



Youth and Violent Extremism in the MENA Region: Risk and preventive factors of youth violence in the MENA region in the context of ongoing crisis.

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1. A hot topic: Violent Extremism and Radicalisation

1.1 Countering Violent Extremism and radicalisation has been an increasingly hot topic amongst western governments.² It emerged from a counter-terrorism response after the September 11 attacks in the USA and the subsequent attacks in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005, but its primary locus is not in rich Western countries: over 80% of deaths attributed to terrorism in 2013 occurred in just five countries: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria.³ And the *impact* of violent extremism is also more profound in poorer societies. It destroys communities, disrupts economies, and magnifies inequality and marginalisation; further, it tests the limited capacity of governments to respond. So, if we really want to prevent the global menace of violent extremism, these are the places where we need to start.

1.2 The discourse on extremism is based on a contested concept of a (linear) “process” of radicalisation, whereby individuals (especially youth) are socialised through their ‘vulnerabilities’ and exposure to extremist ideas to commit violent acts. Unfortunately this is a highly reductive over-simplification of complex reality, but it has become the “conventional wisdom” for explaining how individuals become involved in acts of political violence or terrorism.⁴ Because it is not that simple, such solutions do not work and policies to counter violent extremism and radicalisation are very often counter-productive and actually fuel recruitment.⁵

1.3 The Countering Violent Extremism agenda is also a very negative narrative, founded on negative defensive reactive semantics: not at all attractive or engaging for youth. Our starting point should not be a *counter* narrative, but an alternative positive narrative. Even an appeal to “moderate” behaviour is not appealing to youth, especially at the age when they are exploring their identity and role in society. Instead we must inspire youth with more compelling positive opportunities for autonomy, significance and belonging.⁶

It is important for governmental policy makers and donors to understand that the semantics matter, and the language they are using may be counter-productive. At the very least they need to appreciate that the language used on the ground may need to very different from that used in their policies. In the same way that it is rarely useful to label a programme explicitly as a peace-building or conflict transformation programme, so it is certain to be completely counter-productive to walk into a community and talk about starting a programme to counter violent extremism.

² One example being the US President’s “White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism” earlier this year: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/18/fact-sheet-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism>; <http://www.cfr.org/radicalization-and-extremism/reflections-white-house-summit-countering-violent-extremism/p36229>; <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/homeland-security/233831-notes-from-the-white-house-summit-on-countering-violent>.

³ Global Terrorism Index 2014:

http://www.visionofhumanity.org/sites/default/files/Global%20Terrorism%20Index%20Report%202014_0.pdf.

⁴ This ‘radicalisation’ process they describe and underwrite is then used as an explanatory tool in any and all given contexts of political violence to attribute causality, to silence politically inconvenient factors such as poverty, exclusion and foreign policy, and to invoke the possibility that future violent acts can be prevented by targeting suspect communities with counter-radicalisation policies. In Western societies, sometimes the discourse is restricted entirely to identifying the process only within Muslim communities (forgetting all other examples of violent extremism by other religions or entirely secular groups) and relating to an existentialist clash of civilizations. To put it bluntly, it constructs a religious and racial ‘other’ who takes the blame for violence, while simultaneously making claim to provide solutions that will prevent future instances of violence. See: “*Counter-radicalisation: critical perspectives*” edited by Charlotte Heath-Kelly, Lee Jarvis & Christopher Baker-Beall, 2015 published by Routledge.

⁵ Clumsy use of hard power causes collateral damage fueling negative reactions and accelerating recruitment. Law-enforcement approaches for identification and detention of violent extremists are also being dwarfed by new recruitment, encouraging hate-crime and decreasing community cohesion rather than foster it.

⁶ An additional problem that there is a tendency to associate violent extremism exclusively with militant Islam, fostering Islamophobia. Programmes in the UK and elsewhere have also fallen into the trap of imprecise and pejorative use of the label “extremists” as compared with “moderates”. And it is important to be very cautious about donor branding and associations with western government policies; and interpretations of extremism or moderation that reflect the degree to which people support government policies or support certain theology, rather than the degree to which they may support violence or not.

2. Theories of youth vulnerability to extremism

Several different theories are offered to underpin policy and programme responses to violent extremism:

2.1 Are jobs the answer?

With a demographic youth bulge and high youth unemployment across the MENA Region, the assumption is that unemployed youth are most vulnerable to recruitment and if given a job will have stronger resilience and something to lose. But recent research by Mercy Corps⁷ shatters that myth and finds that principal drivers of political violence are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of injustice, discrimination, corruption and abuse by security forces. And the Global Counterterrorism Forum states explicitly that: “Research has rejected the thesis that poverty begets violent extremism”.⁸

Research also shows that offering financial rewards or punishments may only drive some to greater extremes of sacrifice or violence.⁹ It is far better to provide *opportunities* not inducements.

