

# TOWARD UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AND REVISING COUNTER-VIOLENCE POLICIES IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

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Back in 2011, a wave of violence and radicalisation started in the Southern Mediterranean region, which was characterised by a variety of forms, such as unorganised brutality accompanying riots, insurgencies, violent attacks directed against particular targets, or random attacks regardless of the target's political or social affiliation. This wave illustrated the ability of violence to extend regionally and globally. Its patterns depended on the dynamics and structural strains of the state, differing among Southern Mediterranean countries.

Over the last three to four years, protraction of violence has been, hence, a consequence of intertwined international, regional and domestic factors, such as the collapse of the Islamic State (ISIS) and the ability of the nation-state to restore power over its territory and political sphere aftermath of the Arab uprisings, ending the vacuum in which many of these acts took place.

Through technology, violence was able to expand globally, becoming a more sophisticated, interdependent phenomenon. Central authorities tightened their control to contain this violence; however, any decrease in the number of violent attacks is likely fragile and misleading. The hard economic circumstances in this region and the trend of settling political and societal conflicts without consensus or reconciliation mean that this slight decrease in the number of violent attacks could be temporary. Furthermore, there is a lack of accurate knowledge and information on the current violence because of the information vacuum created by the post-2011 Southern Mediterranean regimes and their tight control over the public sphere.

The aim of this policy brief is to point out the shortcomings of the research agenda on violence and counter-violence policies over the last seven years, with the main focus on

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the obstacle of accessing information as a prerequisite to comprehend the current wave of violence, as well as the side effects of the dominance of Jihadists in the research and political agenda, in addition to the underestimation of the pivotal role of the internal context and dynamics in directing violence. Finally, this policy brief concludes with some recommendations on how to overcome the shortcomings of research and counter-violence policies to make the latter more integrated, comprehensive and sustainable, with the objective of containing the current wave of violence and any potential coming waves.

### **Access to Information as a Principle Determinant to Understanding Violence**

At an early stage of the contentious politics of the Arab uprisings, violence sparked in the form of popular outrage and riots. This unorganised violence evolved into other more complex and organised patterns. The spread of violence as a tool to influence the political process was challenging. The last wave of violence escalated in 2011 along different trajectories, including civil wars such as the one in Syria, insurgencies like that in Sinai, and rebellions and riots that hit many Southern Mediterranean countries. Regimes and state apparatus in the Southern Mediterranean at that time deployed security tools in order to counter the threats of mass violence that accompanied the uprisings and to simultaneously counter organised violence that posed the threat of geographical disintegration. Military and security policies were confidential and shrouded in secrecy, backed up by national security claims. In such a context, there was no access to accurate information on the perpetrators of violence, their backgrounds or their motivations. Most of the accessible information came from official sources that revealed only little about the perpetrators and their operations. Information was highly politicised and manipulated by the official authorities and other actors in order to nurture particular narratives and goals. Such political propaganda calls into question the accuracy of this information. In the Syrian context, for instance, the official narrative was characterised by its efforts to stigmatise protest movements by labelling them violent and/or Jihadist.

Yet, there were more independent, small-scale stories and data available on the youth involved in violence, be it Jihadist-affiliated violence or non-Jihadist-affiliated violence. Published by investigative journalists, they offered testimonies that referred to the backgrounds of operatives and their radicalisation. However, those stories were fragmented; therefore, the information was tentative and difficult to verify. This problem was compounded by the lack of transparency in Southern Mediterranean countries, where the comeback of the state apparatus after its slip due to the Arab uprisings jeopardised the flow and accessibility of information because of the state's control over the public sphere. Moreover, violence in 2011 escalated relatively quickly, further hindering the collection of and access to information.

### **Dominance of Jihadists in the Research and Political Agenda**

Violent Salafi Jihadist actors dominated the research and political agenda since the escalation of violence in 2011 and its aftermath. This focus on Jihadist actors is

understandable, partially because of the rise of ISIS and the existential threat it posed to countries and societies, as well as its brutal and widely broadcast crimes, which all caused a global wave of fear. This extensive and absolute interest in Jihadist actors does not allow us to adequately address other diverse actors who used violence and their various motivations, backgrounds, doctrines and responses and adaption to the regional developments, including the developments that were introduced by the Jihadist actors. Those non-Jihadist actors are mainly dissenting segments from the traditional political Islam entities as well as minor factions, such as populist factions, short-lived anarchist groups, and some youth movements that use violence in different incidents.

It is known that non-Jihadist actors who used violence at a domestic level in the Southern Mediterranean took advantage of the regional emergence of Jihadist actors in terms of strategies and tools. However, differentiation between Jihadist and non-Jihadist actors is very important despite this interdependence. The interest in Jihadist actors was also a major element in the political discourse of authorities and media coverage, who took advantage of the Jihadist emergence to label any violent actors as Jihadists; hence, confronting them is inevitable. Counter-violence policies and discourse that do not consider actors' particularities have become the norm, principally relying on security tools instead of actual understanding.

