

## Meeting Report of the NATO Advanced Research Workshop

# (Counter-)terrorism in the post-Arab Spring Context

6-7 October 2015, Brussels, Belgium

## Introduction

The revolutions that swept through the Arab region since 2011 challenged prevailing paradigms and strategies concerning (counter-) terrorism that had been developed for decades. This is partially in response to the changing (and more brutal) face of terrorism in the region, but particularly among the ‘new’ regimes the understanding of what constitutes terrorism and best approaches to counter terrorism (CT) and violent extremism (CVE) has been changing.

Throughout the Arab uprisings the issue of terrorism in the Arab region has acquired new dimensions, as demonstrated by the rise of the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) in Iraq and Syria and the proliferation of newly established violent extremist groups in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The region is now faced with a form of hybrid terrorism, in which transnational organised crime, in particular arms and drugs trade and human trafficking, is interlinked with ideologically-rooted terrorist networks. Criminal and terrorist groups cooperate in the recruitment of new members as well as in the provision of necessary financing and weaponry. Such networks are transient and transnational, with violent actors, affiliations and *modi operandi* adapting quickly to new political and security environments. The phenomenon can be found throughout the Middle East and North Africa and it poses a significant threat to the post-Arab Spring transitions in a number of countries, notably Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.

Egypt serves as a relevant case in point to analyse the issue. In the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution that toppled the Mubarak regime, the country witnessed a significant proliferation of violent jihadi groups and an expansion of their activities in many cities as well as in the Sinai Peninsula. In the Sinai, a wide range of violent extremist groups is active with various local, regional and international aspirations. The linkages between these groups and criminal organisations, for example indicated by cash flows and smuggling activities, are of specific concern to (local) policy makers.

Against this background, on 6-7 October 2015 the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT), Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS) and the Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’ organised a two-day NATO Advanced Research Workshop to analyse and discuss CVE strategies in the Arab region in the post-Arab Spring context. The workshop devoted particular attention to the case of Egypt and comparative practices in other Arab countries.

## Objectives of the Workshop

The objective of the workshop was twofold: 1) to assess the status of (counter-)terrorism in transitional countries in the North Africa region and especially Egypt over the past five years; and 2) to map (future) developments of radicalisation and terrorism in the region, as well as local and regional efforts designed to prevent and combat these issues. To this end, the workshop aimed to bring together regional and international experts on CVE and security, (regional) policy makers and practitioners. The focus was especially on long-term policies, rather than short-term successes and failures.

The workshop was set up as a roundtable expert-meeting to facilitate the exchange of ideas among the participants. Each session focused on a specific theme that was introduced by keynote speakers. Their presentations kick-started a discussion amongst all participants. In addition, during two break-out sessions the discussion was split up in three smaller groups to facilitate the exchange of views among all participants (after which a plenary discussion followed on the findings of the three groups).

It is worth noting that the discussions during the workshop were not confined to violent extremism (VE), but also took extremism and terrorism into account. The latter was used by most participants as equivalent to VE.

## Part 1: Developments in Violent Extremism in the Region since 2011

The first day of the workshop focused on the developments in violent extremism in the region since 2011, and the (changed) approaches of post-Arab Spring governments in CVE.

### The Changing Face of Extremism

In the first session the changing face of extremism in the region was explored. While a few years ago most attention was focused on Al-Qaeda, nowadays Islamic State (IS) receives most media and political attention. However, Al-Qaeda is still an important player in the region. The competition and differences between both organisations were discussed, as well as the (often) indirect ties of both to other organisations in the region. It is difficult to measure the extent of the (genuine) support to IS or Al-Qaeda by the local population in the region, especially because the people have few alternatives and therefore the support might be a matter of survival rather than conviction. The deteriorating living conditions for the local population in areas that are under the control of the terrorist organisations contribute to the local support for extremists. The governments often lack the service delivery system in these areas needed to provide better or the necessary life circumstances. During the debate, the question was posed whether Al-Qaeda in the mind of some people could become a reasonable alternative to the even more violent IS, but it was generally considered that in any case Al-Qaeda will never become a reasonable partner for the West.

