



# Human Security to Counter Violent Extremism

## MIDTERM MEETING REPORT

### **PREVENTING THE SPILL OVER: COMBATting VIOLENT EXTREMISM (VE) WITH A HUMAN SECURITY (HS) APPROACH IN PALESTINE, EGYPT AND IRAQ**

**Monday 25<sup>th</sup> & Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> of June  
The Hague, the Netherlands**

#### **Executive Summary**

On the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of June, the midterm meeting for the project **“Preventing the spill-over: combatting violent extremism (CVE) with a human security (HS) approach in Palestine, Egypt and Iraq,”** took place in The Hague. The meeting was organized by the Netherlands Institute of International Relation Clingendael together with its consortium partners Human Security Collective (Netherlands), Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (Egypt), The Center for Democracy and Community Development (Palestine) and the Strategic and Political Research Centre (Iraq). The project is funded under the framework of the NWO-WOTRO Security and Rule of Law Strategic Research Fund Project on “Comprehensive Approaches to Human Security in Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings: Transnational Dimensions.”

The meeting brought together consortium members, stakeholders from national/international policymaking, as well as practitioners and representatives from academia with the aim of **sharing practical and context-specific knowledge and experiences on the challenges and opportunities in the facilitation of locally owned and HS-grounded security agendas.**

Mid-term outcomes were shared and analysed. Furthermore, an extensive exchange of challenges and opportunities encountered by the various stakeholders in the development of a HS approach to CVE took place. All participants brought their unique set of experiences and knowledge, culminating in a shared understanding of how, and under what conditions, a HS-approach can effectively address the drivers of violent extremism (VE).

## **Report of the 2 day midterm meeting**

### **Day I – Understanding the local context in a dynamic region**

In the opening session, the project background and context was laid out as well as the objectives of the meeting. How HS is envisioned by the project, and therefore the consortium members was clarified. It was explained that an inclusive and comprehensive human security approach can alleviate, contain and prevent VE, as it directly and affirmatively addresses the potential threats to the security and welfare of individuals and communities through the mutually reinforcing pillars of protection and empowerment. Moreover, a HS approach to countering violent extremism is people-centred and participatory, fostering engagement between civil society groups and the whole of government while improving local ownership. This however, is failing to be implemented due to the trust deficit between communities and the security sector, as well as the shrinking of civic space, often due to counter-terrorism (CT) measures. It was highlighted that the project aims to merge research and practice by not only validating push and pull factors of violent extremism, but also by developing and applying a HS-approach to address these push/pull factors. It was emphasized that, with the aim of facilitating locally-owned and HS-grounded security agendas, it is very valuable to exchange ideas, best practices, and needs between communities and various other stakeholders. Engagement between the various stakeholders, on all levels, is key. So is trust. Fostering these key ingredients is what a HS approach is all about. Through the relational tool of engagement, the emancipatory objective of reaching higher degrees of HS among communities can be reached. Furthermore, it was added that we need to help each other in pressuring governments to include civil society. In the end, inclusive, comprehensive strategies are needed to effectively counter the threat posed by violent extremism, which requires continuous exchange of ideas, and a shared commitment.

### **Session I – Changing perceptions, policy shifts: recent developments in a dynamic and changing region**

#### **Egypt & Libya – Countering Violent Extremism in the South of the Mediterranean**

The comparison between the case of Libya and Egypt brought to the surface some of the key dilemmas. These dilemmas, including the absence of a coherent P/CVE strategy, and the dominance of hard security measures, featured prominently in the discussions held throughout the midterm meeting.

Firstly, the distinction, or rather the lack of a clear distinction between terrorism and radicalisation was identified as not only creating confusion and vagueness in legislation, but further contributing to the failure to address the core issues rather than the symptoms of violent extremism. Secondly, on top of this, long-term strategies and policies were said to be lacking. Where in Libya there is a major reliance on military confrontation and political bargaining, in the Egyptian case, CT policies are motivated by crisis management rather than long term planning. Consequently, the approach taken was labelled as reactive rather than preventive. Lastly, and again building on the two previous dilemmas, in both countries, there is an absolute reliance on hard security. In the case of Egypt it was mentioned that state actors dominate the security landscape at the expense of non-state actors.