This status quo is supported by the rise of nationalist and populist movements within the Mediterranean region, whose aim is to gain popularity and score electoral victories by offering unsophisticated explanations for violence and ignoring the interplay between politics and violent groups. It is important to focus on non-Jihadist actors, since they can re-emerge in the future and gain greater support, as the popularity and appeal of the militant Jihadist organisations are likely to continue declining with their brutal crimes.

### **Internal Context as a Decisive Factor in Directing Violence**

Local context is the main determinant for how and when violence is utilised, whereas global and regional contexts work more as enabling environments. This factor is applicable to all actors, including Jihadists. The local dimension is especially important when considering how violence is utilised, whether it is organised or spontaneous, and whether it is ideological or pragmatic, as a consequence categorising the actors who deployed it. Individuals usually utilise violence because of domestic and structural grievances, even if they enrol in transnational violent organisations. As a consequence, depending exclusively on the term "terrorism" is likely to overlook the diversity and complexity of the map of violence, its actors and their incentives since this concept has a profound global and Jihadist significance. In fact, participation in violent groups can often be a reaction to marginalisation; for instance, many individuals in the economic or social periphery of Southern Mediterranean countries may get involved in movements with which they have little genuine ideological or theological connection, yet this is their only channel to

demonstrate. It is important to consider the different levels of involvement of individuals in violence and their incentives, even within the same organisation. As a consequence, mass de-radicalisation policies are less efficient in containing those various segments of radical individuals with their specifics. Here, it is also important to refer to the dynamics of the internal context within the countries of the 2011 uprisings, which played an integral role in feeding the cycle of violence in other contexts in the Southern Mediterranean by supplying them with combatants. For instance, after the 2011 uprisings, some youths from Egypt and Tunisia were convinced that their countries are on the right democratic trajectory, and hence their role will not be significant; but other countries in the region like Syria still had an ongoing revolution, and hence their role there would be more significant. On the other hand, other youths were not satisfied with the political trajectories of their homeland, which proved that they had little influence on the political process, and hence the battlefields were the proper arena to influence.

### **The Limitations of Traditional Frameworks for Interpreting Violence**

There are three common frameworks for interpreting violence, which adequately address previous waves of violence within the Southern Mediterranean and Middle East: economic factors, religious interpretation, and the democracy-versus-authoritarianism duality (Storm, 2009). These approaches were proved to be of very limited use in recent times. All three of them fail to explain current patterns, such as well-educated and fulfilled individuals, with established social and economic privileges from well-off backgrounds becoming involved in violent actions (El Shobaki, 2018) or youths in Tunisia enrolling heavily in violent Jihadist organisations in Syria, even after their country had undergone democratisation (Fahmi & Meddeb, 2015). Using these three approaches, political discourse and counter-violence policies tend to be designed for more organised violence or regard individuals from poor and marginalised backgrounds as primary suspects, which was not necessarily factually supported in the recent wave of violence. It is important here to pay attention to the specificities of the latest violent wave that escalated in 2011, whose solutions may require innovation, and to be critically open to looking past traditional, unitary approaches of tackling violence and to combine them with a more dynamic understanding.

There are major elements in the current situation that need further exploration and to be addressed in a comparative manner by the research agenda. First, religion appears to be a secondary factor as a motivation for radicalisation, since most violent actors now are driven by politics and societal grievances. According to available youth accounts, their decision to use violence precedes any religious justification and interpretation even in case of conservative/religious operatives, where religion comes later to legalise or subjectively moralise their decisions. This affects the expected impact of the religious establishments and institutions, such as al-Azhar and other official religious establishments in Southern Mediterranean countries, to contain those young extremists.

The intensive involvement of religious authorities may even exacerbate young people's distrust of those institutions, their independence and their legitimacy by tying them to political regimes (Ahmed, 2017).

Second, we are also seeing atomised features and incentives of the involvement of youths in violence with no rigid doctrines or socialisation. There are many stories available on youths who have become involved in violent operations without belonging to any recognised political or religious entities that command them to act violently. Well-established actors and entities, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and Salafist parties in Egypt or Ennahdha in Tunisia, have no control over those young people, nor do they have a centralised role in directing their actions. Violence in this wave was characterised by extensive liquidity, in terms of both the low cost of enrolment in violent groups and the ease of withdrawal from them and the proliferation of violent small networks and cells. Those organisations are less disciplined and less rigid compared to traditional organisations. Hence, violent networks and cells are likely to be temporary. This is why there are many organisations that rapidly form, disintegrate and reintegrate. Such fluidity and rapidly transforming patterns pose challenges to tracking and countering these groups' activities.

