

# AUTHORITARIANISM AND RADICALISATION TOWARDS VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Before discussing the very likely link between authoritarianism and radicalisation towards violent extremism it seems necessary to provide a basic working definition of authoritarianism. For the purpose of this article, authoritarianism shall be defined as very weak pluralistic political representation or the complete absence thereof. Further, authoritarianism implies a political legitimacy of the governing system that is not based on the rule of law and a constitutional framework but on emotionally-charged “higher goals” promoted by state propaganda, which could be economic development, the fight against exterior and interior enemies and typically the fight against terrorism. Civil society in authoritarian regimes is generally weak and/or excluded from the political process. Generally, authoritarian regimes exclude large groups of society – be they socioeconomic, ethnic or religious – from political, economic and societal decision-making.

**The correlation between authoritarianism and radicalisation towards violent extremism is highly charged and has very significant policy implications.**

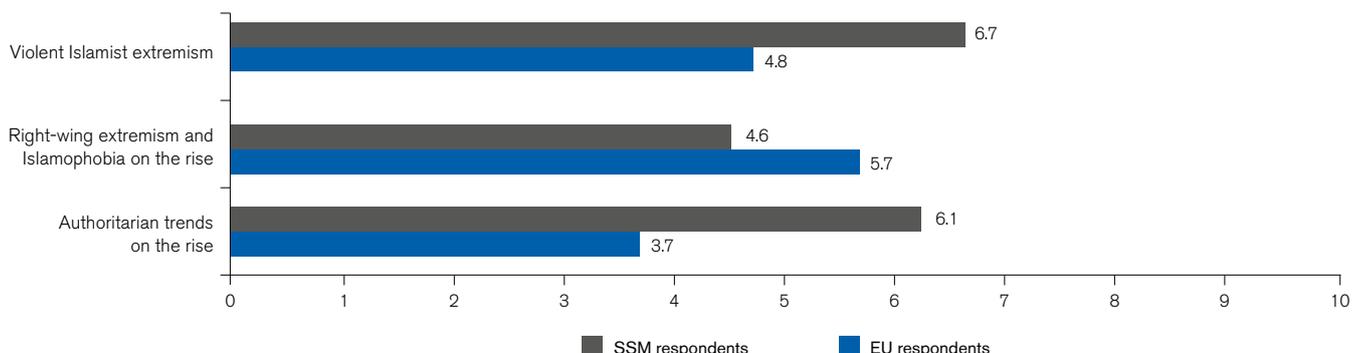
The question of a correlation between authoritarianism and radicalisation towards violent extremism is highly charged and has very significant policy implications for other states. To put it very simply, the dilemma could be formulated as follows: should one support an authoritarian system that nearly always combats violent extremism with violent repression, often widening the repression to other groups of society, or should one put pressure on authoritarian leaders to allow for popular participation and the rule of law in order to reduce violent extremism.

The results of the Euromed Survey show that, overall, respondents recognize that authoritarianism is a threat to the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean region and that it may fuel radicalisation towards violent extremism. However, there are some nuances according to the geographical origin of respondents and the results are sometimes ambiguous.

Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries’ respondents are very aware of the potential of authoritarianism to affect the security and stability of their own countries (see Graph 1).

**Graph 1: To what extent do you consider that the following phenomena threaten the stability and security of your own country?**

(mean 0-very low extent, 10-very high extent)

