

# BUILDING A BRIDGE: ENGAGING CIVIL SOCIETY IN PREVENTING ALL FORMS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

---

LUCA GERVASONI | VILA

Codirector of NOVACT, International Institute for Nonviolent Action

A few weeks after the terrorist attacks in Barcelona, clichés about how to fight terrorism are again doing the rounds. For some, the members of the cell behind the Barcelona attacks were “brainwashed” and should be fought using legal weapons such as those used to combat sect recruitment strategies. For others the blame lies in the lack of social cohesion and integration policies. For many, anti-terrorist policies should be reinforced through an intensive deployment of police.

**Over the past few decades violent extremism and terrorism have been addressed through security counter-terrorism measures.**

To some extent, similar questions are being raised in Germany. The recent entry in the Bundestag of the populist radical-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has given even more ground to the debate around how to counter the emerging radicalisation of Neo-Nazi movements. Should local police be reinforced? Should intelligence agencies infiltrate social media? Should we convert school teachers into allies of police forces to denounce cases of violent radicalisation?

The reality is that over the past few decades, Euro-Mediterranean governments have chosen to answer these questions with the same linear responses: violent extremism and terrorism should be addressed through security counter-terrorism measures.

In several countries, constitutional amendments or legislation have been approved to trigger a state of emergency more easily or to grant special powers to security and intelligence services. In France, for example, a new state of emergency norm has been established standardising a range of intrusive measures, including powers to ban demonstrations and conduct searches without judicial warrants. Some states have misused counter-terror laws to target human rights defenders and political activists. Turkey, Israel or Egypt are a stark example. Almost all Euro-Mediterranean governments have passed new laws allowing indiscriminate mass surveillance and granting intrusive powers to security and intelligence services including wire-tapping, monitoring of electronic communications and surveillance of telecommunications networks without any judicial oversight. In general, the anxiety to respond to violence is driving the Euro-Mediterranean region into a deep and dangerous state of permanent securitisation where plural and democratic values have been limited and expanding human rights violations are committed in the name of security.<sup>1</sup>