The emerging violence in the post-Arab Spring region was also discussed from a military viewpoint. The disbanding armies in Iraq and Syria provided the various rebel groups with many weapons and military know-how. In addition, essential financial and political support is

given by governments in the region to fighting groups in various ways. Foreign involvement (for example by the US, Russia and Iran) contributed to more violence as well, combined with an influx of foreign fighters from many different countries. The speed with which the situation in the post-Arab Spring countries is deteriorating is leading to political instability and unrest which is being exploited by extremist organisations to their own benefit, 'easy solutions' such as decapitating the Assad regime in Syria may only create more problems. While military involvement (air strikes) from foreign countries may provide some short-term successes in combating terrorists, only political negotiations can offer a long-term success. The difficult question is, however, who should be at the negotiation table? The fighting groups are too fragmented and many of them are classified as terrorists by many countries, which do not make them a realistic negotiation partner. The discussion considered that the best solution may be to start with local or regional ceasefires and then to have these areas of peace slowly spreading over the country, and bringing the moderate factions of the extremist groups to the negotiations.

### **Drivers for Radicalisation**

The second session explored the factors explaining the rise of violent extremism in the post-Arab Spring countries. It is important to note that phenomena occur in specific historical and socio-political context. The drivers/patterns identified by the participants included: socio-economic problems, high levels of informality, marginalisation, gaping societal disparities, corruption and the perception of monopolies/egocentric mentalities of the elites. The traditional 'social pact' between government and people had completely broken down. Little to no investments had been made in the provision of basic services i.e.: health care, energy provision, etc. States even started to wage war against its own people. Organisations like IS could therefore easily offer an alternative to the desperate populations: a radical change of the rotten state structures. This context explains much of the relatively high increase of support for these extremist organisations.

The second presentation examined the external and internal drivers for violent extremism in Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It argued that both parties are facing a shared threat and have shared responsibilities for the drivers of/toward violent extremism. Youth in the MENA region faces a crisis, which has become a condition conducive to radicalisation. Problems occur as a result of an absence of economic and political prospects and perceived isolation. The same problems drive others to emigrate to the European Union (EU). Some youth groups in European countries nowadays are facing similar problems, and along with the ineffective integration policies of the minorities in European countries, these problems motivate some of them to join IS as foreign fighters. The disillusioned youth has easy access to information via internet and social media. Participants discussed how these communication platforms are being exploited by Salafist extremists for 'kidnapping moderate Islam' and offering the youth tools for self-radicalisation. Participants advised that by strengthening a comprehensive cooperation in using the soft power of the moderate Islam institutions like that of al-Azhar (the main institution of Sunni Islam in the Muslim world), as well as creating economic opportunities for the youth, the attractiveness of the Salafist Islam may be lessened.

The discussion in Session 2 stressed the importance of the (perceived) marginalisation of the youth, both in the Post-Arab Spring countries and among migrants in Europe. It was discussed whether the focus should not only be on political and economic drivers, but also on religious ones. It was suggested that there could be a relationship between regional problems which are also caused by the 'fragmented Islamic theatre' in the region, and various interpretations of Islam fighting each other. IS thrives on the (perceived) grievances by suggesting that the (Salafist) Islam provides solutions for every problem, bridging the inter-Islamic disputes as well. Participants furthermore agreed that each radicalisation process is an individual one, and is shaped by the surrounding context, which makes it difficult to generalise drivers and root causes (as well as potential counter-policies).

### **Factors and Vulnerabilities Regarding Extremism**

In the first break-out session two questions were discussed:

- 1) What are the main pull and push factors for radicalisation in the Post-Arab Spring countries?
- 2) Which segment of society is most vulnerable to these factors (which are the main conditions influencing vulnerability)?

Regarding the first question, many factors were mentioned, summarised by one participant as 'an indefinite number of factors', and stressing that 'the personal context in the end determines which mix of factors has effect' supporting the notion that radicalisation is always an individual process. Most often mentioned were, nevertheless, weakness of the religious discourse of the official Islamic institutions, bad economic and societal circumstances, lack of security, lack of respect for human rights, lack of economic and societal prospects, exclusion of youth and other groups from the political process, unemployment, and imperfect (religious) education. External factors were also mentioned when identifying push and pull factors of extremism. These included the stalemate in the Palestinian - Israeli peace process, the continuation of the conflicts in Libya and Syria, and the attempts of foreign states and organisations in trying to convince people of their ideologies. In general, however, the differences between every country/region/group/person should be acknowledged.

The participants considered youth the most vulnerable group for radicalisation. Young people who see their expectations and dreams shredded, are considered to be most vulnerable for propaganda targeted at new ways to improve their life.

### **Regional Approaches to CVE**

In session 4 the strategies of governments in the MENA region regarding CVE were discussed.