2.2 Grievances / social injustice / horizontal inequalities need to be addressed

Across the MENA Region grievances which sparked the Arab Spring have not been resolved: governance failures, corruption, illegitimate rule, perceived injustices, marginalisation, discrimination, alienation, rejection, lack of acceptance, lack of opportunity, lack of voice, lack of safety/security, etc., all of which might contribute to an uneasy sense of not belonging and not having hope for the future, nor dignity, significance or autonomy in the current circumstances.

In such a context, there are extremely varied and competing motivations at individual and identity-group level for joining extremist groups. We need to understand the complex local landscape of push and pull factors within which both perpetrators and victims of violence must navigate, and which may comprise a mix of opportunism and ideology, horizontal inequalities¹⁰ (economic, political, social, cultural); lack of access to basic public services, including education; material incentives to join; pre-existing social connections within the armed factions; or the search for safety under the auspices of armed groups: all of these are significant predictors of enlistment in a violent extremist group.¹¹

From Generations For Peace work to respond to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan and Lebanon, it is clear that displacement exacerbates male and female youth vulnerability to horizontal inequalities for both refugees and host community youth, as communities suffer from pressures on all forms of accommodation, food, water, education and health services, formal and informal sector employment.¹²

⁷ https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/MercyCorps_YouthConsequencesReport_2015.pdf.

⁸ Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/159884/14Jan02_Ankara+Memorandum.pdf.

⁹ Atran, S. “Address to UN Security Council Ministerial Debate on ‘The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism & Promoting Peace’” April 2015: <http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/2015/04/25/scott-atran-on-youth-violent-extremism-and-promoting-peace/>.

¹⁰ Stewart, F. “Horizontal inequalities as a cause of conflict: a review of CRISE findings”, University of Oxford, Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, 2010: <http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/pdf/pdf-research/crise-ov1>.

¹¹ “Simple inequality between rich and poor is not enough to cause violent conflict. What is highly explosive is...horizontal inequality: when power and resources are unequally distributed between groups that are also differentiated in other ways – for instance by race, religion or language.” Kofi Annan: address to World Bank 1999 entitled “Peace and Development: one struggle, two fronts”.

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:20048671~pagePK:64257043~piPK:437376~theSitePK:4607,00.html>.

¹² 3RP Regional Progress Report. June 2015: <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/3RP-Progress-Report.pdf>

Mercy Corps “Seeking Stability: Evidence on Strategies for Reducing Risk of Conflict in Northern Jordanian Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees” 2014:

https://d2zyf8ayvg1369.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/Seeking%20Stability%20Report_Draft%206.pdf.

2.3 Are categories useful?

Amidst all the complexity it can be helpful at least to appreciate that push and pull factors may be very different for joining local domestic extremist groups compared with groups abroad¹³, and for youth from poorer, less educated and more marginalised communities compared with better educated elites.¹⁴

So, in our Generations For Peace programmes in Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, Somalia and Pakistan, we see that there may be very different motivations, different modes of recruiting; and also different possibilities for prevention when working with youth in poor communities as compared with working with university educated youth.

But such categories cannot be used too simplistically: adding to the complexity is the fact that individual vulnerability and motivation is very dynamic, as individuals may drift in and out of radical groups and moderate groups depending on a variety of competing factors, circumstances and influences.

2.4 Should we forget about root causes and instead focus on disrupting recruitment strategies?

One response to this complexity is to shift our attention from theories of *motivations*, to analysis of the distinct *strategies of recruitment* pursued by different groups at different times. However, whilst disrupting recruitment strategies may be effective in the short term, Generations For Peace believes that a stronger long-term response requires addressing root causes, strengthening youth resilience and reducing vulnerability. For example, our work in Jordan and Lebanon, with Syrian refugee and local host community youth, seeks to understand more deeply their coping mechanisms, issues of tension/violence, push/pull factors for radicalisation and joining violent groups, and to mitigate those tensions, reduce violence, and improve social cohesion and resilience.