When discussing the motivations to join violent extremist groups, it was emphasized and reiterated several times throughout the 1,5 day meeting that these remain very much context specific. In both Egypt and Libya the post-revolutionary environment can be considered conducive for breeding violent extremism. In Egypt, factors such as political closure, polarization and marginalization as well as vengeance sentiments were considered to feature prominently. In Libya, the role of geographical/tribal affiliation was highlighted. Furthermore, the social status component was mentioned. It was suggested that within conflict settings, the role of ideology, namely radical Islam, may be less significant. In other settings however, it was added that pro-violent religious discourses feature prominently. Furthermore, it was added that the life cycle of radicalisation is shrinking, and groups do no longer spend a lot of time grooming their members. This is posing significant challenges to countering radicalisation.

Domestic as well as regional implications were discussed. In the case of Egypt, it was highlighted that the decrease in terrorist attacks is interpreted by the state as a success of hard security measures. They fail to see that it is actually breeding new groups. Violent extremism in the case of Libya was referred to by one

participant as turning into territorial terrorism. Furthermore, it was said to prolong the conflict in a significant way, as it impedes on the process of political settlement. Regionally, it was mentioned that Arab countries lack rehabilitation mechanisms to deal with foreign fighters.

### **Palestine – US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel: growing sense of alienation among Palestinians**

It was observed that though the Palestinian case bears some similarities to the Egyptian and Iraqi cases, it has an additional component as VE cannot be discussed in the Palestinian context without addressing the Israeli Occupation. It was raised that VE in Palestine is not only an internal issue, but also something that comes from outside. It was therefore considered necessary to look at the historical sociological aspects. References were made to the settler colonial project and its international, regional/Middle Eastern and domestic implications (Intermestic). Furthermore, the concept of state terrorism and group terrorism were discussed with attention to low intensity conflict, land grab and group violence. The sentiments amongst Palestinians were shared, highlighting that, taking into account the recent developments, the language and terminology used by various stakeholders, and the term violent extremism in particular had been problematized several times during engagements. It was stressed that the occupation remains to be the main cause fostering feelings of insecurity, including grievances resulting from limited freedom of movement and daily humiliation. Consequently, a different layer was added to the Palestinian case, as it is not only the aim of the project to prevent Palestinians from *turning* to violent extremism, but also to prevent Palestinians *against* violent extremism. The infighting between Fatah and Hamas was added as one of the factors, together with that of growing Islamism.

Several interventions addressed the issue of definitions, all highlighting that the term used can only be properly understood when put in context as the meaning may change according to the context in which it is used. It was mentioned that the term extremism can delegitimize the peoples struggle. Furthermore, it was said that states usually use the term, whereas the terms used by societal actors may differ. Sometimes the distinction between political violence and violent extremism is blurred, particularly in conflict settings.

### **Iraq - Post-referendum Kurdistan and post-Daesh stabilization: challenges and opportunities to inclusive human security**

Similar to the Egyptian case, the lack of a coherent P/CVE strategy was highlighted. An extra dimension was added, given the low levels of trust between the central government in Baghdad and the regional government in Erbil. Consequently, it was stressed that they fail to work together in creating a coherent and inclusive strategy. On top of this, the role of the private sector was discussed, as, following the Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction for Iraq; the private sector will play a significant role in the reconstruction process. There are many important issues, including the issue of prisoners and of abandoned children of Daesh fighters and Yezidi women, which remain completely unaddressed. The prioritization of hard security measures and the military strategy in the post-Daesh stabilization phase was said to be impeding on the development of a HS approach. Yet, while Daesh may be defeated, the mentality is not. The challenge ahead of us, as it was repeatedly emphasized, is to address the needs of the people, as in one form or another, Daesh or a similar group can (re)appear easily if they are not. It was brought to the attention that in Iraq in particular, there is a history or culture of violence, which is very important to understand. It was brought up several times that vengeance is very prominent, and consequently, there is a great need for reconciliation efforts. The communication aspect featured in many of the discussions on Iraq, where mutual understanding and respect is key, yet very much lacking due to there being relatively little communication between various communities. As one participant mentioned, CVE in the Iraqi case has two components, a religious one, and an ethnic element. This ethnic element, and the growing sectarian behaviour and language are fostering division.

