

# COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MENA REGION: TIME TO RETHINK APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

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## Introduction

According to The Soufan Group's latest report, between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters (FFs) had travelled to Syria and Iraq as of December 2015. More than half (16,000) come from the MENA region. Five years after the Arab uprisings, these figures contrast with the commitments made by governments in the region to establish a new and more inclusive social contract through political reforms and transition processes. While Tunisia is depicted as a beacon of hope in the region, young Tunisians make up the largest contingent of FFs with an estimated 6,000 young people having joined the battleground in Syria or elsewhere. Such a fact raises questions about the extent to which the youth has been effectively contemplated in the agenda of the multiple social, economic and political reforms promised by political leaders in the MENA region since 2011.

As violent extremism poses direct threats to many MENA countries, varied and often competing frameworks have been used to interpret the significant increase of people attracted to groups preaching it. However, after terrorist attacks have affected many MENA countries, "hard" strategies inspired by security-focused approaches have prevailed over other strategies and approaches to violent extremism. Despite the breadth of security measures taken against violent groups, and although military actions targeting extremist groups have been carried out in Libya, Syria and Iraq, the number of foreign fighters continues to grow at increased speed.

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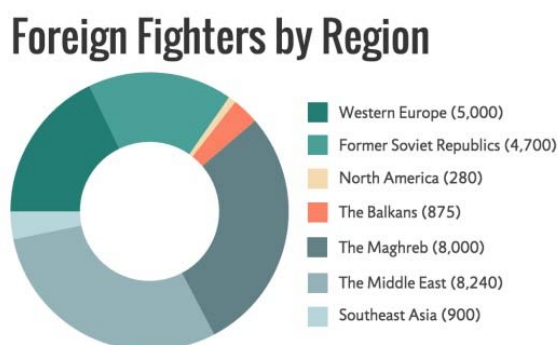
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This suggests that the current strategies struggle to achieve the long-term objective of making violent extremism (VE) an unviable alternative to young people in the MENA region. Research on VE showed that FF profiles and backgrounds are as diverse as their reasons for joining violent groups. The absence of a sense of belonging, weak affective relations, being a loner, a status or adrenaline seeker, the gap between expectations and reality, and commitment to a holy cause are all part of a broader spectrum of motivations. As a result, a more comprehensive approach entailing interrelated push and pull factors of a different nature (economic, social, affective, psychological and political) is needed. Not only could this open up new ways of addressing this phenomenon, but it could also contribute to preventing young people from joining violent extremist groups. Addressing this objective requires turning the existing short-term and security-focused strategies into a long-term comprehensive plan.

### Evidence and Analysis

It is estimated that the MENA region contributed 60% of the total number of foreign fighters flowing to Syria and Iraq as of December 2015. This phenomenon, which is unprecedented in scale and pace, combined with the shift of some violent groups from consolidating their territories to destabilising their enemies (terrorist attacks), has turned countering violent extremism into a key priority for many MENA governments.

**Figure 1: Foreign fighters by region**



Source: The Soufan Group Report, "Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", December 2015.

With the exception of Algeria, where countering violent extremism (CVE) measures have been taken since 2012, most MENA countries took no measures against the recent FFs phenomenon until 2014. Once they were introduced, their aim was twofold: to deter people from joining VE groups and to handle the return of FFs to their homeland.

These measures are of varying nature (Watanabe, 2015):

1. Counter-terrorism measures, including dismantling of terrorist cells and recruitment networks; cutting the financial resources of groups suspected of VE.
2. Legal measures to criminalise joining terrorist groups, recruiting FFs and promoting VE.
3. Administrative measures, including travel bans, monitoring returnees' movements and activities.
4. Border security measures, entailing strengthening border security and cooperation with neighbouring countries.
5. Intelligence sharing and cooperation with countries through multilateral initiatives.
6. "Counter-radicalisation" measures, including the development of counter-narratives to disrupt VE, awareness-raising and development programmes, and bans on media and websites promoting VE.

