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Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA

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Strengthening societal resilience is considered vital for the prevention of violent extremism. This, however, requires a nuanced approach and comprehensive review of past policies. PREVEX is a European Union funded project, implemented by a consortium of 15 international research centres in Europe, MENA region and the Balkans. MERI is our partner in Iraq.

The European Union (EU) has revised its counterterrorism policies several times since 2001. Still, the destructive impact of violent extremism (VE) continues to take its toll, generating negative shocks across international borders. However, a fundamental question remains: why are some communities more likely to experience VE than others? Addressing this question is the overarching objective of our new EU-funded collaborative project, PREVEX (Preventing VE in the Balkans and the MENA), which is designed to decipher the socio-political dynamics of VE-enabling environments. Policy makers can adopt a better fine-tuned and more effective approaches to preventing VE, largely through strengthening societal resilience.

Focusing on the broader Balkans and MENA region, including Iraq, we shall carry out context-sensitive, in-depth case studies to compare cases where VE occurs with those that do not. Particular emphasis will be placed on how to strengthen resilience through investigating the lack of occurrence of VE in some conducive and 'enabling environments'.

The PREVEX project focuses on five core objectives for improving the approaches to prevent VE.

1) Provide a nuanced understanding of VE. Despite its widespread use in security discourses, the concept of VE lacks a precise definition. Given this, how can we effectively prevent VE without a clear understanding of the nature of the phenomenon and its relation to terrorism? This shortcoming could ultimately lead to counterproductive outcomes in terms of policy prescriptions. This clarity is not only important for academic purposes, but also for the very policies put in place to prevent VE in the broader MENA and the Balkans.

2) Introduce the ‘enabling environment’ framework. We define the ‘enabling environment’ as an area in which the combination of various factors creates a conducive situation where expressions of VE are likely. This analytical framework rests on three main features: decisive moments; cases of occurrence and non-occurrence of VE; and the effect of preventive measures.

Decisive moments: While ideological radicalisation or hate speech are common, it is crucial to better understand the moments in which these are transformed into violence.

Occurrence and non-occurrence: We pay particular attention to cases of non-occurrence of VE in ‘enabling environments’, and ask, why do some communities display much greater resilience to violent extremist ideologies than others? What role do local community leaders, including religious leaders, play? An understanding of why violence does not occur is often more relevant for strengthening resilience and designing preventive measures, than understanding why it occurs.

Preventive measures: Our assumption is that the key to identifying effective preventive measures requires an improved understanding of how different drivers of VE operate, and why the pattern escalates into violence in some places but not in others.

3) Connect local and global dynamics. The form of VE that we are mostly confronted with in the Balkans and the broader MENA region is local, but with global connections. We need to distinguish between local-global connections where groups deliberately, purposefully and strategically navigate to become an active operational brand in larger global networks of extremist ideology (for example, al-Qaeda or Daesh), and those that mainly employ such strategies as a branding exercise, to look more powerful, global and omnipotent than they are.

4) Understanding competing authorities. As many people in the Balkans and the broader MENA region live in fragile states, with governments lacking the capacity or willingness to care for and protect their citizens, many view the state not as benevolent, but dysfunctional and corrupt. This leads to grievances against the state, that are instrumentalised by ‘violent entrepreneurs’ making use of extremist ideologies and discourses.

5) Enhance effectiveness of preventive measures. While the bottom-up approach of PREVEX will radically advance research on VE and prevention strategies, the policy recommendations emerging as a result will provide a better understanding of how VE is best prevented, as well as how the capacities of both the EU and partner countries in this area can be improved.

In this ambitious project, the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) is one of fifteen partner organisations, funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement no. 870724. As the Principal Investigator of PREVEX, I take this opportunity to voice my appreciation for our partnership with MERI and the great work done by MERI researchers not only for PREVEX, but also in other projects where NUPI and MERI have collaborated for the past five years.

The PREVEX Consortium is coordinated by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and consists of the following institutions: University of Copenhagen (Denmark), University of Leipzig (Germany), St’Ana School of Advanced Studies (Italy), European University Institute (Italy), Centre for International Research (France), Centre for European Policy Studies (Belgium), Centre for Advanced Studies (Bulgaria), Belgrade Centre for Security Studies (Serbia), Atlantic Initiative (Bosnia and Hercegovina), Group of Legal and Political Studies (Kosovo), Institute for Democracy and Mediation (Albania), al-Akhawayn University (Morocco), Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa (Senegal) and the Middle East Research Institute (Iraq).

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