First, the counter-terrorism experiences of Turkey were highlighted. Turkey faces various problems such as Kurdish terrorism, the spill-over of conflicts in neighbouring countries, and large numbers of refugees to name a few. Although many factors contribute to radicalisation, the umbrella explanation could be titled 'needs'. People are attracted to violent extremism because they consider it as another avenue to realise their needs. Therefore, in response, the Turkish government could offer alternative means of realising their needs; prevent them from

feeling excluded, and address their expectations. After several years of expensive CT policies which predominantly focussed on stabilising insecure areas (by military operations and resettlement programmes), a shift was seen from 2004 when Turkey started investing more in social projects and regional investments to address the needs of people in insecure regions. Engagement and outreach to people were keywords. This approach will provide success in the long run, but short term security concerns need to be addressed as well. This is why the Turkish government some years ago abandoned this approach to some extent and is now focussing to include a more offensive military approach. It was suggested that the best balance in CVE is probably 25 percent offensive policies (security operations) and 75 percent non-offensive (socio-economic policies addressing the population's needs).

Second, the role of social media within CVE was discussed. Social media can be considered to be a crucial tool for extremists to mobilise more people for their goals. Studies show individuals form very real relationships on social media and these relationships tend to deepen in an online environment as it allows users to more easily distance oneself from mainstream and 'accepted' conditions. As a result online 'peer groups' are easily formed in which people who feel excluded from society can feel included again; at the same time these peer groups are used to convince or even force people into a certain direction regarding (religious/political) ideas and actions they should take. This way, social media is exploited by extremists to offer vulnerable persons an alternative to normal life. For effective CVE strategies, the use of social media is crucial as well. So-called 'platform-based' CVE, which means CVE based on the creation of platforms on the Internet, is required to offer counter-narratives to the extremist narratives. People using Internet or social media for certain information could be automatically redirected to these counter narratives. Such platform-based CVE is not hindered by any borders, just like the mobilisation tactics used by extremists on social media.

The discussion focussed on the potential backlash of manipulating Internet and/or social media by governments. It could be better to offer neutral information instead of active influencing search machines or social media. Moreover, extremists will find creative new solutions to circumvent such influences, which might also create more secrecy over their communications which can now openly be followed on social media by CVE officers as well. The issue of effectiveness of this approach was raised during the discussions and whether this approach is an alternative to shutting down the platforms used by the extremists. Platform-based CVE should mostly be about offering various alternatives for feeling excluded, and about making the mobilisation of extremists more difficult. The private sector is an important partner in this regard.

## **Part 2: The case of Egypt**

The second day of the workshop focussed on developments in Egypt (Sinai and mainland), assessing the country's security situation and its needs in countering terrorism and violent extremism. The Sinai in particular presents a relevant and complex example of an area with a long history of extremist activity, and where (counter-)terrorism was impacted by Arab Spring-related developments.

## Terrorism in the Sinai

The first presentation described how the situation in Egypt's North Sinai developed from a local "insurgency" into an Islamic State province in recent years. The organisation Wilayat Sinai (WS), a branch of IS, executes many terrorist attacks, not only against state targets but also against opposing local tribal leaders, Westerners, smugglers, and international military of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) mission. While WS claims to defend the local population against the Egyptian government, they are in fact a big threat to the population. The Sinai has an increasing influx of foreign fighters. Regarding Egyptian CVE policies in the Sinai, one should conclude that they have failed. There is no effect on limiting terrorist attacks, and the security of the population has only decreased. If there is no change in policy, the number of terrorist attacks will only expand. A policy recommendation suggested was to focus on countering the IS narratives to prevent increasing support for IS/WS. Moreover, Cairo should address the grievances of the local citizens in the Sinai, for example by providing better public services (including security).

The second presentation focussed on the drivers of terrorism in the Sinai. A mix of internal and external factors were responsible for turning the northern Sinai into a zone of combating terrorism. For the internal factors, since Egypt regained control over Sinai in 1982 the governmental presence was weak. No military existence was allowed in the Sinai except for international MFO-troops. This gave terrorists the opportunity to be active without military counterweight. The weakness of state control in Sinai worsened after the toppling of Mubarak regime by the 2011 revolution, which urged many Salafi groups to announce the "absence of the state" and that they are the one in control. This situation continued till the removal of Mohamed Morsi's regime in July 2013 which turned the conflict in Sinai from being political into religious. Speaking of external factors, the situation at the borders between the Sinai and the Gaza strip has destabilising effects especially following 2011: international criminal networks are exploiting many illegal tunnels for smuggling activities across the borders with Gaza. The collapse of the state in Libya and the increasing role of IS in Syria and Iraq also turned the Sinai into a hub attracting terrorists (partially funded by Iran). The local population is living in difficult circumstances; the people experience a lack of security, water, employment, etc. Last but not least, many foreign fighters joined the terrorists. The Egyptian government is now responding by sending more military, in coordination with Israel (neglecting the 1973 agreement), and trying to offer the local population alternative ways of living compared to their current Bedouin living style.