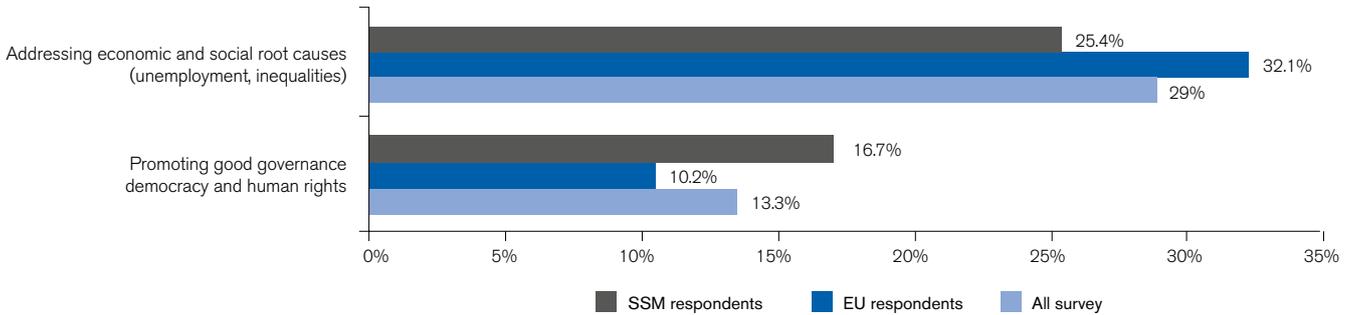


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

Similarly, the fact that “promoting good governance, democracy and human rights” is identified as the second most important priority to counter violent extremism, seems to illustrate the awareness among respondents on the importance to counter authoritarian trends (see Graph 2).

**Graph 2: What should be the main priorities in order to effectively counter violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region?**

(results show first choice out of four)