¹³ We may see a difference between “domestic” extremism (such as internal violent jihad, recruited locally) and “international” extremism (externally recruited); in Syria, for example foreign fighters have joined Daesh/ISIS from more than 80 countries. International Center for the Study of Radicalization (I.C.S.R.), King’s College London: “Amongst foreign fighters there are many different motivations: the typical British jihadist “is male, in his early 20s and of South Asian ethnic origin. He usually has some university education and some association with activist groups. Over and over again, we have seen that radicalization is not necessarily driven by social deprivation or poverty. Other than those who go for humanitarian reasons, some of the foreign fighters are students of martyrdom; they want to die as soon as possible and go directly to paradise. Then there are the adventure seekers — those who think this will enhance their masculinity, the gang members and the petty criminals too; and then, of course, the die-hard radicals, who began by burning the American flag and who then advanced to wanting to kill Americans — or their partners — under any circumstance.” http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/her-majestys-jihadists.html?_r=0.

See also: Carter Center “Syria Countrywide Conflict Report” #5, February 2015:

https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Feb-28-2015.pdf.

Barrett, R. “Foreign Fighters in Syria” 2014, The Soufan Group: <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

¹⁴ Researchers identify Type1 radicals who are elitist and intolerant, do not have confidence in the government (especially for safety and security) and have experienced past hardships; and Type2 radicals who have lower income, perceive themselves as victims, seeking ideology (not necessarily religious) and a leader, advocates of strong action to achieve social goals. See Fenstermacher, L. & Leventhal, T. (eds) “*Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods & Strategies*”, 2011:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/files/attachments/95226/ucounterviolentextremismfinalapprovedforpublicrelease28oct11.pdf>

2.5 Autonomy and identity. “Sacred values” and “group fusion”. A more promising theory?

Our Generations For Peace Institute research partners at the University of Oxford’s Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict (CRIC), recently presented to the UN Security Council their “*Devoted Actor Hypothesis of Conflict*”.¹⁵ Their extensive research in different countries supports this hypothesis, that when sacred values (values that may be so strongly held as to justify extreme personal sacrifice and use of extreme violence) become embedded in strongly fused identity groups, then members of these value-driven groups become willing to collectively defend or advance those values through costly sacrifices and extreme violence, in ways resistant to material trade-offs and normative social influence. It does appear that religious beliefs can have a powerful influence on sacred values. And yet research shows repeatedly that suicide bombers are not brainwashed, mentally ill, or religious zealots.

This means that to protect youth attracted by “sacred values” which support extreme violence, we must offer youth alternate “sacred values” based on tolerance and respect for diversity, but also, *crucially*, actual opportunities for leadership, significance, autonomy in decision-making, and “group fusion” connection with a positive peer group and collective effort that delivers concrete impact in their community and which thereby delivers meaning in their lives.

This is precisely the focus of Generations For Peace programmes engaging vulnerable youth in such contexts. And we know it works when in our programmes, in Tunisia, in Libya, in Somalia we have volunteer who themselves were previously members of violent extremist groups, and who have now found with Generations For Peace a much more positive peer group and senses of autonomy, significance and purpose.

2.6 We need more donor support for research

We still need more research. Time and again, programme evaluations¹⁶ conclude that programming decisions would have benefitted from a more comprehensive understanding of violent extremism in the local contexts, to identify more narrowly those most at risk, such as teenagers, ex-convicts, members of specific clans, etc.; and to understand the relevance for each of material incentives, fear, status-seeking, adventure-seeking, and other individual-level drivers. Research has shown how radical ideas are internalised by violent extremists, but has not adequately explained how the majority of people exposed to radical ideas are not radicalised.

But it is still hard to get funding for research; and it is hard to get access to communities to engage youth in such research; and it is harder still to get access to primary data from actual perpetrators of violent extremism. And yet, the best access can be provided where there is already a local presence and relationships of trust and credibility in a community, built up over years of local community youth programming. And we need precisely such programme-oriented action-research, focused on local communities, to provide the evidence base for effectiveness and sustainability to inform effective adaptive programming.

¹⁵ Atran, S. “Address at the UN Security Council’s Ministerial Debate on ‘The Role of Youth in Countering Violent Extremism and Promoting Peace’” 23 April 2015: <http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/2015/04/25/scott-atran-on-youth-violent-extremism-and-promoting-peace/>.

Sheikh, H., Atran S. et al, “The Devoted Actor as Parochial Altruist: Sectarian Morality, Identity Fusion, and Support for Costly Sacrifices”. *Clidynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution* 5(1), 2014. http://artisresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Clidynamics-Devoted-Actor-as-Parochial-Altruist_Sheikh-et-al.pdf.

Atran, S. et al, “For Cause and Comrade: Devoted Actors and Willingness to Fight”. *Clidynamics: The Journal of Quantitative History and Cultural Evolution* 5(1), 2014. http://artisresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Clidynamics-For-Cause-and-Comrade_Atran-et-al.pdf.