In general, the methods and means used result from "hard" strategies focused on security and legal measures to criminalise, monitor and impede individuals attracted to/belonging to VE groups and returnees. This reading of the FFs phenomenon often relies on a one-dimensional approach: violent extremism emanates from individuals who are considered to be die-hard radicals or lifelong extremists and as such are either exploited by foreign actors or have made erroneous readings of the holy texts. The emphasis is mostly put on ways to neutralise these groups and individuals through practical impediments.

Yet, in spite of the security, legal and non-legal measures used to fight this threat, the flow of FFs joining fighting zones keeps growing: their number has tripled since 2014. Such a fact contrasts with the efforts and resources devoted to a

strategy that mostly focuses on the threat itself without directly addressing the roots of violent extremism.

### **Soft Policies: The Limits of the Security-Oriented Approach**

Against this backdrop, many MENA states started developing “soft” CVE policies, with counter-narratives that insisted on both “true Islamic values” and on the damage done by violent groups. Deployed at the national level and promoted by officials (political leaders, religious leaders), these counter-narratives had little containing effect on the flow of foreign fighters. Three components of these policies should be considered: the nature of the messages, the actors and the scale.

#### *Radicalisation of Islam vs. Islamisation of Radicalism: “De-islamising” Approaches to VE*

The security-focused approach relies on a questionable starting point: it sees religion as a channel that leads towards radicalisation and arguably considers VE as emanating from a wrong understanding of Islam. Alternatively, “soft” strategies systematically resort to greater controls on mosques, on religious discourses and devote substantial effort to disseminating religious counter-narratives aimed at showing “the true face of Islam” to a general audience. This reading is often endorsed by political leaders in the region, including Islamists, who view radicalism as the outcome of a process through which radical and violent religious movements pervert Islam’s core principles. A wide series of initiatives illustrate this reading: Morocco’s Higher Council of Ulemas issued fatwas explaining the concept of Jihad and rejecting violence and terrorism, Al Sisi calling for a “change of religious discourse” to sideline violent extremists and the increasing cooperation between Maghreb countries and EU countries (training European imams) tend to show the underlying framework of analysis to CVE. In the same line, the lack of religious education is the main argument made by Ennahdha to justify the high proportion of Tunisians among FFs.

Although references to Islam are overwhelming in the propaganda discourse disseminated by violent groups, this does not imply that religion per se plays a role in the so-called radicalisation process: research on FFs shows that almost

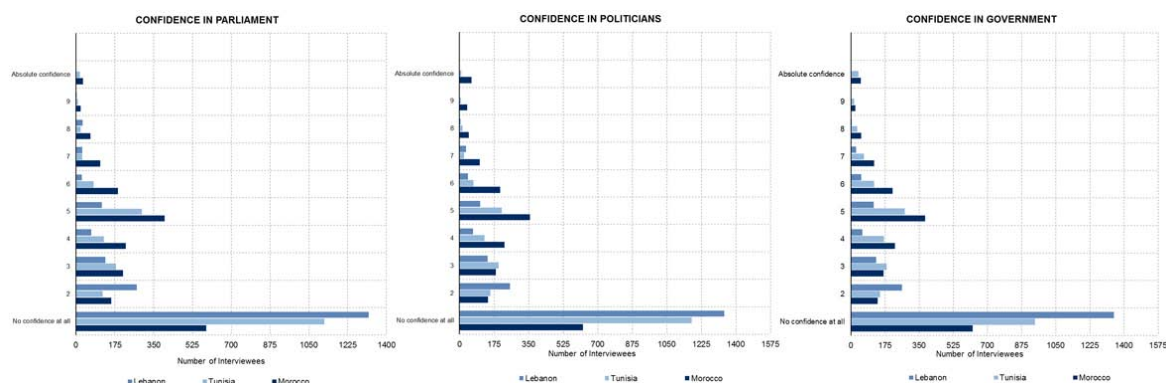
all have little (if any) religious background. In most cases the decision to join violent groups is based on personal reasons. Only a minority decides to join the fight for political or religious reasons (reaction to the Western presence in the MENA region, establishment of the caliphate, seeking martyrdom, holy war between the West and Islam, etc.). In other words, although promoters of VE undoubtedly rely on an Islamic narrative and resort to Islamic sources to justify their views and actions, they do resort to religion as a tool to indoctrinate their target population. Likely, those who adopt VE views find in this religious matrix the exclusive pretext for their behaviour: this means that the current trend does not fit with the “radicalisation of Islam but rather the Islamisation of radicalism” (Roy, 2015).

