



## Roundtable: Key Drivers to Violent Extremism in North Africa:

Organized jointly by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Tunis) and the Center on International Cooperation - New York University (New York) and under the auspices of the Ministry for Constitutional, Civil Society and Human Rights Affairs in Hammamet, 28 - 30 July 2016

### Overall objectives of the meeting

- Better understand the key factors leading to violent extremism in five North African countries.
- Compare experiences among the five, challenge assumptions, identify commonalities and differences and point to priority areas for attention when developing future policies
- Examine state of knowledge about root causes, identify gaps in research and data and review challenges facing researchers in this area. Identify priority areas for future research.
- Provide a platform for sharing research and analysis from the region and outside, strengthen these connection and enhance links with policymaking at local and international level.

### Background

Violent extremist groups killed roughly 44,500 people in 2014, more than double the number killed in 2013 and more than four times the number in 2012. Initial responses by governments and the international community to this phenomenon and to the rapid rise of violent extremist groups like the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) have been primarily military and security-led in an effort to contain and defeat them. More recently there has been a

shift to a more comprehensive approach that retains the security-based elements but adds preventive measures that seek to address root causes and key drivers of violent extremism.

The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism launched in January this year ably describes some of the key drivers or “push and pull” factors that a growing consensus of analysts see as being conducive to an environment for violent extremism to take root. However, while we can point to a set of grievances or identity or belief issues as factors, we still do not know why only certain individuals within that society or community turn to violence or join extremist violent groups.

Radicalization is not new and has been well researched in various contexts such as recruitment of child soldiers (creation of dependencies, desensitization), into religious cults into the 1960s and 1970s, into gangs in Latin America and the USA, and at times recruitment campaigns for militaries. It should also be said that radicalization in itself may not necessarily lead to violent extremism or to negative outcomes. Many radical movements in the past have brought about important positive changes and reforms.

The reasons for radicalization are complex and local and research has found they often converge around a combination of ideology (including religion), grievance, identity, economic factors, and the propaganda that feeds on them. But these studies are limited. We do know with some certainty that there is no straightforward link between poverty and violent extremism, unlike in civil conflict.

Available research also indicates that a lack of opportunities to create change through normal politics increases the chance that opposition groups will turn to terrorism. Mostly, this occurs during or shortly before and after civil wars. Violent extremist groups mostly operate in fragile and failed states, parts of the world with the highest concentration of development and governance failures, political injustice and proxy wars. As with civil war, financial opportunity plays a role. Successful extremist movements have been able to mobilize recruits and expand activities where resources, particularly those linked to trafficking, are easy to capture.

In the age of social media the additional use of shocking images such as beheadings and crucifixions serve a number of purposes from demonstrating power to desensitizing against horror and dehumanizing the “enemy”. This powerful toxic mix is used by recruiters who prey on those looking for meaning in life, a sense of belonging, and who feel angry and powerless because of injustices at home or abroad.

Some qualitative research is also available on the role of ideology and grievance, but this tends to be case- or country-specific rather than systematic in nature. We do know violent extremist movements use grievances over both global and local factors to mobilize recruits, extending from the occupation of Iraq and Palestine and the use of drone attacks to mistreatment of Muslim populations who are forcibly displaced – not only in Syria but as far afield as Myanmar.

Overall, much of the existing available literature and recently published research on the drivers to violent extremism has either focused on the situation of foreign fighters or is very specific to particular countries and themes. When we look at North Africa, what little published research there has been has focused primarily on the role of foreign fighters and less on those who may remain or those who have returned from abroad. Additionally, Tunisia remains for many a conundrum given it produces the largest number of foreign fighters yet it is the one success story from the 2011 Arab uprisings. Last, there is also limited comparative research and analysis to enable informed prevention policies by governments in this region or those seeking to assist them.

The purpose of this workshop is to share our understanding of the rise of violent extremism in this region, to identify the key factors behind this and to point to knowledge gaps. It will also provide an opportunity to have scholars from the region and from outside exchanging analysis and debating issues. As outcomes we will focus on identifying what areas of research are needed to plug information gaps and to begin to address the questions around where the priorities should be in terms of future prevention policies. A follow up workshop may focus on the effectiveness of state and societal responses to the key drivers and to identify through comparative analysis what works and what does not.

Research findings will be used primarily for policy discussions and recommendations with advocacy groups, bilateral agencies, governments and the UN.