¹⁶ See, for example, the Evaluation of the Kenya Transition Initiative to Counter Violent Extremism: <http://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/case-study-counter-violent-extremism-cve-programming-lessons-oti-s-kenya-transition>.

3. Recommendations for effective interventions

Rather than reaction, we need to focus on prevention, among the most vulnerable in communities, listening and learning from those in the midst of the challenge, especially youth.¹⁷ We must avoid reinventing the wheel. A lot of work has already been done and there is good guidance already out there.

Carol Bellamy (former head of UNICEF and now Chair of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund) emphasises the need for local community actions to be a crucial part of the response:

*"Local communities are probably better placed than anyone else to understand why some of their members – whether university-educated or poor, religious or not – are vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization to violence. These communities are also better placed to find solutions: to prevent violent extremism.[...] For sure, there are no quick fixes or easy answers. But focusing on prevention, among the most vulnerable communities, and listening and learning from those in the midst of the challenge, will surely be an important part of a global response. [...] Just as the causes of radicalization to violence are hard to understand, so too are the responses hard to predict; but I envisage that the types of projects we fund will include education, training young people for jobs, women's empowerment, and civic engagement. In other words, traditional development methods – but focused on the grassroots of communities most at risk of recruitment and radicalization to violence."*¹⁸

The recent Declaration from the Amman Global Forum on Youth Peace & Security¹⁹, the Guiding Principles on Young People's Participation in Peace building²⁰, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum's Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism²¹, all provide very useful guidance and recommendations.

Our humble submission is that these are already followed by our Generations For Peace approach and we will hear at this forum a number of case study examples from Generations For Peace programmes in different countries.²² We also see our work as an example of *Global Citizenship Education (GCED)*²³ in action in very challenging conflict contexts.

¹⁷ We need a much more reflective response based on a best-practice development paradigm addressing underlying causes and motivations, and recruitment strategies, and de-legitimation of violent extremist leaders, followers, messages, methods and outcomes. This can only be effective if alternative leaders, followers, messages, methods and outcomes are made more appealing and legitimate. Peer groups have a major role to play in influencing youth in these legitimisation dynamics, and creation of positive role models at grassroots level.

¹⁸ http://www.gcerf.org/?post_type=news&p=413.

¹⁹ <https://www.unteamworks.org/youth4peace>

²⁰ <https://www.sfcg.org/guidingprinciples/>

²¹ https://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/159884/14Jan02_Ankara+Memorandum.pdf

²² Generations For Peace programme experiences were presented from Jordan, Lebanon, Nigeria, Palestine, Sudan, and Yemen. An additional presentation focused on the approach Generations For Peace uses for participatory monitoring and evaluation.

²³ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002329/232993e.pdf>

4. Generations For Peace approach

All Generations For Peace programmes work with youth volunteers at grassroots level empowering communities to address local issues of conflict and violence, in diverse forms in different contexts. All our programmes promote four values, which we believe resonate strongly with the *Global Citizenship Education (GCED)* approach for youth-led peace building:

- Youth Leadership
- Community Empowerment
- Active Tolerance
- Responsible Citizenship.

We believe in the enormous potential of young people to lead change. We give youth autonomy, significance and purpose by empowering them as volunteers to design, implement and evaluate effective programmes to address local issues of conflict and violence which they are passionate about changing in their own communities.

We do that by training them in our unique Curriculum, covering conflict analysis (with special regard to gender and different experiences of males and females of direct, structural and cultural violence), construction of a robust theory of change, programme logic and activity design and facilitation, monitoring and participatory evaluation. We then support our volunteers' ongoing development through more advanced and specialised training and through collective horizontal learning opportunities to share and exchange best practices and successes as well as challenges and lessons learnt. We mentor them closely and recognise their achievements, and support their programmes over the long term in adaptive programme cycles which are able to seize emergent opportunities to innovate for greater impact and sustainability.

Our volunteers select activities that are most appropriate for their target group (making a particular effort to engage the most vulnerable to violence), local conflict issue, local culture and their own strengths and capabilities. The five tools are: Sport, Arts, Advocacy, Empowerment and Dialogue For Peace. In each case these youth-led actions engage a target group for a sustained series of activities over time, to pass on Generations For Peace values, knowledge and skills, and to foster empowerment shifts in personal capacities within individuals and recognition shifts in relationships between people and identity groups, building individual resilience but also collective resilience through peer groups and increased social cohesion and social capital.

In the end, we believe it is this approach, which respects and empowers youth and offers positive "sacred values" and positive "group fusion", that is our best contribution to preventing violent extremism.²⁴

²⁴ For more about Generations For Peace, please visit www.generationsforpeace.org.