**Some states have misused counter-terror laws to target human rights defenders and political activists.**

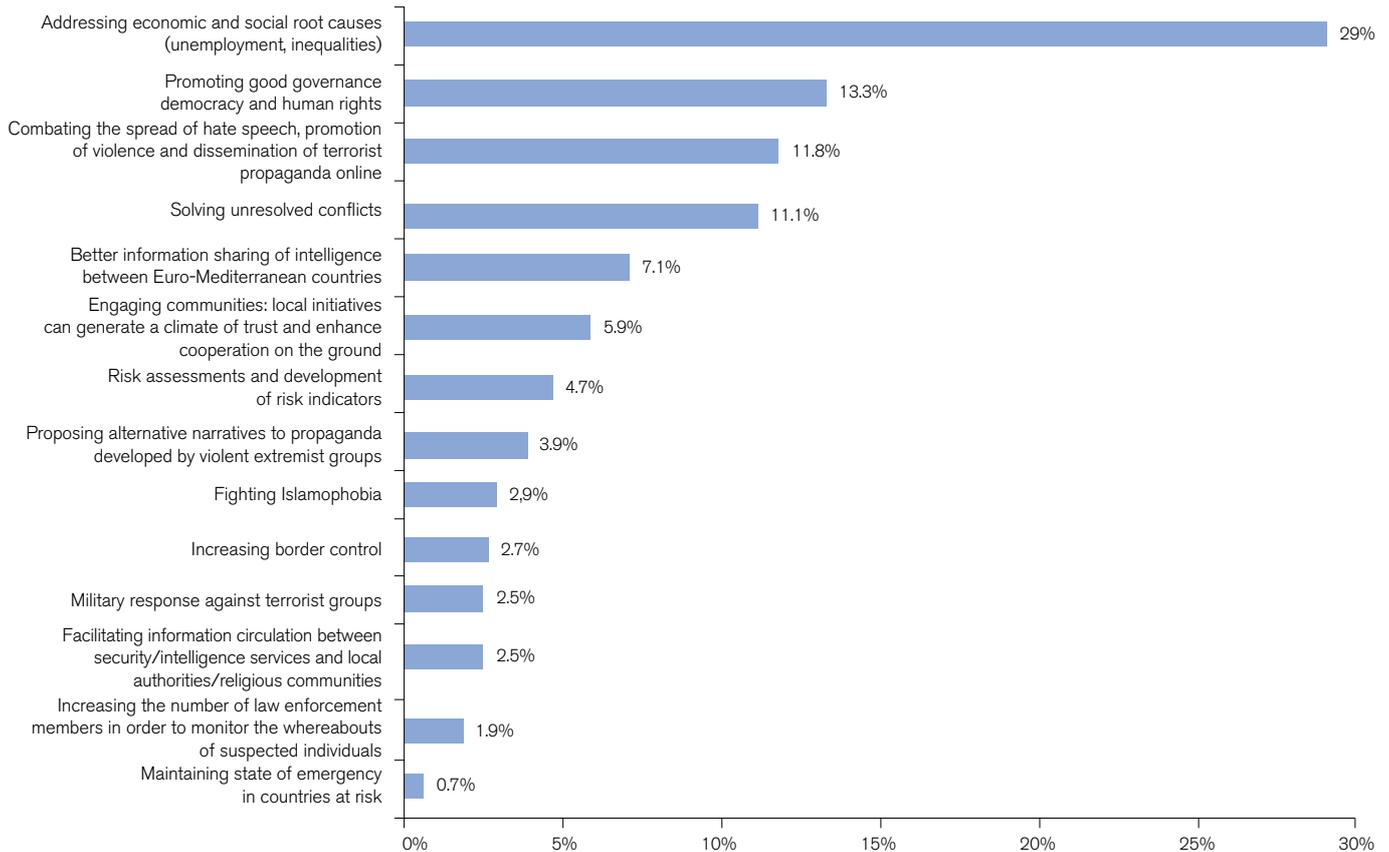
Has this been effective? The responses to the 8th Euromed Survey seem to be quite critical regarding the results obtained after decades of intensive investment in security. The results can be easily read as an agreement on the point that security-only counter-terrorism strategies cannot dry up the emotional and social wellsprings of violent radicalisation and, indeed, can make matters worse. There is a general agreement in the Survey on the point that maintaining a state of emergency in countries at risk, increasing the level of law enforcement, reinforcing the military response against terrorist groups or increasing border control should not be the way towards a more effective response (see Graph 1). We need to think differently.

---

1. No Security Without Rights. OPEV&NOVACT International Institute for Nonviolent Action. September 2017.

### Graph 1: What should be the main priorities in order to effectively counter violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region?

(results show the first choice out of four)



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

The Euromed Survey results are consistent with the idea that there is a general need to take a more comprehensive approach which encompasses not only ongoing security measures but also systematic preventive measures that directly address the drivers of violent extremism and its root causes. But how can we organise it?

How can civil society, particularly in the Euro-Mediterranean region, generate a new paradigm based on the prevention of violent extremism? Let's explore some key ideas in this short analytical article.

### State action against terrorism may prompt many to join violent extremist groups: civil society could be a more legitimate actor to work on prevention

There is a paradox that is not easy to explain: state actions (among which not only of authoritarian regimes against terrorism have the potential to push people into violent extremism. Why?

**In some cases, state actions against terrorism can contribute to pushing people into violent extremism.**

Perhaps the most rigorous answer to understand this paradox are the results of the study “Journey to Extremism in Africa”, published<sup>2</sup> recently by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), where almost 500 former combatants were asked about their drivers, incentives and tipping point for recruitment. There is a growing alarm that, as a region, Africa’s vulnerability to violent extremism is deepening and it seems that expanding our knowledge regarding what is motivating this “new front” seems fundamental right now.

What were the conclusions of the report? Of more than 500 former members of militant organisations interviewed for the report, 71% pointed to government action, including the killing or arrest of a family member or friend as the incident that prompted them to join a group. The report says: “State security-actor conduct is revealed as a prominent accelerator of recruitment, rather than the reverse”. Also: “In a majority of cases, paradoxically, state action appears to be the primary factor finally pushing individuals into violent extremism”.

