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COUNTERING AND PREVENTING RADICALIZATION IN THE MENA REGION AND THE EU

Summary of findings and conclusions of the workshop “Countering and Preventing Radicalization: Reviewing Approaches in the MENA Region and the EU,” 22 November 2016, in Brussels

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Threats from violent extremism undermine security and development around the globe. Though impacts and dynamics are multifaceted and global in nature, the drivers vary across individuals, communities, and regions. Different countries grapple with distinct problems, and radicalization of individuals and groups takes various forms. To gain deeper insight into the dynamics of radicalization processes and preventive approaches, the KAS Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean in cooperation with the KAS Multinational Development Policy Dialogue conducted an international workshop on countering and preventing radicalization in the MENA region and the EU on 22 November 2016 in Brussels.

The workshop was designed as a platform to build and strengthen networks that enable a continuous exchange among the key actors involved in the study and practice of countering radicalization. It aimed at sharing experiences and best practices in the context of counter-radicalization strategies in Europe and in the MENA region. In addition, the workshop examined innovative approaches to halt and reverse the spread of violent extremism and analyzed vulnerable groups and root causes of radicalization. The event was embedded into the KAS dialogue program for representatives of Think Tanks and NGOs from the MENA region, who shared existing initiatives in their respective countries with initiatives in Brussels and Paris and discussed approaches developed in Europe to counter violent extremism. Therefore, the strength of the workshop laid in the diverse

backgrounds of the panelists and their extensive knowledge on de-radicalization – in each case from another perspective.

The workshop brought together more than 40 international experts from various sectors (academics, representatives of EU institutions, local governments and UNDP, as well as NGO workers) from countries of the South Mediterranean and Western Europe to discuss root causes of radicalization and practical experiences on de-radicalization from different perspectives. The event was opened by introductory words by Dr. Canan Atilgan, Director of the KAS Regional Program South Mediterranean, who laid emphasize on the importance of strengthening networks in order to promote the dialogue on counter-terrorism in the EU and in the MENA region.

The Range of Strategies and Methodologies

The first panel highlighted the significance of an open and frank discourse and a mutual understanding between EU and MENA countries as violent extremism is a threat in both regions. In this context, Lebanon was presented as success story of countering radicalization. The panel identified six core issues that make Lebanon unique, such as the strong national identity, the representation of minorities in sectarian based institutions, the well working dialogue between Sunni and Shia and the communal retribution for radicalized people who joined ISIS. This again showed the complexity of countering terrorism in regard to the high societal and political impact on radicalization processes.

In the case of Tunisia, the contribution emphasized the high number of foreign fighters in the country and the need of a comprehensive strategy that fills the knowledge gap concerning the causes and motivation of radicalization instead of only providing security focused approaches. Although the design and implementation of measures countering radicalization take place mainly on the ground, the discussion underlined the importance of countering radicalization at the national level as well.

The panelists emphasized that the new challenges regarding the recent manifestations of violent extremism, its scale, as well as the use of new communication tools (e.g. twitter) call for an approach addressing both the immediate security implications of radicalization as well as the root causes, bringing together all relevant actors across society. In addition, the first panel looked into the importance of youth empowerment. Many of the radicalized youth were previously unemployed and had a criminal record; however, while there seems to be a correlation between unemployment and radicalization there is not necessarily a causal relationship, as most foreign fighters who left to Syria had a job before joining ISIS.

Yet, the present frustration of the youth seems to be one of the main triggers of radicalization. Frustration can be linked to a variety of factors, such as unemployment, a personal family drama or an identity crisis, sometimes linked to a migration background. People who are frustrated often search for a sense of belonging and a perspective. If the society and public sphere are exclusive and politics does not provide alternatives, terror groups can easily establish a parallel society and a violent narrative, for example through social media. Therefore, a prevention focus at the local level is highly important in order to build trust between the youth and the police/ government, to understand identity crises as potential radicalization trigger and to find out who is targeted by terror groups, to address emotional feelings rather than rational reasons and to finally see youth as an opportunity and driver of change instead as a problem in the context of de-radicalization.



The Social Environment: from Family to www

The next panel followed the first one and highlighted the appetite for change in the civil society and the lack of change on the political level. This discussion was linked to the question of radicalization strategies that aim to establish a parallel state and the responsibility of governments to present a counter-narrative. The gap between the volume and quality of counter- and alternative narrative campaigns and the propaganda of terror groups like ISIS is large.