In this regard, although these measures and counter-narratives are politically necessary, they have hardly any impact on radicalised people with poor or little religious background: in their eyes, Islam is “[their] life”, i.e. the motivation/cause/value justifying their subsequent acts and behaviour. On the other side of the spectrum, no effect is to be expected on FFs who deeply believe in Salafi Jihadism, a religious-political ideology which dismisses all other forms of Islam, considering them either heretical or promoted by unbelievers through the use of excommunication (takfirism).

Overall, this approach is problematic for two main reasons: on the one hand, it places all FFs in the same category – that of individuals considered die-hard radicals or lifelong extremists – while, on the other hand, it ignores a wide series of actors and processes intervening in the radicalisation process as will be further explained below.

Finally, generic counter-narratives emanating from this approach ignore the multiplicity of causes and motivations for which young people join these groups: they focus on religion, ideology or security-related issues which do not resonate with vulnerable groups who consider themselves marginalised and deeply alienated from their own society. Credibility and legitimacy is also questionable as the main spokespersons for these counter-narratives are traditional public figures – governmental, security bodies, political and religious leaders mostly.

Figure 2: Do you trust the following institutions?



Source: SAHWA Youth Survey 2015/2016 (Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon).<sup>1</sup>

Taking into account these results, promoting counter-narratives through untrusted traditional actors can hardly resonate with vulnerable groups. This is all the more unlikely to happen as the messages disseminated are very generic (centred on ideology, religion) and do not tackle the real roots of radicalism, i.e. the series of socioeconomic and political causes and factors leading to VE that affect large segments of MENA societies, especially the youth.

In this regard, another challenge relies on the scale of these strategies and programmes. The vast majority of these programmes and strategies are implemented by national bodies (whether security or government bodies) at the national scale. Yet, reports and data collected from intelligence agencies highlight uneven distribution of FFs at the national level. Flows of FFs have been traced back to areas of some MENA countries where hotbeds, networks and incubators of violent extremism were in evidence. These hubs in North Africa highlight the fact that personal connections through friends, family and members of the community play an important role in the recruitment process. For instance, more than 30% of Tunisian FFs come from only three areas: Ben Guerdane, Bizerte

<sup>1</sup> Preliminary Results from the SAHWA Youth Survey 2015/2016 (Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon). The SAHWA Project is an FP-7 Project led by the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) and funded by the European Commission. It brings together 15 partners from Europe and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries to research youth prospects and perspectives in a context of multiple transitions in Arab countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon. Further information can be found at this link: [www.sahwa.eu](http://www.sahwa.eu)

and Tunis. Likewise, more than two-thirds of Moroccan FFs come from four cities – Tangiers, Tetouan, Fes and Casablanca – while 13% come from a single small city with 70,000 inhabitants (Fnideq).