Of course, the report does not say that the heavy-handed tactics adopted by authorities is the only factor leading individuals into violent extremism: many factors can explain the spread of the attraction of extremist ideologies. But it seems that the responses that governments are adopting are making things worse.

**Governments’ counter-terrorism response can generate a decrease in civil liberties and rights.**

There is a logic that can help us understand this. We are aware that governments’ counter-terrorism response in almost all countries aims to suppress terrorist activity by security adopting strategies that generate a decrease in civil liberties and rights. The problem is that the already existing individual and group grievances can be boosted by these strategies. And, even more, the fact that governments responsible for taking care of the whole population are responsible for violating rights of some stigmatised communities can help to spread a narrative that makes the message of violent extremist organisations more attractive.

Aware of this potential risk, are state institutions and security forces the most legitimate actors to implement preventive measures to render the violent extremist message unattractive? Probably not. This is why engaging independent civil society in preventing all forms of violent extremism, promoting good governance, democracy and human rights and addressing economic and social root causes is probably one of the most important tasks to be developed in the future. They are the best alternative.

### **Civil society represents an underused resource to confront violent extremism**

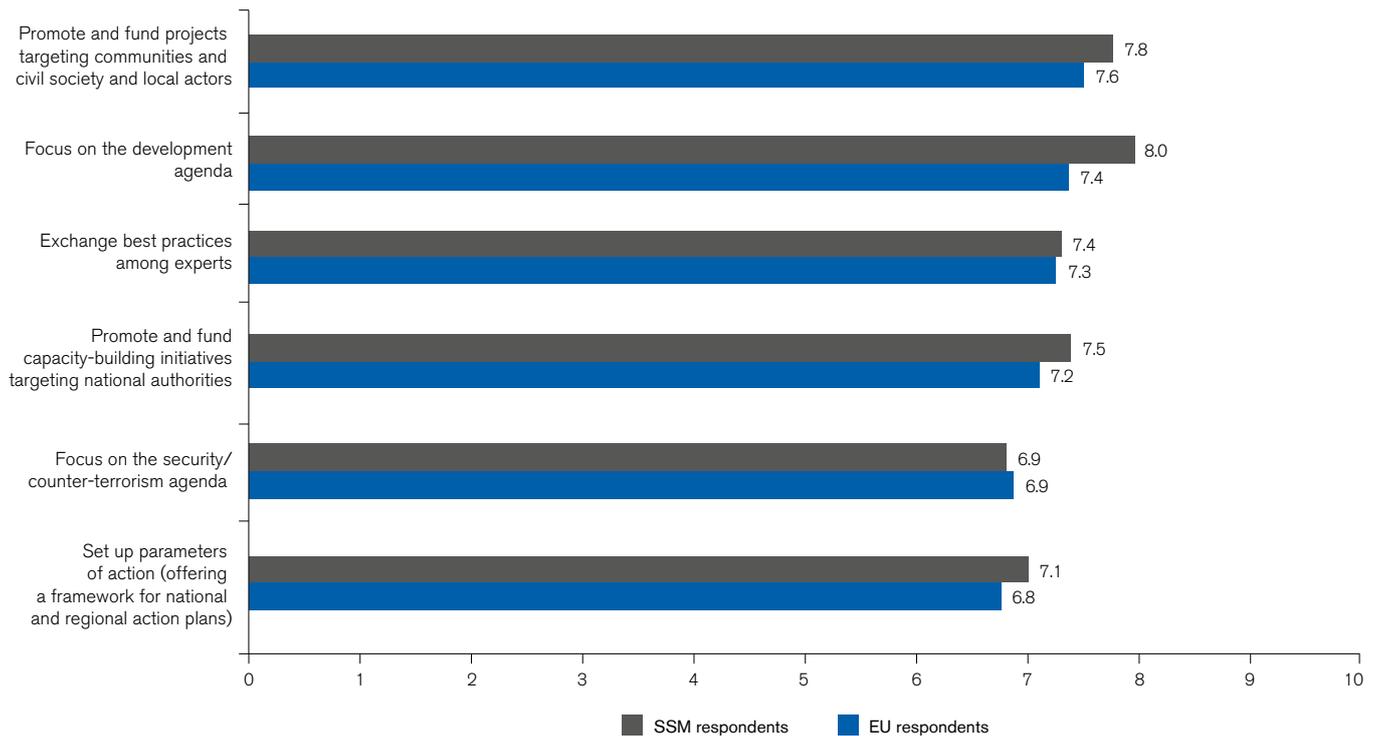
During the last few decades various international statements at all levels have highlighted the role of civil society in a comprehensive and multidimensional response to the threat of violent extremism. The United Nations’ General Assembly, in its resolution adopting the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, confirmed the determination of member states to “further encourage non-governmental organisations and civil society to engage, as appropriate, on how to enhance efforts to implement the Strategy”. In the framework of the OSCE, the African Union, the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation or the European Union, among others, it has been recognised that it is critically important to engage civil society in finding common political settlements for conflicts and to promote human rights and tolerance as essential elements in the prevention of violent extremism.

