

DE-RADICALIZATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

COMPARING CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES

edited by **Lorenzo Vidino**
introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

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www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

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Introduction

In the past few years jihadist terrorism and radicalization have become some of the most critical threats to the Mediterranean region. Terrorist attacks in European, North African and Middle Eastern countries have endangered the thriving spirit of the area. Furthermore, conflicts in Libya, Syria and Iraq have degraded the security situation and paved the way for the emergence of new extremist groups such as the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Along with a general rise in ‘homegrown’ extremism, many Mediterranean countries were the source of a large exodus of foreign fighters who traveled to conflict zones and now face the danger of a return of extremist militants with combat skills and experience. Moreover, as authorities cracked down on terrorist networks, radicalization in prison has become an ever more critical challenge. Countering violent extremism (CVE) has thus become a crucial priority in the area. While the responses of local governments have been varied, with a greater focus on the use of hard-power, repressive measures, the need to add alternative actions of prevention and rehabilitation to the already existing repressive policies has been highlighted by authorities throughout the region. To emphasize this aspect of the fight against extremism, this ISPI report seeks to provide an analysis of the policies and measures adopted to counter violent extremism in different Mediterranean countries. In particular, it sheds light on the practices of the North African and Middle Eastern countries that have been affected the most by this phenomenon and have been at the forefront of the fight on terror, acquiring valuable experience throughout the years.

For this purpose, the experts brought together in this volume illustrate the policies of contrast, prevention and

de-radicalization that have been adopted by countries in the MENA region, revealing emerging trends, lessons learned and overviews of the security status of the countries in the area. Their findings demonstrate a diverse approach to CVE that attempts to match and counter the unique local conditions which drive radicalization in each state, while also seeking to provide insight and policy recommendations for CVE measures.

As shown in the report, while radicalization and extremism are a complex global phenomenon, the push and pull factors that mobilize people are usually highly localized and may differ from country to country. Furthermore, radicalization is a very individualized process, making it difficult and counterproductive to make broad generalizations about the factors that may lead to radicalization. Therefore, while extremism represents a common threat to the MENA region, it must be addressed in the manner appropriate to each country.

From this standpoint, the experiences of Mediterranean countries provide important lessons and takeaways because with the new surge of radicalization in the area governments have begun to draft and implement new national counter-terrorism strategies and policies. The ultimate goal of this ISPI report is to examine the measures that have been taken thus far, and offer points of reflection about this complex phenomenon.

In the first chapter, Lorenzo Vidino examines how, while Italy may appear to be a hub for jihadist mobilization and a target, it has not experienced the same surge in radicalization as most European countries. Nonetheless, while Italy has adopted many efficient repressive measures which have been able to address the situation thus far, several signs have emerged that suggest that the nature of radicalization in Italy is evolving and now requires the implementation of new preventive and de-radicalization policies.

Anina Schwarzenbach focuses on the French efforts to counter extremism and radicalization. Differently from Italy, France has been greatly affected by jihadist terrorism in the past few years. Twenty-four jihadist terror attacks have been carried out

in the nation since the establishment of the ‘Caliphate’ and around 1,700 individuals have left the country to fight in Syria and Iraq. Schwarzenbach concentrates on the ongoing social, political and legal debates in the country as well as on the measures that have been taken by French authorities, following attacks in 2014 and 2015, in an effort to prevent radicalization and rehabilitate radicalized individuals into society.

Fernando Reinares and Carola García-Calvo delve into Spain’s approach to countering jihadist extremism following the 2004 Madrid train bombings. The country was equipped with a well-prepared internal security apparatus, with long experience in dealing with internal terrorist groups like the Basque *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA). Furthermore, while the country had a history of jihadist extremist activity prior to the bombings, new counter-terrorism policies were implemented to better deal with jihadist terrorism following the Madrid attacks. The chapter further analyzes how, as the phenomenon evolved in the past few years and the need to implement a soft-power approach became more evident, further policies were enacted in an attempt to stem jihadist radicalization.

Chapter 4, by Jenna Consigli, instead provides an overview of the different approaches to countering violent extremism in North African and Middle Eastern countries, which have thus far been strongly centered around the hard-power approach. Consigli presents different case studies, which explore measures taken in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia. Her article seeks to provide a clear picture of the recent evolution of policies on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, and examine their issues, challenges and future prospects.

Similarly, El Mostafa Rezrazi provides insights on Morocco’s approach to countering violent extremism. Rezrazi analyzes the efficient Moroccan counter-terrorism policy that was enacted following the deadly bomb attacks in Casablanca in 2003. While Morocco has been successful in preventing further terrorist attacks on its soil since 2003, the threat of extremism and radicalization lingers and remains a threat to the security of the

kingdom. The chapter focuses on the various aspects of CVE in Morocco, which range from fighting poverty to security measures, religious oversight, reinforcement of the legal framework and rehabilitation instruments like the Moshala program, an initiative designed for reintegrating persons imprisoned for violent extremism and terrorist-related cases.

In her chapter, Emna Ben Arab, delves into the complex topic of counter-terrorism in Tunisia. Since the revolution in 2011, Tunisia has been one of the countries most affected by the rise of jihadist extremism, with groups like Ansar al-Sharia and the Islamic State, that have entrenched themselves in local communities. Furthermore, with the outbreak of the civil wars in Syria and Libya, Tunisia has become the country with the largest amount of foreign fighters per capita in the world. While the government's response has mainly been focused on security measures, a new national strategy adopted in 2016 refocused the fight on extremism and terrorism along four main axes: prevention, protection, judicial proceedings, and retaliation. Ben Arab analyzes the work that has been done so far and what further steps need to be taken in order to improve the country's response to the threat of jihadist terrorism.

Ziad A. Akl focuses on Egypt's approach to counter-terrorism. In the past few years Egypt has been struggling with a violent insurgency in the Sinai and has been hit by deadly terrorist attacks. In this key, Akl offers an overview of Egypt's counter-terrorism policies. While the series of terrorist attacks in 2013-2015 led Egyptian authorities to prioritize counter-terrorism policies, there was a shift of focus in 2017 that led to an initial implementation of CVE policies. While some initiatives have been launched, CVE in Egypt is still largely in the making. Akl discusses the progress that has been made and identifies possible new prospects for prevention and de-radicalization in the country.

Musa Shteivi, Mohammad Abu Rumman and Jesse Marks focus on the emerging threats of radicalization to the Kingdom of Jordan. The focus of Jordan's counter-terrorism efforts has

mainly been concentrated on preventing any spillover effects from the Syrian Civil War. Specifically, the authors focus on measures that seek to reinforce Jordan's border security and to counter homegrown terrorism and the threat of foreign fighters in the areas of conflict.

In the final chapter, Abdullah K. Al-Saud and Yousuf Zarea examine Saudi Arabia's efforts in countering violent extremism. While the country has been historically targeted by jihadist terrorist organizations, it has accumulated a certain degree of know-how in combating violent extremism and radicalization. The authors analyze and provide valuable insight on the CVE measures which have been taken, like the programs to rehabilitate extremists in prison and to counter extremist propaganda online and the Mohammed bin Naif Counseling and Care Center and Etidal (moderation) center.

How have Mediterranean countries reacted to the threat of terrorism? What policies have been taken to reduce the risk posed by violent extremism and radicalization? This report provides an overview of the measures that have been taken by countries on the different shores of the Mediterranean, drawing from different experiences and offering insights and future prospects.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice-President and Director