*Local Level Focus: A Decisive Scale for the Success of Soft Strategies*

This uneven distribution should lead decision-makers to focus on the local level where there is already a local infrastructure (local authorities, communities, schools, etc.) facilitating synergies between local actors engaging with vulnerable groups. Programmes at the local level also require multi-agency approaches to establish dialogue in a climate of trust and confidence with an extensive range of actors at different levels. This should not be limited to national authorities, police and intelligence services, but should engage families of FFs, ex-detainees, community members, teachers, local leaders, local authorities, human rights NGOs and other actors in contact with these groups. Unlike national initiatives where the influence of the government and security bodies is overwhelming, local initiatives can generate a climate of trust and enhance cooperation on the ground.

Indeed, research has proved that local initiatives have been more effective than national-scale programmes in reducing violence (Das & Galvanek, 2014). In this regard, young people can play a crucial role in engaging their peers in discussion and reflection on the factors that lead young people – at the personal or collective level – to embrace violent extremism (expectations-reality gap, political marginalisation, abuse, corruption, lack of opportunities, social exclusion and other broader issues). Learning from their views, experiences and conditions can fuel decision-making at the local level that favours young people as well as counter-narratives. In this respect, local approaches should envisage the crucial role returnee FFs who are willing to reintegrate into society can play. Unlike officials and state actors who may not get the attention of at-risk individuals, these returnees can develop truly convincing counter-narratives based on the contrast between what they were promised by VE groups and the acts of violence and injustice they experienced during their stay in conflict zones. Such initiatives can gradually compensate for the current imbalance between hard and soft strategies.



This primary exploration of the limits of security-focused hard strategies and one-dimensional soft strategies therefore suggests the need for a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach that aims at understanding the patterns, trajectories and factors making young people embrace violent extremism.

### **From Short-Term to Long-Term Strategies: Towards Multidimensional Approaches**

Research demonstrates that the profiles of radicalised people vary as much as their personal reasons for joining, which rely on both pull and push factors. This requires an in-depth study of the pull factors deployed by violent groups such as IS. Such a study could be made through extensive analysis of the propaganda discourses disseminated by these groups to multiple audiences.

#### *Analysing Pull Factors: a Window of Opportunity for CVE Strategies*

The analysis of the pull factors deployed by VE groups has a profound political implication: it leads to the admission that these groups – although primarily seen as promoters of violence and terrorism – propose alternatives to the existing options facing vulnerable/interested individuals.

Indeed, an in-depth analysis of the propaganda discourse of VE groups underlines the use of attractive “rewards”, all tailored to different segments of their audience. IS and other groups manage to attract people of different backgrounds precisely because their branched propaganda apparatus resorts to narrowcasting: targeted communication aimed at those who are attracted to violent groups for reasons other than violence, such as material rewards (job, housing, a wife), humanitarian reasons (“helping Muslims against tyranny”), friendship, adventure-seeking, a sense of belonging, practising a pure form of Islam or taking part in a holy project (the caliphate). These groups manage to create imagined communities – virtual communities engendering a sense of togetherness – that contrast with the environment in which candidates for VE find themselves (Anderson, 1982). This is achieved through the traditional methods of cults: isolation to cut the individual off from their environment (i.e. breaking ties with friends, family, etc.) and absorption of the individual into a new group (the organisation) that acts as the individual’s new family.



