidarity for the "brothers in jail" and invoked to carry out attacks against prison officers. By now, advances have been made to develop risk-assessment tools to detect at-risk individuals or radicalised inmates. However, little attention has given to prisoners' treatment and **disengagement programmes**. In most cases, such actions are still at a preliminary stage or lack evaluation and, sometimes, do not even exist as it is the case in Egypt or Libya (Renard, 2020).

Towards a new cooperation method

Despite the similar threats and terrorist interlinkages between EU and North Africa, radicalisation drivers, vulnerable areas and communities, as well as the cultural-historical backgrounds, highly differ from one region to another, and therefore need different interventions and approaches. In order to deploy cooperation in prevention and deradicalisation, **the approach should change** shifting from an exchange of good practices to a real intention to understand one another and learn how each State deal with such threats. This comparative, less invasive analysis would allow States to create longer-term mechanism of resilience, target more specific issues and finally better understand the nuances of jihadism in their own local contexts.
An outstanding sample of this proposed approach is the five-year effort on "Countering violent extremism in regions of Maghreb and Sahel" launched by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) in collaboration with the European Union, thanks to which 31 pilot projects have been carried out.

In the preliminary findings of the project, the difference in approach between local and international organisations is already notable and it makes it easy to extract key ideas for future successful interventions. The very first lesson learnt regards the need of having an in-depth knowledge of existing conflict dynamics and cultural preferences in order to avoid any clash with the logic of communities' values and practices. More specifically, actors should not only know the communities and context where to implement a project but should have their trust. This thorough understanding is key also to define which vulnerabilities constitute a risk for radicalisation or for joining violent extremist groups, and how to address them. In fact, stipulating preferred type of issues that need to be tackled risks to undermine the success of the intervention. Even more interesting is the **centrality of religion** in North African projects. In Maghreb it should be adopted an approach that recognizes the importance of religion and demonstrates deep respect for the culture embedded within an Islamic worldview by incorporating Islamic values and teachings into their counter-radicalisation efforts. It would be worth it to evaluate how much this approach could work in Europe and which might be the actors to involve. On the other hand, it was showed how certain tasks are better undertaken by Western countries. Specifically, Europe has a broader knowledge of project management and, therefore, the participation of international organisations in these P/CVE interventions could ensure the implementation and coordination of administrative tasks. Also, UNICRI's results show how certain topics are not assessed by local communities, while they could be discussed through diplomacy and international dialogues (i.e. institutional and security forces accountability and equal access to justice).

Policy Recommendations

In line with the reflections made above, a few actions are recommended:

- The cooperation approach has been too related to security, while it is now time to shift to prevention and deradicalisation – always preferring a "bottom-up approach".
- The security strategy should be re-designed in a post-Caliphate era. There is a high risk that the next generation of jihadists will use the image of the past Caliphate in its discourse, recruiting people with a political and ideological message such as "make the Caliphate (great) again". Both North Africa and Europe should reinforce their counter-narratives capabilities and collaboration with media, in order to avoid polarised discourses and ensuring a standardised quality of news regarding terrorism.
- Society should be more involved in prevention and, especially, disengagement. Particularly, it has been demonstrated how effective the presence of families, victims and former extremists can be for radicalised individuals. They are perceived as credible voices and may help creating a 'safe space' for the radicalised individual to speak out, as well as finding a sense of peace or community outside the terrorist group. In the case of Europe, it might also be interesting to work on "religious leaders", learning from the Maghreb.

Consulted & Recommended Sources

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[1] This Policy Brief presents information gathered during the Policy Event "Sharing the insights on the Maghreb and EU approaches in radicalisation and violent extremism", organised by MINDb4ACT consortium on November 28, 2019 in Brussels.

[2] The author is solely responsible for its content, it does not represent the opinion of the European Commission, who is not responsible for any use that might be made of data appearing therein.