The following discussion mainly focussed on the importance of framing the conflict in the Sinai as a conflict with terrorist organisations designated as such according to the Egyptian Laws, and not as a conflict with insurgent groups. Insurgency as a term entails the legitimate cause adopted by the group and the support of local population, and that they are fighting against an occupation; this is not the case as Sinai is part of the Egyptian land. There was an emphasis that the Egyptian government is promising the people in the Sinai economic development for decades already, but nothing has happened; thus allowing extremists to enter a receptive society. However, one could also contend that economic development is not possible because of the insecurity; no-one wants to invest in such a risky area. That is why security and development policies have to be coordinated.

## **Egyptian Socio-Economic Needs in Relation to CVE**

This session started with a presentation on the perceived failure of Egyptian CVE. It was suggested that instead of focussing on the socio-economic needs of the population, Egypt has chosen for ‘fighting terror with terror’. By a violent tit-for-tat approach a spiral of violence has been created. Terrorist killings and government killings are being executed as revenge, which has created some sort of escalating vendetta. The human rights of the population are seriously violated by Egyptian security forces, thus creating a root cause for radicalisation. Another important driver is political repression; people feel they cannot influence their life and future at all. For an effective CVE strategy it is necessary to restore the trust of people in core state functions like the police and judiciary among others. The argument was made that excluding Islamic groups from politics is no solution; everybody who is not a direct danger to the state should get a voice.

The next presentation (in two parts) dealt with the drivers of terrorism and extremism in Egypt. Although many experts are convinced that socio-economic drivers are key to understanding radicalisation, it was argued that there is not a direct correlation between poverty and terrorism. Most terrorism in Egypt has a political background, sometimes mixed with religious motives. Perceived marginalisation of people is an important driver, but more at the political than the socio-economic level. This argument was illustrated by examining the map of terrorist attacks in Egypt both in Sinai and the mainland in comparison to the level of economic developments in different governorates in Egypt since the dispersal of Raba'a and al-Nahda sit in in August 14, 2013, the event responsible for changing the face of terrorism in Egypt. Various cases of active terrorists and ex-terrorists were also examined to identify other drivers for VE in Egypt. In the past, socio-economic drivers were important, but nowadays religious drivers are increasingly dominating. Killing being considered as a religious duty is nowadays an important motive behind terrorist attacks.

The discussion highlighted the role of prisons as main places for radicalisation. Rehabilitation projects could diminish this risk. Again the need for counter-narratives was discussed. The discussion also raised the importance of not considering the Egyptian government as equal to the terrorists, as the latter act against the law while the former is responsible for applying it. The importance of judiciary activities in countering terrorism was raised, as well as holding the parties responsible for violating human rights accountable, but all needs to be done in the framework of the laws without any politicisation of the process.

## **Egyptian Security Needs in Relation to CVE**

This session explored Egypt’s efforts to counter terrorism and violent extremism from a national and regional security perspective. The first presentation made a distinction between Egyptian governorates or regions and emphasised that various governorates or regions have their own dynamics regarding violent extremism. Tailor-made approaches for each region have to be made. Generalising, however, several policy recommendations could be provided to increase the effect of Egyptian CVE. First of all, Security Sector Reform (SSR), specially focussed on de-politicisation of the security system. This includes the prison system, since prisons are now targets of extremists to mobilise ‘criminals’ for their extremist goals. Security

forces (police and army) need better intelligence capabilities to decide who they should target and who not. Last but not least, it is crucial to get local communities involved, to be able to take their needs into account.

The second presentation analysed the effectiveness of counter-terrorism policies applied by the Egyptian governments and the challenges it faces. It emphasised the changing face of terrorism in Egypt. Currently, terrorism is more Islamist inspired and is taking the shape of leaderless terrorism in comparison to terrorism in the decades before. Terrorist attacks are no longer confined to the Sinai region only, but everywhere targeting both civilian and security targets. Terrorists all have a mix of personal grievances, a combination of ideological, political, religious and socio-economic drivers. This personal mix is making it very hard to develop a model of the potential terrorists or to formulate general policies to prevent extremism and terrorism. Effective CT policies should target three different groups: terrorists, victims of terrorism, and the critical masses. Countering extremist ideas is crucial to deal with the root causes of terrorism, for which civil society (and especially media) should be mobilised. More attention for the victims of terrorism is required as well, even more because their experiences can provide a counter-narrative too. The absence of national strategy of countering extremism and terrorism was emphasised as the reason for the limited effectiveness of CT policies in Egypt.