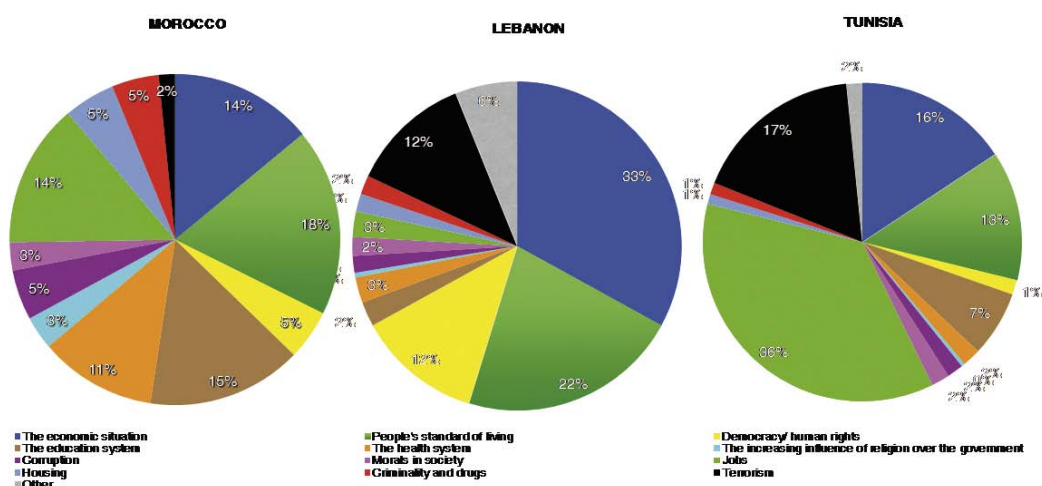
As a matter of fact and according to official sources, between 20% and 30% of foreign fighters return to their homeland. With the exception of the few returnees with the objective of pursuing their fight in their homeland, most returnees decide to return home because they are disillusioned by their experience, the injustice and violence they have witnessed, or because they feel they have been manipulated. This variety of profiles of both FFs and returnees, together with tailored propaganda from VE groups, suggests that FFs should be dealt with on an individual basis. Yet, putting all these diverse individuals into the “potential terrorists” category is a one-dimensional approach that cannot address the main goal: analysing what makes VE groups attractive in order to eventually bring into disrepute their propaganda and propose alternative narratives. Furthermore, merging returnees into the very same category of “potential terrorists”, security-focused policies may therefore prevent states from benefiting from the returnees’ value as a source of intelligence, as well as, and above all, their potential as prominent actors in establishing legitimate counter-narratives.

From a long-term perspective, theories of motivation are thus required to diversify the categories of analysis. Government and security forces may resort to these categories to better assess violent extremist discourses and methods. In the long run, this can help reach the objective of reintegrating into society individuals who were effectively indoctrinated. In addition to that, this approach should more specifically focus on VE groups’ recruitment strategies (practical and ideological) as a way to build up powerful and attractive counter-narratives: this would lead to a shift from generic counter-narratives to concrete alternative positive narratives focused on youth opportunities (Clark, 2015), the sense of belonging, autonomy and significance. This requires a comprehensive approach also focusing on concrete push factors.

#### *CVE in the Youth Agenda: The Need for Integrated Strategies*

Such an approach also has a significant political implication: it leads to the admission that states and policies have so far failed to address a series of structural problems that lead to violent extremism. It also involves a theoretical implication: as a wide range of factors and parameters influence individual trajectories, this approach requires a broader multidimensional perspective to cover as many push factors as possible.

Figure 3: What are the three main problems facing your country in the near future?



Source: SAHWA Youth Survey 2015/2016 (Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon).

### *Violent Extremism as a Form of Political Engagement*

Politically speaking, the recent context in which this phenomenon has accelerated can be roughly articulated around two moments. Firstly, the so-called “Arab Spring”, which raised huge expectations in terms of participation and democratisation. Five years after calls for regime change and/or constitutional reforms meant to solidify the revolutionary hopes, youth expectations have not been matched by institutional responses in terms of improving social inclusion and state-citizen relationship. Political parties and forces which initially represented an alternative became parties in government, met various fates and ended up losing their oppositional role while the main youth issues (employment, housing, transition to adult life) remained broadly unaddressed. In addition, resistance to regime change occurred in Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and above all Syria, tipping the last three countries over into civil war.

Secondly, beyond the regional developments that brought these situations about (the Syrian conflict's spillover into Iraq, civil war in Libya), the first reading of the situation in Syria and Libya by MENA and western countries may explain one key fact: many MENA countries did not initially adopt measures to prevent some of their nationals leaving to Syria to fight against the Syrian regime and fatwas were even issued by local sheikhs to justify the fight against the Syrian regime, which allows us

to talk about a tacit approval in some cases. It is therefore of crucial importance to consider the change in the reading of these conflicts as well as the FF phenomenon: this change is due to the proliferation of violent groups within rebel groups, the rise of IS and its subsequent terrorists attacks targeting foreign countries.

