

EVENT REPORT

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

MULTINATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT POLICY
DIALOGUE

DR. SUSANNE CONRAD
May 2018

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Shadows of a radicalized youth: The struggle with Jihadism in the Mediterranean and the EU



On 29th May 2018 the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue (Brussels) and the Regional Program South Mediterranean (Tunis) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) jointly hosted with the Egmont Institute a public conference “Shadows of a radicalized youth: The struggle with Jihadism in the Mediterranean and the EU”. Led by a panel of experts, the conference analyzed the regional situation of Jihadist movements in Tunisia, Jordan and Turkey. It focused on drivers of extremism and its longstanding tradition in the affected countries and asked how to most effectively counter a growing Jihadist threat related to youth radicalization. Moreover, the event discussed how to build-up a long-lasting partnership between authorities, youth movements and communities to address underlying factors that can make communities vulnerable to violent extremism.



The conference was opened by **Ms Sabina Woelkner**, Director of the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of KAS, followed by introductory remarks from **Dr Thomas Renard**, Senior Research Fellow of the Egmont Institute. The conference’s key note speaker was **Mr Gilles de Kerchove**, the European Union’s (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. The panel of experts comprised Assistant Professor at the University of Sfax from Tunisia, **Dr Emna Ben Arab**, the Director of the Middle East Media and Policy Studies Institute (MEMPSI) in Amman from Jordan, **Dr Amer Al Sabaileh** and **Dr Can Kasapoglu**, Fellow of the Istanbul Policy Center Stiftung Mercator Initiative (IPC) of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin and Analyst of the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) in Istanbul. The session was moderated by **Dr Canan Atilgan**, Director of the Regional Program South Mediterranean of KAS.

The opening session addressed the political debate on how to strengthen cooperation across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean in counter-terrorism and countering or preventing violent extremism in order to tackle the issue of Returning Foreign Fighters (RFF) and youth radicalization. In this regard, **Sabina Woelkner** underlined the need to improve capacities for intelligence sharing, countering terrorism measures and doing better prevention of radicalization particularly among the youth. Against the backdrop of growing concerns about RFF and radicalized young people in Europe and its Southern Neighborhood, the intention of the discussion of the conference was to give an updated picture of this multifaceted challenge in the EU and in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the aim of the event was to iden-

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tify new avenues for counter-terrorism cooperation bringing together authorities, youth movements and community actors at all level in the countries concerned.

In his keynote, **Gilles de Kerchove** de-



scribed the phenomenon of the RFF as a big threat in the EU which needs an effective response in terms of prevention of radicalization based on long-term commitment. He presented three levels of action: 1) the mapping of the foreign fighters that are coming back to the EU in terms of numbers and location, 2) the juridical possibility to convict them and 3) the development of specific programs on deradicalization with special focus on women and children. Furthermore, he emphasized the demographic growth of Salafi Jihadism/Wahhabism in Europe and worldwide which emerged from the war in Afghanistan as an armed rebellion in the Muslim world. Since then the Iraq war and the Syrian civil war helped to increase fighters in the Muslim world. The rise of Salafism, he claimed, is almost everywhere to observe nowadays: In the EU, but also in Africa especially in the Sahel zone. In its concluding remarks, Gilles de Kerchove summed up a set of operational and practical measures with regards to justice, soft power, internet, ideology and empowerment of women and youth which the EU has to take to prevent Islamic terrorism and better defend EU citizens. These measures, according to him, aim to address vulnerabilities exposed by recent attacks and further strengthen the EU's external action on counter-terrorism in the upcoming years.

The opening session was followed by a short Q&A discussion focusing on different groups of returnees within the EU and the Mediterranean and a debate discussing approaches to differentiate between them. The topic of re-grouping of former Jihadist groups after the collapse of ISIS' Caliphate was raised as well as the issue of the EU cooperation with

Egyptian authorities in fighting terrorism while disrespecting constitutional principles.



In her introductory remarks of the following expert panel entitled "The struggle with Jihadism between countering and preventing", **Dr Atilgan** emphasized the turn of the discussion from the EU efforts in combating Islamic radicalization and extremism to the measures taken by the countries of the South Mediterranean. She gave the floor to **Dr Ben Arab** who presented the case of Tunisia and its handling with RFF and youth radicalization. Dr Ben Arab stated that Tunisia exported the highest number of ISIS fighters to Iraq and Syria worldwide due to massive Islamic radicalization campaigns in the country. In response to this challenge, she started a frontline research interviewing imprisoned RFF to explore the way of radicalization and to explain the wave of radicalization especially among the youth. She developed a profile of individual radicalization in order to understand the high engagement of the Tunisians for the Islamic state. She decided between either a social frustrated and marginalized youth with crime background looking for a better future and socio-economic living conditions or an adventurer looking for a thrill.

In his presentation of drivers for extremism in Jordan, **Dr Al Sabaileh** stressed the long tradition of Jihadist movements and their roles as ISIS incubators in Jordan for many years. According to him, the violent youth radicalization and recruitment of fighters remarkably stepped forward because the Jordan state seriously failed in its most basic political responsibilities. He claimed the absence of a long-term political vision, a substantial lack of investment in culture and diversity



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and the non-existence of any critical determination to fight against the Islamic radicalism of the population. This has provided a space for merging of salafi Jihadists of different orientation and varying levels of doctrinal adherence that led to the new threat of transnational salafis and Jihad confronting the state of Jordan and others.



Finally, the case of Jordan was followed by a presentation of **Dr Kasapoglu** about Turkey's reaction to radical Islamic terrorism. In his initial statement, he explained that Turkey was the first country which designated ISIS as a terrorist organization. Furthermore, Turkey was the only NATO country which adopted a comprehensive strategy for combating radical Islamic terrorism based on different components. The Turkish strategy includes measures in order to prevent travel of foreign terrorist fighters, to diminish the financing and recruiting capabilities of ISIS as well as security measures on the border to Syria. In addition, Turkey joined the international coalition against ISIS as co-chair of the coalition's foreign terrorist fighters working group. While Dr Kasapoglu attested Turkey a leading role in eliminating the multi-dimensional threats posed by ISIS, he criticized the EU for its lack of leadership in fighting against radical Islamic terrorism. In conclusion, he pointed out that ISIS's recruitment of foreign fighters is a global phenomenon which can be observed in the Maghreb region as well as in Central Asia, the Caucasus or even in the Balkan region.