It was highlighted by several participants that even though the picture sketched is quite pessimistic, there is also a lot of good work being done, including projects aimed at fostering communication between various communities. It was highlighted that we should have more strengths-based approaches for working with communities, and particularly when working with women. It was said that in the Egyptian case, radicalization created a new framework, which is hampering women's empowerment. Furthermore, around the Arab world, the patriarchal discourse impedes on women's empowerment. The role of women was discussed, including their role as stakeholders and not just victims or survivors. On the other hand, it was added that women can also be perpetrators.

## **Session II – The local context: challenges and opportunities in facilitating the development of a HS approach to CVE**

### **CVE with a Human Security approach in Egypt**

The researchers presented the work that they have been involved in in the past year and a half, while reflecting on the challenges and opportunities they have encountered. They brought to the fore that there have been little quantitative studies that try to make sense of the security situation. Through the research that they did, they found that though there is a decrease in terrorist attacks, the attacks are increasingly intense and targeting civilians. While the security sector has been successful in creating an environment in which it is difficult to execute an attack, they questioned whether this is sustainable. Some of the challenges they encountered while conducting research included the reliability of sources, the ability to reach the 'local community', low level officials as well as certain governorates, but also the polarizing climate they work in, which is fed by the media. They also highlighted the challenges they encounter in rendering the 'HS approach' (i.e. people-centred and participatory) more appealing in an increasingly hard-core securitized environment, particularly now that there is less political will due to the decline of terrorist activities. The security sector claims the success, rendering the need for other 'soft' approaches less prominent. They suggested shedding light on some Egyptian, as well as regional and international best practices, including the historical methods in CVE that used HS tools in the '90s. These included engagement with Islamic Jihad in prisons as well as reintegration programs after prison. It was suggested that it might be very valuable to present to stakeholders not only why in some governorates the number of attacks is very high, but also why in some governorates it is not, and link this, where possible, to the human security approaches to counter violent extremism. The researchers referred to the multi-stakeholder platform that was created, in which various security stakeholders take part. This can be considered a ground-breaking platform, and they hope that they will be able to continue holding meetings in the future, expanding on the participants if possible.

### **CVE with a Human Security approach in Iraq**

The Iraqi partners at the Strategic and Political Research Centre of the Salahadeen University explained how they started by analysing the state structures in Iraq, seeking to engage government structures with the end goal of getting a seat at the table in the drafting of a national P/CVE action plan. It was described how the urgency of the situation, as well as the need for inclusive and comprehensive strategies is not recognized sufficiently by the authorities. The following example is illustrative in this regard. More than 50 letters were sent to ministries and other governmental stakeholders. Yet, they only heard back from the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The lack of responses was labelled as one of the challenges. Some of the other challenges laid out included the diversity in Iraq, meaning that your findings will be very different when conducting research in Kurdistan, then when conducting research in Southern Iraq. They also brought up the point of definitions; when should something be labelled violent extremism, and when is it better referred to as political violence or simply violence? Thirdly, the issue of conflicting perceptions was mentioned, and the challenge of combining them in your research. As was highlighted, even Daesh enjoyed some sort of acceptance amongst some communities. The views and perceptions you gather will depend on the communities you talk to. Concerning the findings, they re-iterated the lack of a HS approach in policy making. It was highlighted that a HS approach is very difficult to apply because of protracted conflict; as the country currently finds itself in the stabilisation phase, the focus is on fighting Daesh instead of meeting the needs of the people. It was added that you need to combine a hard security approach, with a human security approach. Right now, however, the latter is completely missing. Feelings of insecurity were said to be paramount, particularly feelings of insecurity about the future. The referendum and the development after are only fuelling these sentiments, as people feel betrayed. There is a lack of access to information, and people do not feel that the police is there to protect them. As a result, people start to take security matters into their own hands. Community policing was extensively discussed. While this can foster positive results, it can also become very problematic, particularly due to the division that is plaguing Iraq. Some recommendations were added, including the need to strengthen local governance, as well as to (re)created legitimate institutions at the state level.

