

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

22-24 giugno 2022



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Violent extremism drivers and P/CVE strategies in MENA region

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LINGUE/LANGUAGES: English

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Violent extremism is linked to complex forms of interaction between the religious environment and the political context in each society of the states of the Middle East and North Africa region. In these countries, to the political polarization within societies, has been added a religious polarization feeding the political affiliations. This accentuation in the political relations has occurred with the recent political and social upheavals which have affected this region over the past ten years.

In the Arab world, youth face unemployment, obstacles preventing their civic engagement and political freedom. They were also disappointed with the results of the revolutions and public policies to tackle the lack of economic opportunities, corruption and harassment of the security services (Ennaifer 2018, Hostrup et al. 2017). As a result, the accentuation of internal divisions and tensions, coupled with poor social, political and economic conditions, favored the spread of radical movements. These countries still struggle with the legacies of colonialism and wars that continue to fuel political, religious and ethnic polarization through conflicting interpretations of history, memory and victimization – mainly conveyed by media controlled by elites who are often close to power. This leads people to share a sense of defeatism and perpetual injustice in fragile states which are controlled by corrupt politicians who have at best failed to emancipate their peoples, or worse, programmed their subjugation.

Education is a central pillar in establishing or preventing violent extremism. In its broader sense, it is a factor of collective construction, transmission, socialization of values, insertion and inclusion, and learning rules. Its role takes place in both formal and informal settings, such as schools, neighborhoods, religious schooling, municipalities, associations, etc.

The vulnerable factors leading to violent extremism in Arab countries are generally based on the weakness of state institutions.

The fragility of state institutions leads religious leaders and institutions to become political actors. In some cases, the constitution gives the right for religious institutions to practice their role without state intervention. In addition to their revenues collected from their communities, religious institutions benefit from allocations as well as tax exemption and receive grants for their institutions and personnel (Al-Haddad 2020). In return, they are used by governments to prevent political unrests. For instance, during social uprisings, religious institutions utilize faith to split the crowds. Thus, religious institutions can influence government policies to achieve political goals. However, when their political demands are not met, they can put pressure on governments and even resort to violent extremism (Radwan El-Sayyed, 2018). In a process of radicalization, individuals justify acts of mistrust of a system deemed unjust and incapable of responding to popular aspirations. Violence is then perceived as a means of pressure and affirmation against the State (Mandaville, Nozell, 2017).

Due to the expansion of regional polarization, the weakness of these states gives also the power to foreign countries to directly intervene in their political affairs. In some countries, political and religious polarizations are considered the main vulnerability drivers that directly affect their political structure. The sectarian division between Sunnis and Shiites has continued to exist after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, with several Sunni leaders fearing a loss of power and due to the sectarian policies of the Shia-

based government (Juergensmeyer 2018). During and since the Syrian war, religious leaders gained more legitimacy despite state institutions. However, in the meantime, the power of formal leaders decreased in favor of informal leaders to whom people turned as they could take advantage from their interrelated and complex vulnerabilities. To name a few: poverty, domination of other groups, oppression, or because they live in remote areas, where state power and services are poor...

In MENA countries, the demands of democratization and political participation are mostly denied, and the peaceful demonstrations are repressed. In addition to this iron fist in which the states exert their power, courts are politicized and issue arrest warrants against prominent opponents under the allegation of supporting terrorism. State power abuses are given, in some cases, a sectarian interpretation. For instance, in Iraq, some Sunni leaders portrayed state oppression as a Shiite aggression and allied with extremist organizations to protect their areas which were the main recipients for extremist groups propaganda. As a response to the spread of the Islamic state in Iraq, Shiite groups organized their resistance and formed the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). However, in both cases, these groups constituted a threat to state's sovereignty. In MENA region, Islam is not the only religion where violent extremism factors exist. Other religious as well as ethnic communities are also proven to host violent extremism manifestations.

In North Africa, like in the Middle East, vulnerability factors are caused by internal and external challenges. For instance, despite the success of the Tunisian revolution in 2011, the successive governments were still affected by corruption and the weak political system. Hence, while the country was still hesitating about establishing its new political system to replace the old regime, the Jihadist groups were taking action and many young Tunisians joined the Islamic state on the southern frontier between Tunisia and Libya. In addition, the spread of informal religious institutions, the emergence of Islamist political parties, the openness to regional military axes, and the corrupt governments in North Africa are all factors of vulnerability to the spread of extremist groups.

In MENA countries, ethnic and religious divisions, poor governance and the failure of the rule of law strengthen people's trust in religious institutions which in some cases bypass state institutions. They penetrate all levels of society and pave the way for radicalization and recruitment. The development of faith-based organizations provides leadership and social protection work in place of the state. Religious organizations seize the opportunity to establish their influence, and impose a security challenge on the states which are already weakened by serious economic and political unrest that go beyond their capacity to provide a security response. It is therefore clear that the vacuum left by the state, especially in the poorest neighborhoods and towns, could be exploited by extremist groups to infiltrate society. Many studies show that religious institutions are more effective on the local level where remote provinces share common socio-economic features (e.g. polarized social space, high social cleavages, or high levels of economic deprivation).

As a consequence, the social phenomenon of violent extremism questions the relationship of the individual with traditional institutions such as the family, school, religion, the state, politics, justice, etc. This reveals the weakness of citizenship and the failure of public authorities to promote a sense of civic engagement. On the contrary, they confiscate public affairs and participate in the isolation and exclusion of citizens from the political arena. Civic engagement is even more complicated to achieve in a sectarian-based system where each community has its own privileges, in addition to its social, religious and legal institutions, such as in Iraq and Lebanon.

Despite the body of research on violent extremism in MENA, most studies are essentialist, normative, and empirically imprecise. To better understand the drivers of violent extremism, we propose to question the construction of radicalization and the dynamics of its translation into performance, over the long term of political relations in the MENA region. In the different realities giving rise to violent extremism, we will focus on the interactions between, on the one hand, the strategies of muzzling and repression of the States studied, and on the other hand, the organization of certain so-called extremist groups to fight against these conditions imposed by their States in order to offer a social and political alternative. The questions of engagement, of civil, armed, military and political participation since the Arab revolts will be raised in an articulation between the local, the national and the global levels. We will seek to understand how the relations between the political actors within these States are regionally articulated; how past

and present political conflicts between national actors are played out and constantly redraw the map of political and community affiliations, both in speech and in practice.

To address these questions, we are interested in collecting papers questioning the role of governance, public action and policies to counter violent extremism; the action of the law and the penitentiary institutions; media coverage of radicalization and extremism; local and citizen engagement; and sectarianism.

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