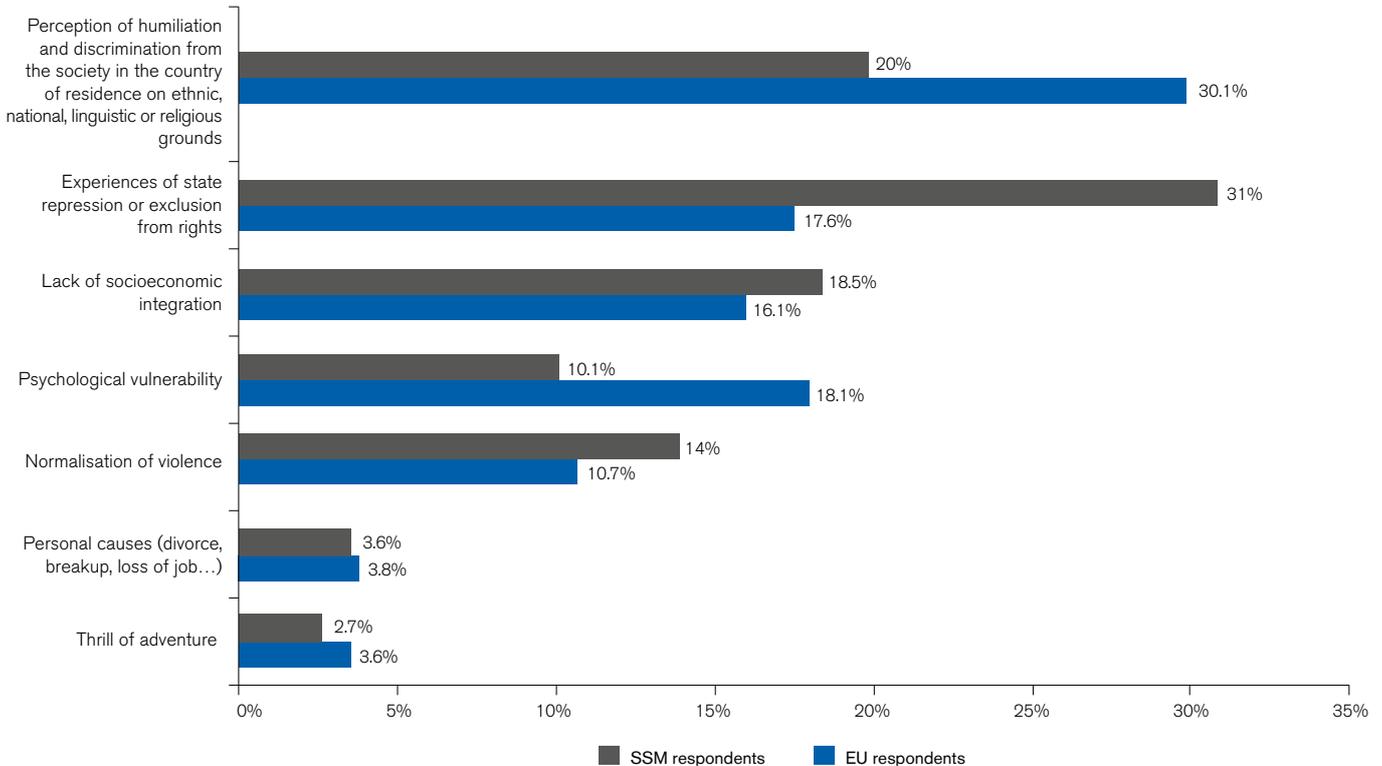


Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

The responses to Question 6 lead to a similar conclusion, as the perception of humiliation and discrimination as well as the experience of state repression and the lack of socioeconomic integration (which can be related to authoritarianism) are considered as the three most important factors for radicalisation towards violent extremism (see Graph 3).

**Graph 3: In addition to an enabling environment, to what can the following elements help to explain why an individual turns to violent extremism?**

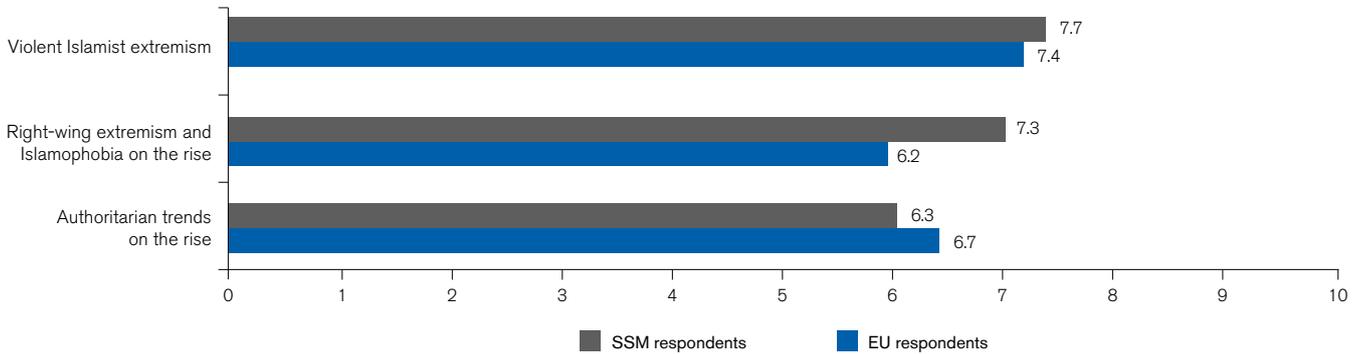
(results show the first choice out of three)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

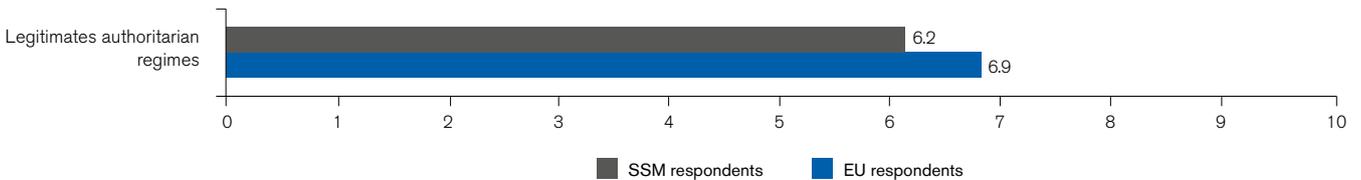
However, respondents from the Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries are less prone to consider that authoritarian trends endanger the Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole than their European counterparts (see Graph 4) and perceive right-wing extremism and Islamophobia as more acute threats to stability and security. Similarly, respondents from Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries are a bit less prone than European respondents to recognize that terrorist attacks can be used by authoritarian regimes as a way to legitimize themselves (see Graph 5).

