

WANTED: MORE FLUID RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND OFFICIALS IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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Introduction

The assumption hiding behind the concept of “evidence-based decision-making” is that policy makers are eager to consider, appreciate and use the work of researchers and acknowledge that research results “effectively transferred, could be used to inform policy and practice decisions and subsequently improve their outcomes” (Dobbins, et al, 2007). Yet, this equation seems to be dysfunctional in the Euro-Mediterranean region and arguably in particular in the southern Mediterranean, where too often the resources dedicated to research are considered either as charity or as an obligation deriving from education or science related international commitments. The decision making sphere in many countries is to a large extent inaccessible to researchers. The latter are perceived as bourgeois, naive, philosophers and theoretical folks that have no practical experience and that are disconnected from reality and in any case they are not seen as equal partners for any relation of cooperation with security decision makers.

This policy paper explores the underdeveloped relation between researchers and policy makers with a specific focus on security practitioners and on countries of the southern Mediterranean. There seems to be double-sided barriers with on the one hand limited appetite from security practitioners to engage with researchers and on the other hand a lack of confidence from researchers to reach out and advocate for their research results. This mistrust translates into a barrier to data access for researchers and a lost opportunity of knowledge transfer for decision makers. This situation calls for profound changes, both psychological and institutional.

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Mistrust: Academia Vs. Security Institutions

The lack of cooperation between researchers on the one hand, and policymakers and security practitioners on the other hand has arguably an impact on the efficiency of important security policies such as counter-terrorism. The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate at the United Nations Organization underlined that “even though Member States have developed a range of rehabilitation and reintegration strategies and programmes, there is limited knowledge as to their effectiveness” (United Nations, 2018). The lack of cooperation, the reluctance to engage, and the suspicions between the policy sphere and the academia were crucial for the stagnation of the field of counterterrorism research (Sageman, 2013). An interesting case in point is the recruitment strategy some violent extremist groups have developed. A number of researchers studied the recruitment channels and techniques of violent organisations and suggested some methods to tackle them. Nonetheless, it appears that in many cases, governments still pursue a process of learning by doing and a method of trial and error in constant disregard to research evidence in this field.

Although many countries managed to overcome or partly overcome this mistrust – or in some cases competition-problem, south Mediterranean researchers are still misunderstood and delegitimised to a large extent. In this region, researchers and policy makers should acknowledge the respective limitations and understand the added-value of pulling their resources. For example, a researcher is not well placed to investigate terrorist crimes, while a police officer can gather extensive data about the radicalization process. However, the latter is not necessary able to analyze this data, contextualise or compare it with other sources to draw lessons about the deep causes behind terrorism in a determined society.

Data Access and Other Barriers

As mentioned above, the lack of trust between research institutions and security agencies leads to a barrier to Data access and complicates the research making process. Researchers in the south Mediterranean region lack (free) access to the data they need for their work, in particular in the field of security. As an illustration, in the framework of a research project in 2017, the author needed access to the information related to Tunisians involved in the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria. This information is stored in the database of the two new Tunisian institutions of counterterrorism, the Judicial and Security poles of counterterrorism that were established in Tunis in 2016. The access to these institutions requires the submission of a request to the registry office at the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Interior Affairs. Such a request is mainly subject to an average waiting period of two weeks before the receipt of the access authorization. However, this authorization is not a guarantee of automatic access, as it must be supported by a letter of recommendation from the supervisor or the director of the research institute with a

copy of the student or professional card¹. Similarly, officials at the Ministry in charge of relations with civil society that holds the intergovernmental platform for the alternative narrative and counter-extremism also deny access to the results of research that they conducted about the Tunisian youth radicalization causes.

The bureaucracy of the security and judicial antiterrorism agencies is not a Tunisian exception. Researchers in Egypt, Morocco or Algeria face the same challenges. There is a fundamental paradox in expecting that researchers would contribute to feeding the policy making process on the one hand and impeding access to data and dialogue on the other hand.

Security is a sensitive field. In securitised regimes lacking democratic credentials, security is a traditional “*chasse gardée*” of the government. Researchers may not only face obstacles; their personal security may be at risk in some circumstances. They are likely to be seen as competitors to state security institutions, and considered as possible spies busy with gathering sensitive data for the account of an external or even a rival force. Consequently, they are subject to surveillance and sometimes suited for suspicions of conspiracy or relation with terrorist groups. For example, Walid Al-Shobaky a Ph.D. Egyptian student at University of Washington was arrested in May 2018 upon conducting security-related ground research. He was charged for terrorist group membership (“University of Washington Ph.D. student detained”, 2018). This hostile attitude shoves other researchers to hide their research activities like interviews with returnees, terrorists, former convicts or their families, which creates new security threats and could be used against them as a law violation.