However, the good-will positions expressed have not been followed by real on-the-ground measures to reinforce the civil society contribution to prevent violent extremism. The results of the Euromed Survey actually show that this should be a priority of multilateral initiatives.

2. <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/>

**Graph 2: The need to address the rise of violent extremism at the multilateral level has been acknowledged and has materialised in a number of initiatives. To what extent should the primary concern of multilateral initiatives be to:**

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



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

Actually, there is a growing concern that states are interested in restraining the space of civil society. In the name of fighting terrorism, governments have curtailed political freedoms and imposed restrictive measures against human rights defenders and civil society activists in many countries. States systematically invoke national security and public safety to shrink the space of independent civil society activities. In many countries, special legislative and regulatory measures have been used to crack down on NGOs and activists who advocate social change and criticise government policies. These measures make it more difficult for civil society actors to promote human rights and tolerance as an essential element in the prevention of violent extremism. It is essential to maintain and protect civil society if we want to address the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism.

### **Civil society can reinforce community resilience and raise alternative narratives faced with the violent extremist message**

We should all agree that when security authorities need to respond, we have in fact already failed in our longing for peaceful existence. When a state imposes a response based on security measures, it is because there has been a failure to deal with the factors that lead to extremism and violence. Nowadays, there is something that we know: radicalisation is a local phenomenon that happens on soccer fields, in parks and cafes. There is no way to investigate every person but if someone is already suspected, only local communities, their families, friends, the people they meet in cafés, could know about it. Equipping them to solve local problems and avoiding the distraction of easy, unhelpful generalisations about immigrant or local communities is the best way to thwart the violent extremist international aims.

**Radicalisation is a local phenomenon that happens on soccer fields, in parks and cafes.**

Most of the fact findings regarding radicalisation processes indicate that very few recruits were self-radicalised; for the vast majority, radicalisation was facilitated through social interaction.

Again we risk providing a reductive answer. The local context is crucial in every experience. In some context recruiters operate within the closed and trusted circles of neighbourhood, family and friendship networks; in others it is within the prisons, religious communities or refugee camps...

Moroccan respondent

Areas where recruiters can prey on people's hopes in the face of alienating defeat are the best places to convert people to any kind of unusual ideology or faith, including ones that might lead to extreme violence.

UK respondent

The Internet can facilitate this but the existence of very specific geographical hotspots that produce the bulk of violent extremism indicates that, when it comes to recruitment, offline factors are more important than the Internet.<sup>3</sup> When radical ideas get introduced into tight-knit networks of friends the feelings of individual or group grievances act as echo chambers that reinforce those beliefs.

