Countering extremism in Arab countries

Terrorist attacks in Sousse, Tunis, Beirut and the Sinai clearly show that hardly any country in the Arab world is immune to the threat posed by jihadi terrorism. Despite their different political agendas, countries in the region have been taking unprecedented steps to identify local factors in radicalisation and recruitment to violent extremism, and to prevent and counter these processes.

Root causes of radicalisation in the Arab world

The incidence of terrorist attacks in Arab countries is among the highest in the world. The Al-Qaeda network is still active and the region provides the 30 000-strong ISIL/Da'esh army of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) with almost half its men: Tunisia (6 000), Saudi Arabia (2 500), Jordan (2 000), Morocco (1 200) and Egypt (600). The root causes of radicalisation in the region vary. Although a large majority of Muslims take a negative view of jihadi groups, grievances over (perceived or real) inequalities, economic underdevelopment, the lack of viable prospects or external meddling still fuel jihadi propaganda. The results of the social and political reforms sparked by the wave of protests in 2011 have also been largely unsatisfactory. In Egypt, the toppling of the Mubarak regime and ensuing power struggle eventually brought to power President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whose policies are often compared to those of the old regime. The same is true of other countries in the region, few of which are fully free. At the same time, Libya, Syria and Yemen are still experiencing the aftershocks of the protests that evolved into internationalised conflicts, and eventually generated the regional security vacuum that is being exploited by jihadi groups.

The Arab response to extremism

Approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE) and radicalisation are organised around two main arguments. The first, while highlighting that no agreed definition of violent extremism exists, acknowledges the threat to peace posed by violent extremism and terrorism. This implies that any proposed solutions to the phenomenon need to consider the local and global contexts. The second rejects a military response as the sole way to tackle the threat and stresses the importance of addressing the root causes of radicalisation, including the historical injustices of colonialism and denial of self-determination, with particular regard to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. In terms of concrete policy responses, many governments in the region have adopted strategies relying on a combination of rigid security measures, efforts to influence religious leaders and their narratives, improved institutional coordination, and military action.

Gulf countries

In the Gulf, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are purportedly spearheading efforts to disrupt the **flow of funding** and undermine the **jihadi narrative**. The UAE has adopted measures to disrupt terrorist recruitment channels, combat the spread of hate speech and promotion of violence online, and prevent the use of religious centres for radicalisation and recruitment. In 2014, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies framed a three-year action plan to counter religious extremism. The Abu Dhabi-based Sawab Centre – created prior to the 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism – acts to counter extremist propaganda and terrorist messaging online. In an effort to stem the flow of foreign fighters, the UAE and the Gulf Cooperation Council are working together to set up a regional police force (GCCPOL) and a joint naval force. Under the umbrella of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF), the Hedayah Global Centre for Excellence in Countering Violent Extremism works to strengthen capacity for countering violent extremism globally and to connect practitioners. In 2015, the Centre published Guidelines and good practices for developing national CVE strategies. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has taken the lead on strengthening the **region's collective capacity** to counter terrorism, including through a military response. In 2015, it formed an anti-terrorism coalition composed of 34 mainly Muslim states with the stated aim of coordinating the fight against terrorist groups through the establishment of a joint operations centre in

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Riyadh, to halt the flow of funds to violent radicals and confront the ideology of extremism. In March 2016, Saudi Arabia hosted a three-week-long counterterrorism military exercise involving 20 countries. The objective of countering radicalisation and terrorism – as defined by the Saudis – has however often been criticised as a mere pretext for building a regional anti-Shia coalition. Indeed, the exclusion from the coalition of Iran, Iraq and Syria has been interpreted as an attempt to build up a Sunni deterrent against Iran, and another sign of the proxy wars between the two countries. The credibility of Saudi Arabia's actions is also undermined by its efforts to promote a particularly rigid brand of Sunni Islam known as Wahhabism that, like jihadi movements, calls for a return to a more authentic, pure Islamic society.

The southern Mediterranean

Many of the measures adopted in the Maghreb countries and Egypt have focused on expanding **governments' powers**, with potential impact on civil liberties. The long list of counterterrorism laws signed by Egypt's President al-Sisi –and endorsed by the newly-elected parliament in January 2016 – have legalised emergency police powers, expanded military court jurisdiction over civilians and effectively banned protests. Law 95 on Confronting Terrorism, in force since 15 August 2015, contains an extensive catalogue of vaguely defined terrorist crimes, including the promotion of ideas and beliefs inciting the use of violence or 'harming the interests of the state'. It made the death penalty the mandatory punishment for anyone found guilty of committing a terrorist crime or attempting to do so, but also restricts freedom of the press by punishing the publication of news contradicting official statements on terrorist acts. Changes to Morocco's 1962 Penal Code and 1959 Criminal Procedure Code, introduced in September 2015, criminalised membership of foreign terrorist groups and authorised the prosecution of individuals for acts of terrorism committed abroad.

Domestically, governments have also tried to improve **relations with religious communities**. Algeria has extended its oversight of aspects of religious education, such as the training of imams and the content of prayers. In 2014, the Religious Affairs Minister introduced a proposal to set up an academy of fatwa to counter religious-judicial rulings of foreign extremist origin. In Egypt, President al-Sisi has translated his calls for religious modernisation into policy, which by expanding government powers (e.g. to appoint or monitor imams and influence their training) is redefining the role of religion in the state. Some countries have directed their efforts towards improving **institutional coordination** with a view to minimising turf wars between government agencies. In Tunisia, the Repression of Attacks against Armed Forces Act adopted in June 2015 proposed the creation of a national commission to fight terrorism, also tasked with inter-ministerial coordination. **Regional cooperation** has also improved, with an emphasis on improving border security. Algeria's approach to counterterrorism, for instance, has gradually strengthened the focus on limiting criminal network operations throughout the Sahel region, strengthening border controls and working more effectively with other affected countries. Finally, many countries in the region have concentrated on **addressing the root causes** of radicalisation. Algeria has adopted a development plan and a comprehensive national reconciliation policy. It provides social services and outreach mechanisms to integrate at-risk youth and prevent marginalisation. Morocco, meanwhile, has adopted a comprehensive strategy that prioritises economic and human development alongside control of the religious sphere, with government initiatives in education and youth employment.

Cooperation with the EU

Even though addressing the threat posed by FTFs has become a priority for all Arab countries, the UN report on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) suggests a rather poor record in this field across the region. In a letter to the EU Ministers for Foreign Affairs dated 4 December 2015, High Representative Federica Mogherini lists improved cooperation with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region among the geographical priorities, including through intensified dialogue with the League of Arab States and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. The EU has also invested in bilateral cooperation with a number of priority countries: Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan. In terms of thematic priorities, EU cooperation in the region is geared towards addressing the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters, improving border security, combatting the financing of terrorism and countering violent extremism. The EU is working with the MENA countries to develop effective narratives to counter radicalising ideologies, not least through initiatives such as the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF) and the Hedayah Centre. In its 2015 resolution on relations between the EU and the League of Arab States and cooperation in countering terrorism, the European Parliament reaffirmed that the effectiveness of de-radicalisation and counterterrorism policies depends on the close cooperation of the countries of origin.