### **CVE with a Human Security approach in Palestine**

It was highlighted that Trump's Jerusalem Declaration is yet another blow to the '*Palestinian street*' in the ongoing saga for rights and recognition; reinforcing existing sentiments of alienation and disillusionment

following an accumulation of setbacks and crushed expectations including 'Oslo's failure and Palestinian political rivalry to name just a few. Some of the grievances were discussed in more detail, which include daily humiliation and limited freedom of movement under the occupation, as well as lack of economic development. One participant described the extensive and tiring journey she had to undertake in order to reach The Hague. In light of the research conducted in Palestine, non-violent communication as a tool in the Human Security toolbox was discussed. As the current economic and political situation is conducive to result in radicalization, it was said that non-violent communication can be very helpful in addressing the anger and frustration many people in Palestine are dealing with. The exchange of feelings of grievances among a group of different stakeholders can already contribute to better understanding and building trust. Some of the challenges mentioned included the concept of violent extremism not being well-received, or even rejected in Palestine. Instead, people are seeking to find ways of getting rid of the occupation, rather than trying to make life better under it. Consequently, the recommendations include the internationalization of the conflict, alongside non-violent activities on the ground. In reaction, one participant highlighted the need to lay out grievances, and to build trust, and foster mutual understanding, for instance through non-violent communication. It was added that, while you need to change perceptions on the international and national level, it already helps to have it on a societal level.

### **Session III – Panel: How can we address these challenges and opportunities at the local level?**

During this session, several non-consortium participants presented on the work they have been involved in, which includes projects with a similar thematic as well as geographical focus. New insights and reflections fed and enriched the discussions, and many challenges and opportunities were touched upon. Again, the importance of merging research and implementation was stressed, as P/CVE programs need to cater to the local context. Furthermore, the need to involve governments, and particularly the security sector was highlighted. As exposure to violence, particularly, violence inflicted by the state, is considered to be a key predictor of who engages in violence, these are issues that need to be taken into account and discussed, where possible, in a constructive matter with the states in question. In the case of Egypt, it was said that though there might be a lot of coherence between security actors, civil society is not involved. It was added that there is a need for something in the middle, which can be trusted by society. For example, when mothers feel their children are radicalising, there needs to be a place where they can go. Consequently, they are trying to offer a pattern of interaction, which broadens the scope of actors to not only include the state. Repeatedly, the need for inclusion was stressed. Nevertheless, one participant added that we should be wary of where inclusion stops. The examples of Bosnia and Lebanon were flagged in this regard.

Differences and similarities between the three regions were discussed, including the contrasts in security landscape between Iraq and Egypt, ranging from completely fragmented to highly centralized. Both landscapes create challenges as well as opportunities of their own, and policies and strategies need to be adjusted accordingly. The challenge with on the one hand, trying to cater to the need of getting the conversation about VE going, while at the same time, knowing that these discussion are very sensitive, was discussed. In this regard, it was mentioned that people often do not consider themselves to be radicalising. Some suggestions were made, including the need to run positive campaigns, in which the ways in which people are already dealing with grievances are taken at the starting point. Furthermore, it was said that it is very important that we discuss only those grievances that we as practitioners can actually address; we need to take into consideration the repercussions of crushed hopes and frustrated expectations. In response to the comment that we have weak demobilised societies which impedes on our attempts to improve state-society relations, it was said that there is a need to create active citizens through workshops, and other forms of activities. The need to include faith leaders was mentioned. Though, some brought up the ambiguous role of Imams when it comes to countering radicalization, as people seem to be more and more moved by the texts than by the individuals conveying these texts.

The first day ended with some remarks on the need to find a language that captures all three cases in order to combine them in an academic frame. It was mentioned that the HS approach can be very valuable in this regard, as in all three countries, we aim to bring the bottom-up and the top-down processes together with the intent to improve state-society relations in the long run. Final remarks stressed that although it may sometimes feel like a hopeless situation, it is our duty to keep looking for factors and opportunities for change. They might be small scale, but we have to set positive examples. It is clear that we are dealing with a very complex situation, as everything is still evolving and changing every day. Consequently, it was repeated that we have to

be very flexible with our responses, keep testing our premises and always keeping in mind, gender equality, evidence based approaches and the do no harm principle.

## **Day 2 – Identifying cross regional links, similarities and differences**

In an effort to smoothen the road ahead, while connecting the bottom-up focus and top-down processes, the aim of the second day was set at hearing from policy makers their concerns and needs. It proved to be a very valuable endeavour, as it fostered the exchange of ideas between the various stakeholders, while underscoring the shared commitment.