### *Unemployment: At the Heart of Violent Extremism?*

From an economic perspective, the overrepresentation of FFs from MENA countries in Syria and Iraq is seen as a result of an economic situation particularly affecting the youth in the region. Traditional frameworks of analysis linking violence to poverty have been used to explain the FF phenomenon. With the world's highest youth unemployment rate (from 25% to 60%), a possible – albeit weak – correlation could be made between high levels of unemployment and the substantial number of FFs.

The SAHWA Project's research shows that employment is a key element for young people in the region since it guarantees access to adult life (economic emancipation, marriage, etc.) (Sanchez Garcia, Feixa Pàmpols & Laine, 2014). SAHWA's Ethnographic Fieldwork underlines how young people suspect financial and material reasons are the main pull factors for joining VE.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, migration to Syria and Iraq is even considered an alternative form of migration.<sup>3</sup> A study carried out by *the Observatoire du Nord des droits de l'homme* (ONERDH) actually confirmed that the improvement of living standards was among the main push factors (Observatoire du Nord des droits de l'homme [ONERDH], 2014). That said, the fact that VE groups offer paid “jobs, houses and wives” to young people coming from the region is not anecdotal.

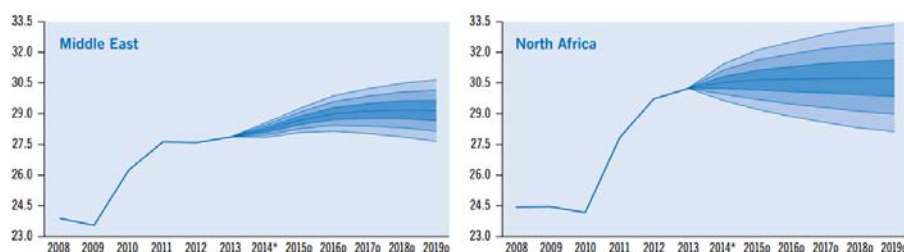
Nevertheless, this does not mean that all unemployed young people are potential terrorists but rather suggests considering youth unemployment as an additional push factor in VE. Following Ted Robert Gurr's theory on relative deprivation (Gurr,

<sup>2</sup> “In Libya, Daesh occupied Syrte, a region rich in oil... in the middle of the country to sell oil. These are considerable amounts of money. They give each recruited young person up to 30 or 40 thousand dinars per month, in addition, to support their families... It is normal that young people are tempted by terrorism,” a 26-year-old Tunisian said (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork, TN\_LS\_3).

<sup>3</sup> “There are young people who get to such a state of despair that they choose one of the two, as for the one who chooses neither one nor the other you ought to know that he has a certain degree of awareness that protects him!”, a young Tunisian said (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork TN\_LS\_1).

1970), violence does not take root in absolute deprivation but rather in relative deprivation. In this regard, specific attention should be paid to the particular patterns of youth unemployment in the MENA region where highly qualified, educated young people suffer more from unemployment than any other group. This widens the gap between individuals' expectations (job, salary and lifestyle) and reality within broader segments of the population than merely unemployed lower-class people. Added to the mismatch between education skills and the labour market, the lack of economic opportunities for educated people contributes exacerbating the gap between expectations and reality and thereby feeds the feeling of relative deprivation.