That means that any specific activity aiming to prevent the success of violent messages should have the capillarity, the legitimacy and the capabilities to foster community resilience faced with the violent extremist messages. Evidence-based approaches would try to mitigate group radicalisation. Values and beliefs are socially embedded. Once the social setting changes, the beliefs may lose their grounding. For this reason, social organisation delivering a different message, an alternative narrative, are not only crucial for mitigating radicalisation processes but can be important in the prevention and deradicalisation process as well. Several programmes have proved that civil society members acting locally can be an effective tool to pull a person or group away from violent extremism.

### **There is an emerging agenda of the Euro-Mediterranean Civil Society for contributing to the prevention of violent extremism**

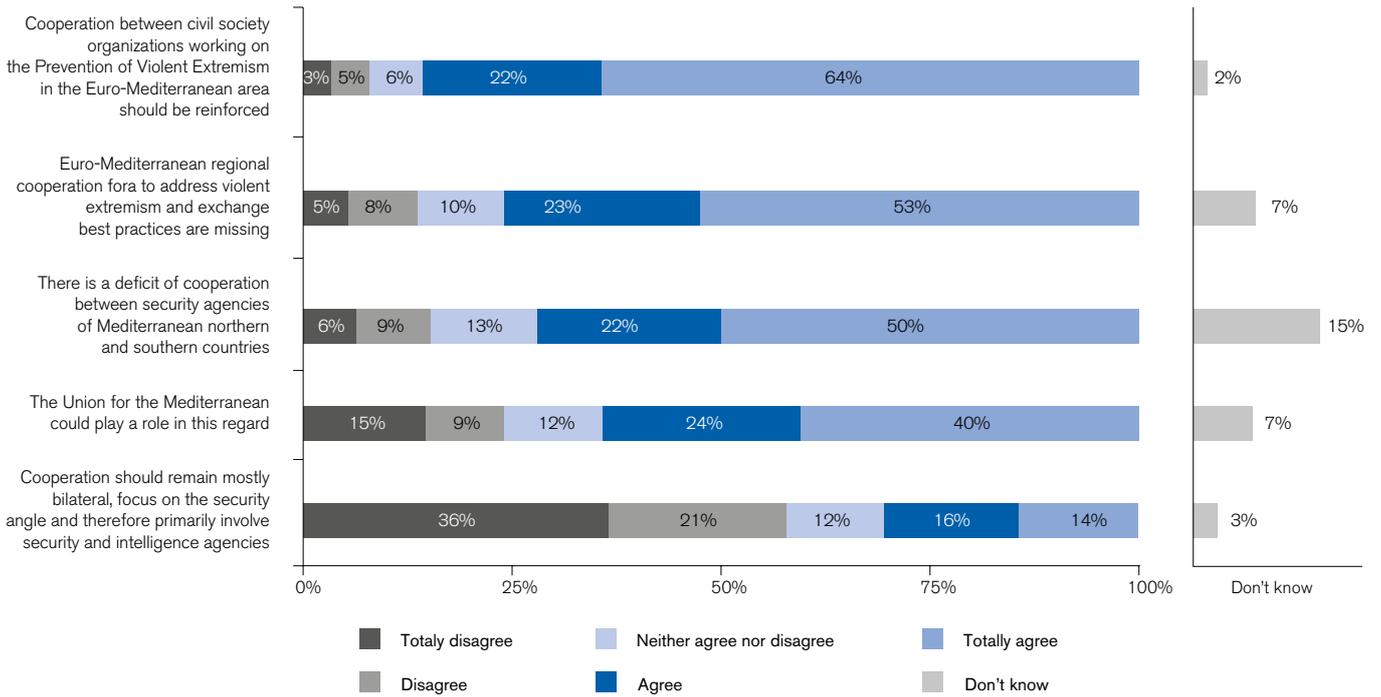
**Human rights and peace-building organisations across the Euro-Mediterranean region have set up an agenda for action.**

One of the most repeated and dangerous clichés when debating the potential involvement of civil society organisations in prevention of violent extremism activities has been the “rumour” of their lack of a positive agenda to contribute constructively to policy proposal. Most of the governments, when interviewed regarding the need to engage CSOs, repeat quite similar ideas: CSOs are not prepared, they are there just to criticise, they have no constructive ideas... This is no longer true. Human rights and peace-building organisations have been organising over the last few years all across the Euro-Mediterranean region to set up an agenda for action. The Barcelona Declaration<sup>4</sup> is an example of these efforts. Answers to Questions 14 and 15 of the 8th Euromed Survey edition gives credit to the shared proposal that there is a need to further reinforce CSOs' engagement in prevention of violent extremism and target communities. It is especially relevant that it was the most supported quote both for Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries and for EU countries.