### **Session IV – Panel: Looking for the transnational aspects/overlapping trends, challenges and opportunities**

Some of the challenges that are faced by international and national policy makers were discussed. International and regional organizations remain dependent on Member States to accept their offer to provide technical assistance. The UN agencies providing technical assistance are guided by strategic documents produced by the UN, such as the PVE Plan of Action. It was highlighted that these documents impact the mandate of regional UN desks. As such the international level directly impacts the national level. Nevertheless, Member States remain in the lead, as they are the ones deciding on the issues in which the UN can get involved. Nevertheless, it was stressed that even where the UN does not run particular projects, they always try to bring important issues to the attention of governments. Furthermore, with UNDP being a development organization, they will always try to interact at the local level. It was mentioned that initially, UNDP was afraid they would jeopardize their neutral position when involving themselves in PVE. They are currently differentiating between PVE specific programming, and PVE related programming. It was further highlighted that international and regional organizations are very valuable platforms when there is limited bilateral discussion and interaction. The issue of funding was raised. Furthermore, one participant highlighted that national governments are sometimes reluctant to get involved in financially supporting particular initiatives as they lack the overview and fear circumventing official authorities. Again, trust was repeatedly mentioned as the key word.

The need for a regional approach alongside a localized approach, as violent extremism has no borders was highlighted in this panel. Again, the importance of evidence-based research was reiterated, along with the need for continuous impact assessments. One participant mentioned that, as there is no agreed upon definition, the UN will provide tailor made programming. Furthermore, it was again stressed that, as the security sector is part of the problem, it also needs to be included in the solution. The need to cooperate with the private sector was mentioned. Furthermore, the interest on behalf of state actors in countering the narrative of VE on the Internet was highlighted, as well as the requests received for assistance in the development of plans for prisons as well as refugee camps. Some questions were raised including how we deal with states where the central government is very weak, such as in Libya, Yemen or Syria; and whether international organizations have strategies for boosting their credibility in certain countries. Furthermore, the do no harm approach was raised again in this context, as one participant mentioned the importance of thinking about the normative theory: who invites who; what are the guiding principles; how and in what manner are ideas developed? It was promising to hear that there is broad support for the human security approach within international and regional organizations. At NATO, which is and remains a very security oriented organization, there is a shift towards a more HS focused strategy, which includes the gender perspective.

A statement made by one participant is very revealing of the complexities, and the continuous commitment required, namely that VE really shows you everything that has gone wrong in a society. There is no quick fix; we need long term investment, and all stakeholders involved in order to tackle the difficult issues at hand.

## **Session V - Break out group discussion: How do we accommodate for these challenges and opportunities to shape international, national and local policies?**

Each of the break out groups explored key recommendations and/or takeaways following the discussions in the morning, and the day before. Afterwards each group reported back to the plenary. The following recommendations were presented:

### **Group I**

1. In order to operationalize the HS approach, one should distinguish between phases and try to adjust the HS approach according to the phase the country or region finds itself in, be it active conflict, stabilisation phase, etc.
2. National and local action is by no means mutually exclusive. Human Security should be seen as the starting point, not an end goal.
3. Closing the gap between policy makers and practitioners by catering to the needs of policy makers through mapping of power-relations as well as mapping of who is involved in which project to present to donors/policy makers

### **Group II**

1. Focus on prevention and resilience building. In the ME, the role of law enforcement/state violence is very prominent and this undermines trust in the state. It is crucial to make them aware of this, and to foster resilience in communities such that they are empowered to enter into dialogue.
2. There needs to be more attention for psycho-social needs/mental health issues. Women can play an important role in this regard.
3. Engagement with the security sector (police and military) is pivotal. When direct contact is impossible, it is important to find someone who can foster dialogue between the local communities and the security sector.

### **Group III**

1. Promoting Social cohesion/inclusion through building trust within and between stakeholders
2. Enhancing local ownership of HS and building on local initiatives by translating the HS principles into a more understandable and graspable language
3. Improving the people's livelihood by stressing on the socio-economic aspects of HS
4. Design a CT narrative to dismantle the commonly used ideological arguments for terrorism