In the third presentation of this session the balance between CVE and human rights was discussed. The question arose whether protecting national security was more important than protecting human rights. One could argue that security measures that do not protect human rights will automatically fail. From that perspective, promoting human rights in itself is already an instrument of CVE. The presentation analysed the increasing tendency of the current government to balance between CT and protecting human rights which is a positive development when compared to the policies of the government in the pre-2011 period. The importance of regional dynamics was also highlighted; taking this into account, an effort to come to regional cooperation in achieving the balance between CT and the protection of human rights could be important. It was suggested perhaps the League of Arab States could play a coordinating role.

Regional cooperation was an issue during the discussion as well. Although the Arab League was criticised as not being very effective, the UN, NATO and EU were mentioned as other potential contributors to regional security. They could, for example, assist in improving border control to stop transboundary weapons smuggling etc., enhancing technical cooperation in the area of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) detectors, building the capacity of the civil society and the media in countering terrorism and radicalism on the local level, and lastly in helping the victims of terrorism, to be part of the financial aid package provided by the EU to the civil society in Egypt.

Also discussed was the difficulty to differ between short-term and long-term successes and failures. Focus on the needs and human rights of people is mostly effective in the long-term, while security operations may cause short-term successes but be counter-productive in the long-term. In this regard, sharing the experience of de-radicalisation programs which proved to be relatively successful in European countries, as well as securing border areas (not only Sinai but also the western border area with Libya) could be useful.



In countries such as Iraq, Syria and Yemen the social pact between government and population has eroded, ending into a complete collapse of the state. Could Egypt become such a country as well? Especially in Syria far more innocent people have lost their lives because of the ‘fight against terrorism’ rather than because of terrorism itself. Discussions considered that although Egypt's President is using this discourse to stress the difficult context Egypt is surrounded with in order to win the minds and hearts of the Egyptians to support CT policies, the societal support for these policies is questioned and receiving more criticism of the effectiveness of these policies in making Egypt more secure. In spite of very energetic CT activities, the number of terrorist attacks is not decreasing but rather increasing. Other participants emphasised that Egypt is attempting to counter violent extremism through engagement and education projects, such as a project devoted to build the capacity of imams to be more efficient in communicating with youth. Moreover, in the discussion about human rights one should consider that it is also a human right to be protected against terrorist attacks. More attention for victims is required as well.

### **Requirements for Effective CVE Policies**

The second break-out session focussed on effective CVE policies. The two questions for discussion were:

- 1) What is required for effective CVE policies in the post-Arab Spring countries?
- 2) What assistance is required from foreign actors?

Above all, participants emphasised the need for a case-by-case approach instead of general (national) policies, and to distinguish between short-term and long-term CVE-policies. The combined findings of the three groups regarding the first question resulted in a very long list of requirements. To highlight some of the most mentioned requirements: inclusiveness of the population was considered a key requirement. Only when citizens and civil society are included in partnership with the government CVE policies, successes can be reached; offering citizens respect, security and addressing their basic needs will contribute to prevent them from being vulnerable to the narratives of extremists. Providing credible counter-narratives is an essential requirement for effective CVE as well (here attention for the victims of terrorist attacks may contribute too). A focus on youth policy, including reform or improvement of the educational systems, is also key, considering that youth is more vulnerable to radicalisation.

Regarding potential assistance from foreign actors it was emphasised that foreign actors above all should listen to the needs of their local partners and respect the sovereignty of each country. Assistance is not the same as pressuring countries to adapt policies they do not consider as successful in their specific circumstances. Concrete assistance could be technical support for security organisations, for example in improving intelligence capabilities, border control and IED detection. Assistance in SSR could also be an option. Economic support (investments) are required to give the population economic prospects. Coordination of regional CVE strategies among several states could be a role for foreign actors as well.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, during the workshop it was emphasised that violent extremism brings various threats and is affected by a very complex mix of causes. Targeting the root causes of extremism is crucial. It is also important to consider that development and security policies have to be coordinated. The workshop also showed that there are many varying opinions on what are considered effective ways to deal with these causes. Above all, local ownership of CVE-policies is required. Effective CVE has to start with a local, all-inclusive process before foreign assistance should come in, to prevent a mismatch between the local and foreign views. Respect is also a keyword: respect for local citizens, as well as respect for national sovereignty. A difficult balance is that of short-term and long-term policies, because they may sometimes harm each other. After two days of high-level discussion, only one general conclusion is obvious: it is still difficult to understand violent extremism in the Arab region and how to counter it. Experimenting with various policy instruments and more research are required to gain more insights.

