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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

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

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:**

**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.

**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

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## **Violent extremism drivers and P/CVE strategies in MENA region**

Chair: Marie Kortam, Associate Researcher at IFPO Beirut and Scientific Coordinator at FMSH for PAVE (H2020) project (Ifpo-FMSH)

### List of speakers and short abstracts:

Mohammed Sharqawi, PhD, research assistant for H2020 PAVE project at Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme - FMSH)

*"The complex forms of interaction between the religious environment and the political context in Lebanon"*

The Lebanese sectarian-based political system teaches us that communities grow stronger amid deep uncertainty. This system is strengthened today as long as the sectarian affiliations serve the categorization of the main political alignments of one community or another in this context. As the national affiliation passes through the sectarian canals, Lebanese political participations are expressed through their confessional affiliations. Our research conducted on the emergence of violent extremism and the manners to address this phenomenon aims to answer the question of why people turn to extremism while traditional representations still exist. In order to answer this question, we will study among other things the tendency to political over-interpretation, the compatibility between sectarian affiliations and Lebanese belonging, and the confusion between the political sphere and the religious sphere.

Lou Raisonier, PhD candidate at the School of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa.

*"Life in Jihad: the mujahidat of the Islamic state"*

At the time of writing, governments are deeply divided as to how to deal with the issue of female jihadists, the mujahidat, and their potential repatriation. In fact, women returning from the lands of the Islamic State (IS) pose a particular challenge to security and counterterrorism measures, which have been more concerned with the return of male fighters, the mujahideen. When looking at the women who have returned, one can notice that they have generally been treated more leniently than their male counterparts in the criminal justice system, namely due to false gender-based assumptions about their limited agency in violence. Indeed, authorities tend to infantilize them by stating that they have either been indoctrinated by men, or that they never wanted to resort to violence in the first place. I believe that this is a direct consequence of the lack of understanding and/or knowledge of their roles within the IS. Women's participation in violent extremist groups have hardly received any attention until the 2000s, even less so when it concerns their affiliation with jihadism. The literature on the topic tends to portray the women involved in the IS as passive victims, which prevents it from depicting a comprehensive picture that encompasses the full range of their contributions.

Melania Brito Clavijo, Autonomous University of Barcelona.

*"Human Rights Acrobatics. An assessment of Egypt's instrumentalization of counterterrorism legislation to constraint civil and political rights"*

In understanding the aggravation of the crises in the Arab countries that have followed the misnamed 'Arab Springs', the political tendency on the part of most regimes shows an evident change towards the reinforcement of authoritarianism. Eleven years after that revolutionary spirit that filled the public space with all kinds of pro-democratic slogans, hybrid regimes within this geography have resorted—and continue to do so—to one or another mechanism to legitimize an entrenchment in power that in most cases has a dire impact on human rights. This working paper delves into the case of the ultra-nationalist security discourse used by the military regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as a justification for the restriction of civil liberties in the Arab Republic of Egypt. Military omnipresence in Egypt is justified with allegations of safeguarding and defence of the nation against widespread terrorist and radicalized threats. Under the pretext of preventing these phenomena, and seizing the still operating framework of counterinsurgent

policies of the so-called 'War on Terror', the degraded state of human rights in Egypt shows signs of instrumentalizing the counter-terrorist discourse to decriminalize the curtailing of civil and political rights.

Sofia Verza (European University Institute), Tuncer Beyribey (Independent Researcher)

*"Discourses of Violent Extremism in Turkey in the 1970s: Power Struggles and Strategies"*

After 9/11, violent extremism and preventive strategies became a popular object of study, with a particular focus on Arabic/Islamist radicalization and extremism. As a result, these studies are momentarily limited in scope, locally focused, and ideologically constrained. Furthermore, they are oriented to problem-solving (Cox, 1981), in that they provide some broad strategies for dealing with the problem of radicalization without delving deeply into its socio-political dynamics. This paper argues for the importance of critical involvement in radicalization research. In this paper, we look at how the concepts of 'radicalization' and 'extremism' are used to address specific societal groups and mobilize specific security mechanisms against them. In this sense, the concepts of radicalization and extremism can be discursive instruments for historical blocs in their power struggle. In this light, Turkey in the 1970s, as a highly polarized and politically unstable country, characterized by subsequent economic and governmental crises, that was dealing with political violence between ideologically distinct groups (far-right and far-left), can serve as a valuable case study for understanding the historical construction of the problems of radicalization and extremism.

Alessandra Bonci (Université Laval) and Fabrizio Cuccu (Dublin City University)

*"Everyday security in democratizing Tunisia: re-enacting surveillance through religious narratives and gendered dynamics"*

The State control over religion is rooted in Tunisia's history, since Bourguiba elaborated a specific idea of a "Tunisian" Islam after independence. It has been common practice for the two authoritarian rulers to portray themselves as protectors of the country and creators of a state-led Islam. In order to do this, they employed a highly repressive security apparatus depicted as the only defence against radical Islamists. The 2011 revolution led to a temporary break of this cycle of control and repression and demonstrated, among other things, how many people were excluded by this mainstream idea of a Tunisian Islam. After a few years, however, the democratically elected governments reappropriated techniques and narratives similar to the ones used by Bourguiba and Ben Ali, depicting themselves as an example of a successful and moderate Islam and using the pre-revolutionary system of security and control. The aim of this paper is to examine how the common citizens adapt to this system of surveillance and control in their everyday life. To do this, we use qualitative interviews and ethnographic research with the goal to analyse how security measures take advantage of the work of civil servants (wa'ydhāt), and how these practitioners respond to the gendered dynamics existing in the security sector, and to the narratives used to legitimise the existing surveillance apparatus.