

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

A policy-oriented contribution
from the EuroMeSCo network

Barcelona, June 2017

1. The EuroMeSCo Annual Conference on “Countering Violent Extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean Region” took place in Barcelona on 1-2 June 2017. It gathered representatives of 106 institutes that are members of the EuroMeSCo network (the largest Euro-Mediterranean network of think tanks dealing with political and security issues), alongside a number of practitioners, diplomats and policy makers. The proceedings of the conference will be published in a comprehensive report. Below are some significant messages that the EuroMeSCo network would like to convey to policy makers and stakeholders of the 43 member states of the Union for the Mediterranean, including the 28 member states of the European Union.

Understanding violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region and its impact

2. Violent extremism is a worldwide phenomenon. But it is particularly acute in the Euro-Mediterranean area. All 43 countries of the UfM are affected in one way or another. There is a prevailing perception, in Europe, that violent extremism is imported from abroad and

in particular from the southern Mediterranean region and is affecting mostly the European Union. While recognizing that violent extremism can be fuelled by chaos, civil wars, foreign interventions and other phenomena in the MENA region, it is important to acknowledge that this perception is misleading and should be countered at least on two accounts. First, violent extremism affects primarily the southern Mediterranean region. Second, the majority of terrorist acts that took place in some European countries are carried out by home-grown self-radicalized young people in Europe; In other words, violent extremism is also thriving among European citizens and generated within the European Union.

3. The root causes of extremism are numerous. Similarly, the profiles of extremists are so varied that it is difficult to establish a general diagnosis and devise simple recipes or policies to address the issue. However, it is important to acknowledge that creeping islamophobia, the surge of populist and nationalist groups in the EU and the continuation or the reproduction of authoritarianism in the southern Mediterranean region are factors fuelling violent extremism.
4. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, and in particular in the southern Mediterranean, socio-economic triggers of radicalisation should not be overlooked, as reveal the initial findings of the Euromed survey on violent extremism. Lack of opportunities, prevailing corruption, and dysfunctional economies tend to push some young people to resort to violent extremism, as they harbour a deep sense of helplessness.
5. Furthermore, violent extremism is also driven by geopolitics. Foreign interventions in the Mediterranean and MENA region, continued occupation and colonisation, proxy wars and sectarian divide have all contributed to ignite violent extremism. Therefore, it is important to work towards “a New Security Architecture in the Euro-Mediterranean” and MENA region as it was proposed by the 2016 EuroMeSCO Annual Conference, in Brussels. Solving protracted conflicts, avoiding counter-productive military foreign interventions, or even addressing the sectarian divides will not dry up the swamps of extremism but it can contribute to trim the instrumentalisation of these phenomena by extremists.
6. Extremism may also be identity-driven. Some young muslims, born in Europe, may feel alienated, with a fractured identity, discriminated or marginalised, disconnected

from their families or even communities. Some individuals may radicalize because they are in search of a meaning for their life, a cause to defend. In some cases, violence is a way for them to transform their self-hatred into hatred of the others.

Addressing the Euro-Mediterranean missing link on countering violent extremism

7. Given the variety of root causes and profiles, only security-driven responses may be counter-productive as they may exacerbate the phenomenon of radicalisation, undermine social cohesion or even widen the gap of misunderstanding between both shores of the Mediterranean. Policies geared towards defeating violent extremism ideology should be pro-active, long-lasting and comprehensive rather than confined to reactive and rushed responses. Miscalibrated responses to violent extremism only driven by domestic considerations or only tackling the security dimension are likely to be self-defeating.
8. The EU, on its part, should combat the tendency to portray Islam itself as a religion generating violence and extremism. Misportraying Islam produces frustration, humiliation, anger and even hatred. As illustrated in a number of studies conducted in the framework of EuroMeSCo, religion is rarely the main reason for radicalisation and there are number of political, cultural, economic, social and geopolitical factors that may contribute to an individual's decision to turn to violent extremism as mentioned above.
9. Numerous initiatives, policies and programmes have been designed over the last years to prevent and counter violent extremism at the local, national, European and multilateral level. However, the Euro-Mediterranean dimension is often missing.
10. In this context, the role of civil societies is of paramount importance. The OPEV (Observatory to Prevent Violent Extremism) has set an example in organising a conference in Barcelona in January 2017, with the participation of 320 representatives of 172 civil society organisations. "The Plan of Action of the Euro-Mediterranean civil society to prevent all forms of violent extremism" is inspiring and its recommendations are largely in line with EuroMeSCo's findings.

11. At the Euro-Mediterranean institutional level, more should be done to coordinate and exchange good practices not only on counter terrorism but also on other strands to prevent and counter violent extremism, in line with the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism that calls for concerted actions to support national, regional and global efforts.
12. There should be a sort of “clearing-house mechanism” or office to better coordinate the initiatives taken by the 43 UfM Member States and by European institutions and promote synergies.
13. The UfM roadmap “The Union for the Mediterranean: an action-driven organisation with a common ambition” endorsed by the UfM Foreign Affairs Ministers at the second UfM Regional Forum in January 2017, included a chapter on prevention of extremism and terrorism where it is stated that the Secretariat should not only continue addressing through its activities the socio-economic root causes of terrorism and extremism but will also “play a facilitator role to promote best practices and enhance confidence building measures to contribute to the deconstruction/counter-narrative of radical discourses and ideologies.” Therefore, EuroMeSCo thinks the UfM Secretariat is well placed to participate in the much needed effort of coordination and monitoring of activities related to PVE and CVE in the Euro-Mediterranean region.
14. EuroMeSCo is equipped, willing and prepared to work with the UfM towards this goal. As a start, a EuroMeSCo task force could come up with a comprehensive compilation of existing policies, strategies and projects carried out at the local, national and regional level in the Euro-Mediterranean region.
15. At the EU level, the EU-financed Radicalisation Awareness Network gathering practitioners is a unique and very important tool as it facilitates exchanges between first line practitioners coming from the 28 EU countries that can then feed into policies. This work with practitioners should be sustained and the network could be upgraded.