Historically, security has never been an easy field for researchers in non-democratic countries, where confusion was prevailing between objective evidence-based opinions and the political opposition complaints. Thus, in some states, like in Tunisia before 2011, any critic to the security institutions, methods and practices could be sanctioned as a threat to the country or as a part of a conspiracy to destabilise the government. I described this situation as “research-phobia”. In reality, this relation doesn’t have any logical explanation nowadays other than the path dependency of security officials who “decades ago mistakenly believed that information about crimes should not be left to scientists” (Lum, Kennedy, & Sherley, 2008). This archaic view delegitimizes and undermines research efforts.

Mobility barriers are another constraint that faces researchers in security among other fields in the south Mediterranean countries. Too little is done to facilitate the academic

¹ There is no clear access procedure to these two institutions, but we were required by the poles guards to obtain these documents in order to allow us entry.

exchange between researchers of different countries. For example, researchers need a visa to move between Tunisia and Egypt and vice versa, a process that can take months. Mobility is particularly constrained in the case of researchers invited in the context of a security-related research.

Semi-Solutions Cannot Be Solution

In front of this aggravated situation, some semi-solutions started popping up in the security research area. These solutions cannot address the roots of the problem in the south Mediterranean although they are performing very well in other countries, simply because they were made in specific conditions that don't exist in the South. Indeed, Government-funded think tanks such as the United States Institute of Peace or the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), and the non-profit think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations, Chatham House and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, play a role in shaping the public policies in their respective countries.

In the South-Mediterranean countries, the proliferation of research bodies in state agencies is meant to help compensating the 'research deficit'. However, a lot of these institutions exacerbated the problem. For example, in the Tunisian Ministry of Interior, departments are all equipped with a unit or a bureau of research, analysis or studies. Unfortunately, these structures are most often in a state of 'hibernation' and used as window-dressing to show that this ministry is able to do evidence-based work. Also, the Judiciary and the Security poles in Tunis are supposed to produce studies. For these two structures, research ends with the quantitative work. Most of the studies they come up with are limited to statistics, graphs or facts. There is no substantial added-value or efforts to analyze these data. Some other structures like the Institute of National Defence that was created at the Ministry of Defence in Tunisia to collect defence-related data and to conduct geopolitical studies, and the Information and Decision Support Centre that was designed to advise the office of the prime minister in Egypt, also tend to centralise the information and make the access to it almost impossible. Such institutions are mainly based on political allegiance, which make them biased and undermine the continuity of their research because of the frequent reshuffling of their staff in unstable governments like Tunisia. As an illustration, the Tunisian Institute of Strategic Studies ITES, which is attached to the Presidency of the Republic, was headed by four presidents in seven years. Changes are made on the basis of political allegiance and membership.

Face to the lack of data access, the Southern-North mobility programs for researchers and practitioners in the security field appeared as another semi-solution. In general, mobility is subject to political agreements between different countries and its continuity is consequently subordinated to the developments of this contractual relationship. Thus, researchers become sometimes 'collateral victims' of sanctions that target the political behaviours of their governments. In fact, the penalties can take the form of aid interruption

or mobility funds cut. Furthermore, the international mobility programs are a fertile field for corruption and favouritism. The non-transparent selection process exacerbates the problem and gives the selection committee a large room for manoeuvre. Thus, political allegiance and personal relations may become the principal criteria in this process.

Recommendations

Overcoming of the problems of mistrust, lack of cooperation, mutual suspicions, and delegitimization, requires profound institutional, structural and legal changes.

In institutional terms, the relationship between researchers from one side and policy makers and security practitioners from the other side needs to be streamlined. This is to say that the traditional distorted forms of informal cooperation that do not have any clear channels should be replaced by a partnership, a new institution that has clear coordination mandate between the two domains. Cooperation committees between academia and policy making structures could solve the problem and help normalize the cooperation between them. Such institution could lay the ground for a future of a fluid relation and a culture of mutual trust, although the mistrust is deeply embedded in the minds and spirits of the actual generation of security practitioners and researchers. At the international level, we advocate for the solution proposed by the United Nations to “use the existing Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) Research network and create an annual work plan to provide advice and to support the work of the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee and CTED on various matters related to countering terrorist narratives” (United Nations, 2017). This same network could provide national policy makers with advice, expertise, good practices, and technical assistance.

Moreover, renewed financial and technical support for independent think tanks and research centres could contribute to balance the relationship between these latter and the structures owned by the state. Number of young security researchers seeks a structure to combine their thoughts and expertise and to channel them towards an evidence-based research project. Financial facilitation and procedures simplification may help these researchers and give them the opportunity to create their structures. Moreover, activating the state-owned security research structures and strengthening them by specialized members with academic background could also be a solution. It would help them play their principal role of evaluating the effectiveness of the security actions, proposing evidence-based security policies, and promoting knowledge transfer and exchange.

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