3. This matches with Ritzmann's assertion “The role of the social media in radicalisation is overstated” see Ritzmann “The Role of Propaganda in Violent Extremism and how to Counter It” p. 26).

4. Barcelona declaration: Plan of Action of the Euro-Mediterranean civil society to prevent all forms of violent extremism.

**Graph 3: Do you agree with the following statements regarding Euro-Mediterranean cooperation?**



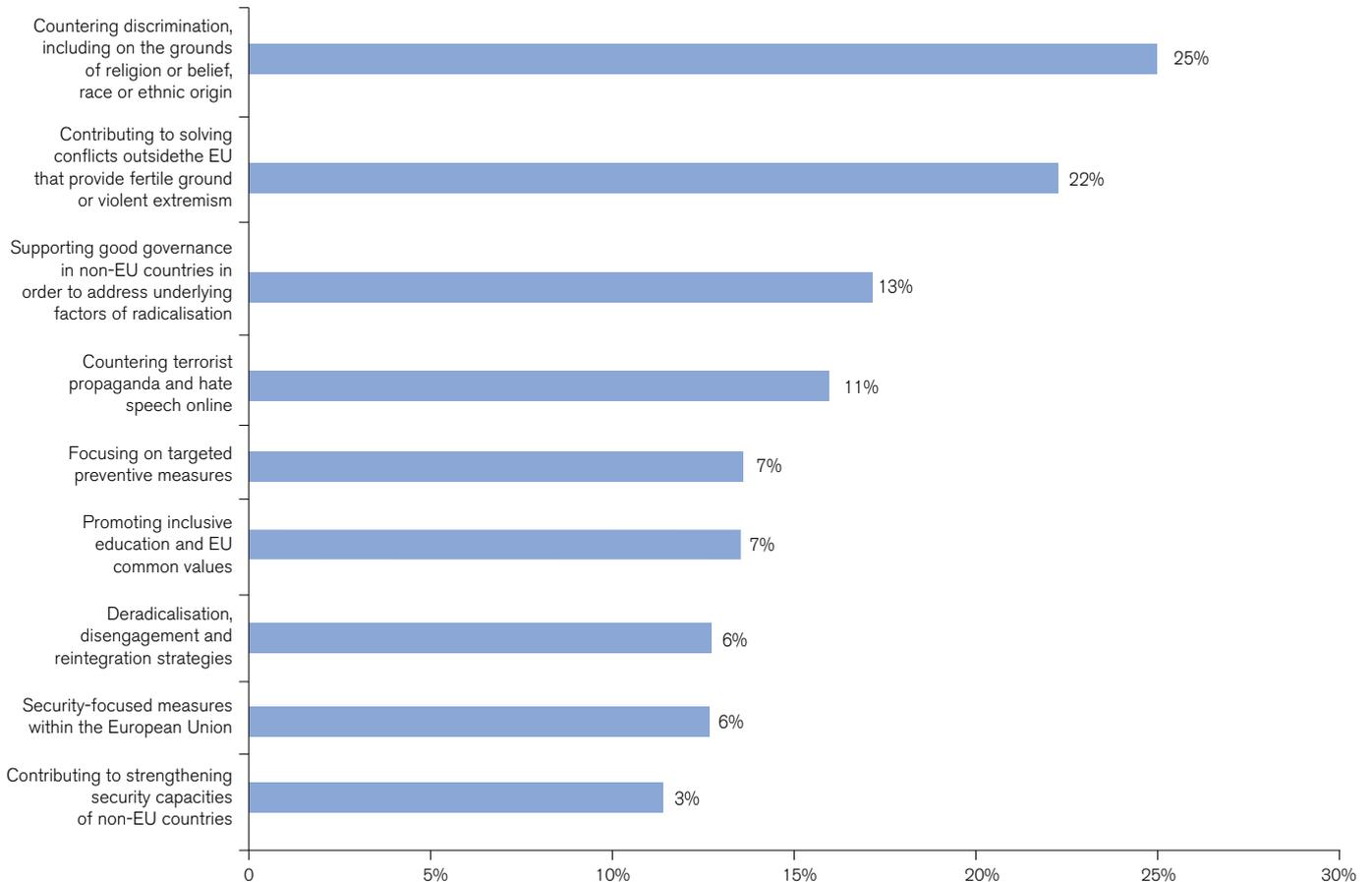
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 8th Euromed Survey