**Graph 4: To what extent do you consider that the following phenomena threaten the stability and security of the Euro-Mediterranean countries and societies as a whole?**  
(mean 0=very low extent, 10=very high extent)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

**Graph 5: In addition to the harm caused by terrorist attacks as such, to what extent do you consider that the following indirect effects of violent extremism threaten the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean space?**  
(mean 0=very low extent, 10=very high extent)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

**Four major sets of factors point to a correlation between the authoritarian nature of regimes and radicalisation towards violent extremism.**

In this article, I will argue that, even though authoritarianism is evidently not the only reason, four major sets of factors point to a correlation between the authoritarian nature of regimes and radicalisation towards violent extremism.

The four major sets of factors coming into play are:

**Firstly:** By definition, authoritarianism operates, excludes and marginalises entire segments of society on ethnical, political, social or religious grounds. Exclusion is one of the best known causes of radicalisation to violent extremism.

**Secondly:** Authoritarian regimes promote monolithic ideologies and mindsets that prevent free and independent thinking. Those in turn make people vulnerable to equally monolithic ideologies promoted by violent extremists (see Ritzmann “The Role of Propaganda in Violent Extremism and how to Counter It” p. 26). One absolute truth leads to another absolute truth.

Authoritarian regimes often resort to lies and especially conspiracy theories to legitimise their rule. Their subjects are thus prone to believe in equally gross lies and distortions, such as in the Jihadist grand narrative and Jihadist conspiracy theories.

**Thirdly:** Authoritarian regimes too often leave very few non-violent options to contest their policies – so opposition groups frequently resort to violent means.

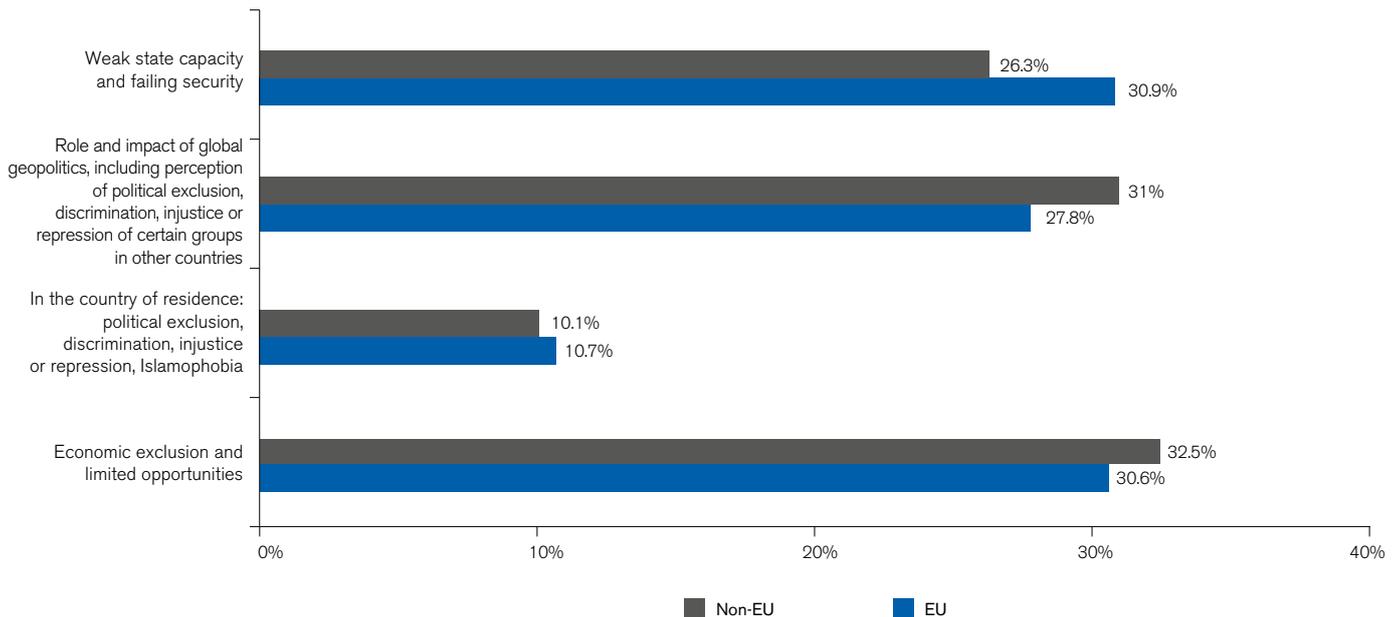
**Fourthly:** Violent repression by authoritarian regimes in turn frequently leads to a vicious circle of violence in which the opposition also becomes increasingly violent and opens the door for the most extreme elements.