The primary obstacle to producing better quality counter-narratives is the lack of sustained government and civil society partnerships and the remaining need for inclusive and open public sphere. Within this framework, the panel discussion featured two topics: a better integration of women, tribes and religious leaders into de-radicalization efforts and a stronger collaboration between local authorities and practitioners working at the grass roots level. The integration of women and tribes can promote localized, inclusive and homegrown solutions and foster social cohesion, whereas the integration of religious leaders was discussed controversially, partly because ideology is a part of the socio-economic context and thus the role of religious leaders is limited. The number of triggers and drivers that can lead to radicalization on the individual level is large – the same is true for the push and pull factors which have an impact on de-radicalization and disengagement.



Therefore, prevention service should be the primary mission of local authorities. Local authorities need to inform and reach out to vulnerable areas and prisons as hotbeds of radicalization, train professionals such as teachers or social workers and carry out risk assessments. In this context, it is important to work closely with vulnerable groups and practitioners to limit the fear that arises out of the lack of information about the work of authorities. In sum, social innovation in order to reinvent hope for youth with concrete actions, closer partnerships between governments and civil society, long-term social workers in vulnerable areas, an inclusive public space that promotes counter-narratives and enables projects against social and political stigmatization of Muslims and youths are good starting points in order to counter and prevent radicalization.

Building Networks: Cross-Regional and Cross-Sectional Exchange

The third and therefore last panel then turned towards the importance of networks between the EU and countries in the MENA region and the necessity of cross-regional exchange. In order to increase the efficiency of countering and preventing radicalization, countries need to share best practices, lessons learnt as well as knowledge on the rehabilitation and reintegration of terrorists. The fight against terrorism needs to be an international effort with a multinational perspective. In this respect, the goal has to be a discourse, not unilateralism. Therefore, the dialogue has to promote the exchange between “the South and the North” and “the South and the South”



instead of strengthening the present unilateral exchange between “the North and the South” and “the North and the North”. As radicalization can also be an outcome of racism and discrimination, it is important to highlight universal values like dignity and freedom and promote the concept of diversity and tolerance within the cross-regional dialogue, emphasized some workshop speakers. Furthermore, the participants discussed post-colonialism as a root causes for radicalization and the possibilities and challenges to focus on a common counter-narrative and the role of perception. Another presentation discussed the challenges to build cross-regional networks and examined recommendations. In particular, the presentation stressed the importance to identify the “right partners” and to empower only the “right actors”, e.g. through long-term funding. In addition, policies and diverse dialogues without double standards, also about religion and in exchange with selected countries in the MENA region, need to be promoted. The last point of the contribution pleaded to act fast but without a focus on quick solutions and impacts.

Conclusion

The workshop showed that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The terms “radicalization” and “violent extremism”, “de-radicalization” or “counter-violent extremism” are used widely but the search for who can be considered as radical, violent extremist or terrorist and how to “de-radicalize” effectively has so far been a rather frustrating experience. Yet, the workshop examined some prevention approaches that might stop people from getting involved in violent extremism. The consensus view was that terrorism does not stop at national borders and neither should efforts to counter and prevent radicalization. Violent extremism is a cross-regional and multidimensional phenomenon. There is no single cause or pathway into radicalization and violent extremism. In order to gain a better understanding of the dynamic processes, effective approaches must contain the micro-level as well as the meso-level – the social environment – and the macro-level – the de-radicalization of public opinion and counter-narratives. Therefore, approaches for de-radicalization must include all relevant actors of the society.



In addition, there seems to be no doubt that youth is playing a relevant role in the context of (de-)radicalization both as main targeted group and as powerful and positive force against violent extremism. All participants highly emphasized the need for awareness raising and for facilitating the cross-regional and cross-sectional exchange between different initiatives, NGOs and governments in the EU and in the MENA region. Dialogue programs and workshops can offer a platform for actors already involved in de-radicalization projects and bring together practitioners, academics and policy makers to further develop clear and comprehensive strategies on how prevent and counter radicalization at all levels. The EU and selected countries in the MENA region could then benefit from each other’s experiences and create further meaningful partnerships for the future.



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