Away from the traditional incentives of using violence, there was a trend of youths who used violence for moral and humanitarian incentives. In the early outset of the Syrian war, prior to the emergence of Jihadists, youths from other Southern Mediterranean countries moved to Syria and got involved in violent groups to defend vulnerable civilians against the brutal oppression of the al-Assad regime, with no concrete political aim (Badawy, 2012).

### **Disintegration of Political Organisations and Liquidity**

As previously mentioned, traditional organisations, especially within the Islamic movement, such as Tunisia's Ennahdha and Egypt's MB and Salafists, had a very limited role in containing and neutralising or even controlling some of their youth members' practice of violence. The decline of confidence in and the disintegration of some of those organisations, particularly in Egypt, among Islamist youths contributed to a trend toward small and lax groups that use violence (Hamama, 2015). This new phenomenon necessitates a revision of counter-terrorism strategies and political discourses that focus on these larger organisations, as their disintegration actually increases the demand for violent groups and leads to even less controlled actions. Here, it seems that trends to not dismantle more traditional political organisations and players can actually stabilise the situation. These phenomena of violence also point to the need for more flexible and accommodating strategies, since new types of violent groups act without hierarchical structures and instead follow a networking pattern, where technology is the main form of promotion. It remains important to note that the technological dimension is more valid in

the case of Jihadist organisations but less fundamental in the case of more localised violent actors in Mediterranean countries, who rely more on other more direct mechanisms of interaction, mobilisation and recruitment and do not aim to promote their public image.

Violent groups can always persist in many political and social contexts and conflicts at critical points and will never be completely eliminated. However, preventing young people from joining these groups and providing a supportive social environment are more realistic if their features and incentives are carefully read, understood and followed.

## **Key Recommendations for Renewing Counter-Violence Research and Policies**

- Information and knowledge are the first step to construct more flexible and integrated counter-violence strategies and build bottom-up approaches to tackle this phenomenon. Access to official resources, investigations, cases and papers on violent operations and operatives is needed, even if access is initially only exclusive to researchers and experts.
- The scope of the research agenda must grow to include all actors, both Jihadist and non-Jihadist, within each context and to map their backgrounds, motivations, patterns of violence and group formation, as well as the interactions and overlap between Jihadists and non-Jihadists on the ground.
- Adopting inclusive and comprehensive counter-violence policies requires searching beyond traditional monolithic approaches to understanding violence, including dialogue, security and addressing inequality and regional grievances within specific contexts.
- It is important to adopt gradual counter-violence policies that aim to differentiate between the different levels of involvement in using violence, as previously mentioned; to differentiate between operatives, supporters, sympathisers, facilitators and providers of logistical assistance, which requires different packages and tools for containing all of them through the stages of radical transformation; and to avoid any potential grievances in the future in case the mass punishment method is applied.
- Differentiation should be built into those policies and should take into consideration the age of the operatives when they committed violent actions. When massive unrest erupted in the Southern Mediterranean in 2011, many adolescents became involved in violence as many of them were affected by the high acceleration of social and political developments at that point and in the aftermath. Policies should seriously consider developing trajectories to check

adolescents' profiles and their eligibility for rehabilitation and possible adjustment of their legal status to integrate them and avoid any grievances among their families and milieus.

- In relation to the categorisation process, it is important to consider the possible trajectories to deal with combatants who joined violent groups abroad and to consider how to contain them after their return to their home countries in order to ensure security without violating the law and humanitarian concerns. For instance, Syria is a common destination among many actors who utilise violence outside of their homelands, particularly from the Southern Mediterranean population. It is important to consider the time of their involvement in the confrontation there and the time of withdrawal, which violent group they were affiliated to, and the degree of their involvement in crimes since the evolution of the Syrian war was untypical and complex.
- Since this wave of violence was complex and multilayered, it is important to enact a network of policies and dialogues among Southern and Northern Mediterranean countries with successful experience in dealing with radicalisation and violent actors on both sides, particularly the domestic dimension of their experience in containing violence, such as the waves of violence that erupted in Europe from the 1960s to 1970s. As always, it also remains vital to take humanitarian concerns into account in these policies in order to neutralise any wide grassroots support for operatives in the long run, since violations of human rights may legitimise the claims of violent actors among oppressed grassroots communities and make the latter open to cooperation with any opponent, even violent ones, for revenge.
- It is important to consider the high level of politicisation of violence and to build peaceful coalitions to contain it, as polarisation and militarism can escalate into violence. For instance, involving religious institutions and committing them to hard-line views and sharply assigned tasks may actually drive young people to lose trust in those players and become more radical.

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