**Violent repression by authoritarian regimes, frequently leads to a vicious circle of violence**

Subsequently, I will discuss these four sets of factors, one by one, in more depth.

**Set of factors 1. Exclusion:** The Survey results provide some insights into how different forms of exclusion are perceived in terms of their influence on radicalisation. Overall, respondents recognize that exclusion is a driver to violent extremism. However, respondents seem to be much more sensitized to the effects of economic exclusion than to the effects of political exclusion (that one could more directly associate with authoritarianism). In other words, it seems that the link between exclusion and authoritarian regimes is not fully recognised.

**Graph 6: Most significant driver for the development of violent extremism in SSM countries.**  
(EU/non-EU countries)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

Generally, we learn from the still too few studies conducted in Europe that exclusion does seem an important factor for radicalisation. The French Iranian researcher Farhad Khosrokhavar, for example, stresses that roughly a third of radicalised young Europeans come from socio-economically disadvantaged milieus of immigrants. The renowned Jihadist expert Thomas Hegghammer from Norway argues that Jihadism in Europe might be still increasing, as a rising number of male immigrants of Muslim origin suffer from an insufficient level of education and are socio-economically disadvantaged. Preliminary research on exclusion has been carried out in Tunisia and partially confirms these findings (“The Future of Jihadism in Europe: A Pessimistic View”, Thomas Hegghammer, 2016).

**Set of factors 2:** Authoritarian regimes promote monolithic ideologies and mindsets that prevent free and independent thinking. Those in turn make people vulnerable to the equally monolithic ideologies promoted by violent extremists. One absolute truth leads to another absolute truth. Here again there is unfortunately a lack of research with the notable exception of Randy Borum's article "Psychological Vulnerabilities and Propensities for Involvement in Violent Extremism". As he writes: Authoritarianism has been linked to a range of traits and attitudes that are consistent with militant, extremist, and even hate-oriented ideologies, including ethnocentrism, prejudice, nationalism, anti-immigrant attitudes, opposition to civil and human rights, and, finally, opposition to democratic values, civil rights and liberties, and human rights (Seipel, Rippl, Kindervater & Lederer, 2012).

The author of these pages has himself conducted a large number of informal and formal interviews with Jihadist extremists as well as with deradicalisation specialists, which seem to confirm the hypothesis that an authoritarian-shaped mindset increases the propensity towards equally authoritarian believe systems. As a number of young Egyptians told the author, Jihadism cannot be questioned as it represents the correct interpretation of Islam and is in this sense a final and unquestionable truth. Very frequently, authoritarian regimes justify their rule with conspiracy theories, e.g. the involvement of foreign powers who want to destroy the state and national unity. Likewise, violent extremists resort to conspiracy theories, such as the global conspiracy against Islam. People who have been prey to one conspiracy theory might easily fall for another one as they are not used to processing information critically or to consulting independent objective sources.