**Figure 4: Youth Unemployment in the MENA Region**



Source: ILO, Trends Econometric Models, April 2015.<sup>4</sup>

In a broader perspective, recent research on Arab youth confirmed Gurr's theory: the drivers of political violence are rooted in the sense of injustice, discrimination, corruption and abuse by security forces (Mercy Corps, 2015). In this respect, one of the most counterproductive risks of the security approach is to make room for practices that could further push vulnerable individuals into violent extremism. These include:

1. Resorting to the freedom vs. security "dilemma": exaggerating the terrorist threat or labelling voices that criticise the regimes as extremist to further restrict freedom of speech (Sika, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> The charts depict the evolution of global and regional unemployment rates between 2008 and 2014 as well as unemployment rate projections for 2015 to 2019. Projections are presented in the form of a fan chart, indicating the probability of various outcomes for the unemployment rates. Each shade of the fans corresponds to a third of the confidence interval around the central projection.

2. Promoting non-legal practices under the pretext of national security (imprisonment without trial, use of torture, violations of human rights, etc.).
3. Criminalising conservative religious groups and movements (e.g. quietist Salafis) instead of seeing them as ideological counterweights to violent extremism.

The structural causes of each of these drivers of political violence should therefore be included in a long-term and comprehensive approach. This would enable VE to be fought as it is, as well as preventing more people from joining VE groups. In line with this comprehensive approach, initiatives implemented in many FF-affected countries such as Denmark (Early Prevention Programme), Canada, Germany (HAYAT) and the UK try to address push factors as much as possible in order to either prevent people from joining these groups or to reinsert returnees into society: in addition to promoting counter-narratives, they provide assistance in employment, education and housing and address the affective environment in which vulnerable individuals find themselves through psychological counselling.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

Analysing the limits of the current hard strategies and security-focused approaches makes room for a broader rethink of the frameworks of interpretation of the FF phenomenon, and the tools and methods for better addressing violent extremism. In this regard, the existing imbalance between hard and soft strategies can be compensated to: i) minimise the long-term negative effect of security measures such as repression and the restriction of freedom; ii) better understand the interrelated pull and push factors leading to violent extremism; and iii) engage with vulnerable groups in the field through non-state actors. This requires a shift towards soft strategies that aim at addressing the structural factors that affect potential candidates for VE (a sense of injustice, lack of opportunities, a feeling of social exclusion).

Accordingly, current soft strategies should opt for multidimensional approaches to VE with a focus on all possible pull and push factors towards it: this should include theories of motivations as well as recruitment strategies. In this regard,

given the weight and variety of long-term problems in the individual trajectories of foreign fighters (social exclusion, unemployment, state-citizen relations, etc.), programme-oriented action research on violent extremism should be further promoted to better develop comprehensive approaches.

The local level should be the privileged field for soft strategies. The emphasis on multi-agency approaches maximises the potential for establishing dialogue and relations of trust with an extensive range of actors engaging with vulnerable groups and individuals. In this regard, government and security forces' involvement should be reduced to make space for non-state actors such as the families of vulnerable individuals/FFs/ex-detainees, teachers, local authorities, civil society actors and community members.

These approaches to violent extremism and multi-agency-based strategies require dealing with “extremist” elements as individual cases, i.e., mobilising all relevant actors, beyond security forces, who are in contact with these individuals (family, friends, teachers, etc.) in order to provide a relevant assessment of their situation. This will give CVE a broader objective – reinserting vulnerable individuals into society – while allowing the considerable potential of returnees and ex-detainees in terms of counter-narrative strategies and intelligence to be explored.

Beyond intelligence sharing, exchanges of practices and experiences should be further enhanced at the global level. As the FF phenomenon affects over 80 countries, there is the potential to diversify approaches to and means of fighting violent extremist ideologies and groups. In parallel, CVE should also be considered as a long-term objective when dealing with the potential future developments of the Syria-Iraq crisis, the civil wars in Libya and Yemen and the ongoing fights between the Egyptian army and “IS-Sinai Province”. Not only could a deterioration of the security situation in these countries feed VE, but it may also further destabilise neighbouring countries as the case of Tunisia shows (Zelin, 2015).

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