**There are some ideas shared by most independent CSOs that deserve to be shared**

It is important to insist on the need to confront all violent extremisms. There has been a tendency in academia and policies to focus much of the efforts on studying radicalisation processes connected to Jihadism while other forms, equally dangerous, of violent extremism were almost forgotten, such as the extreme right or Islamophobia. Only by understanding the interconnection between the different forms of violent extremism will it be possible to set up effective responses. This is coherent with the results of the Euromed Survey including those related to question 16: countering discrimination, including on the grounds of religion or belief, race or ethnic origin, should be the priority work of the EU and member states (see Graph 4).

**It is important to confront all violent extremisms.**

**Graph 4: What should the EU and its member states focus on as a matter of priority?**  
(results show the first choice out of three)



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

The second idea is the need to focus on latent violence (cultural and structural violence) and not only on direct violence. According to CSOs there is a need to work not only on confronting terrorist attacks but also on preventing other forms of violence such as hate speech, hate crimes or structural violence.

The third idea is the need to work on ensuring the protection of human rights in counter-terrorism laws. An independent civil society is one of the most promising strategies to ensure a state action that will respect human rights standards. Only a society with professional watchdog systems will have enough social capital to promote democratic values and protect civil society space.

**Civil society can offer a positive vision of a future together that can generate an effective alternative to violent radicalisation.**

Last but not least is the defence of a community development approach. Faced with violent extremism, we will not be successful unless we can harness the idealism, creativity and energy of civil society groups all around the Euro-Mediterranean region. Social movements must be empowered to make a constructive contribution to the political and economic development of their societies and nations. Civil society can offer a positive vision of a future together that can generate an effective alternative to violent radicalisation. CSOs are convinced that engaging civil society in community development actions, based on the full respect for human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism and the most promising strategy to render this menace unattractive.

## The opportunity of the UN Plan of Action

Faced with the current efforts to develop a new, more comprehensive and effective paradigm based on the prevention of violent extremism, there has been a relevant initiative that deserves attention: the UN Secretary-General Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism that was presented to the General Assembly on January 2016. In this Plan, the Secretary-General calls for a comprehensive approach encompassing ongoing measures with systematic preventive steps to address the underlying conditions that drive individuals to radicalise and join violent extremist groups. The Plan is a concrete response from the international community coordinated among civil society groups from all over the world that appeals for concerted action to support national, regional and global efforts to prevent violent extremism and assist member states, municipalities and governorates in developing National Plans of Action.

The UN Plan of Action constitutes the inaugural basis for a comprehensive approach to this fast, evolving and multidimensional challenge. At a time of growing polarisation on several national, regional and global issues, the new paradigm based on prevention offers a real opportunity for all the actors of the Euro-Mediterranean community to offer a more agile and far-reaching response. The definition of local plans could be an excellent opportunity to build bridges with civil society groups and call upon the commitment of civil society organisations to concerted action.

---

**Luca Gervasoni i Vila**, Founding co-director of NOVACT – International Institute for Nonviolent Action. For the last decade, his work has focused on how grassroots nonviolent movements can successfully fight for rights, freedom and justice. He lives between Jerusalem and Barcelona and has worked with activists from around the world waging social change. He has contributed to the book *Economic Democracy: an alternative to capitalism*.