**People who have been prey to one conspiracy theory might easily fall for another one as they are not used to processing information critically.**

**Set of factors 3:** Where authoritarian repression pushes opposition groups into the hands of violent extremists. The example of Egypt illustrates the rapid radicalisation towards violent extremism by an increasingly authoritarian regime. The government's war on terror where any vaguely "Islamist" opposition is considered a terrorist group as well as the war against the uprising of economically and socially disenfranchised Bedouins have so far only driven more people into the arms of violent extremist organisations. The number of terrorist attacks has also increased considerably.

**Set of factors 4:** There are also examples of formerly secular pro-democracy activists who have been drawn to Jihadism as a consequence of regime repression. The vicious circle of violent repression and extremism has first become evident with the horrors in Iraq where the formerly ruling Sunni minority has now been disenfranchised by the Shiite government and even more in Syria, where the barbarian repression of the Assad regime led to the radicalisation of a considerable part of the initially mainly peaceful opposition.

Even "successful" military campaigns by repressive regimes for the most part do not tackle the problems caused by violent extremists in the long run/sustainably. Algeria, which was the first Southern Mediterranean country confronted with a large-scale insurgency by Jihadists, did not only pay a tremendous human price for fighting the insurgency but was only able to reduce the phenomenon through a political process (amnesty and reconciliation) and, as of now, not entirely successful fight against economic exclusion with considerable resources from its oil and gas wealth. Yet the Jihadists were not completely defeated. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb relocated to the Sahel countries and in recent years was still able to commit large-scale attacks and even destabilise neighbouring countries.

Generally, one can state that repressive and authoritarian regimes create spillover effects. The Egyptian repression of the first historic Jihadist movement after the assassination of Anwar Al Sadat in 1979 led to a massive influx of Jihadists to Afghanistan and consequently to the formation of al-Qaeda.

These spillover effects to other countries amplify in an increasingly globalised world as shown by the Syrian civil war with its tens of thousands of foreign fighters from authoritarian regimes like Chechnya and Saudi Arabia or from countries where Muslim minorities are oppressed, like the Philippines. The influx of European fighters in Syria and Iraq can definitely not be explained by authoritarianism in Europe, but Jihadist attacks in Europe are also partly rooted in the not entirely mistaken belief by violent extremists in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean that European countries are de facto allies of repressive regimes in the Arab world. This is true for the first Jihadist attacks in Europe, for example in France in the 1990s related to Algeria, as well as for more recent attacks related to the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

As the previous discussion shows, a strong correlation can be made between authoritarianism, (perceived) social, economic and political marginalisation of individuals or groups and consequent radicalisation towards violent extremism. At present, governments in the North tend to cooperate with authoritarian and repressive regimes in the South, believing that they will successfully defeat extremists and minimise the direct effects of violent extremism on both the global economy and the societies of the North. Not only does this behaviour stabilise and legitimise authoritarian regimes that disrespect fundamental human rights, it also fuels hatred of marginalised groups within the authoritarian states of the Southern and Southeast Mediterranean against the nations of the North, not to mention the disenfranchised Muslim minority groups within the Global North.

This leads to a crucial dilemma, especially for practitioners and policy-makers: should democratic governments support authoritarian regimes in their confrontation with violent extremists without putting considerable reform pressure on them in regard to democratisation, the rule of law and the respect for human rights? The author of these pages believes that the economically and politically powerful states of the Global North must permanently exercise such pressure on authoritarian rulers and make extensive use of soft diplomacy to amplify this effort.

The path to democratisation might be cumbersome and extremely long. Pure repression might lead to quicker short-term gains but in the long run accountability and participatory political systems will be the only solution to combat violent extremism at its roots.

**The crucial dilemma for policy-makers is how they should engage with authoritarian regimes in order to confront violent extremism.**

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