

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN LIBYA AND ITS EURO-MEDITERRANEAN IMPLICATIONS

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Introduction

Since the early 1980s, Libya has been a fertile environment for the spread of radicalisation, extremism and violent resistance to Gaddafi's authoritarian repressive regime. The current situation must be understood in the light of this recent history, as suggested by a Libyan respondent to the Euromed Survey in the following quote:

In my country, Libya, it is the failure of all state institutions as well as decades of dictatorship and oppression that lead to grief and radicalisation of youth.

Libyan respondent

Violent extremism in Libya must be understood in the light of its recent history.

In 1976, Gaddafi imposed on the Libyan people his Green Book that all Libyans had to follow and adopt in their personal, social, political and economic life. Libyans had no choice but to implement the Green Book and its tenets in their life or else they would be persecuted or imprisoned, and in many cases opposing the "Great Leader" would lead to physical liquidation. This zero tolerance policy towards any opposition to the regime gave no choice to peaceful opposition inside the country. A simple verbal comment on or criticism of the regime could easily lead to the death penalty in front of masses in the holy month of Ramadan. Exclusion and crushing of any second opinion except the Guide's made opponents of the regime gather, communicate and group secretly underground.

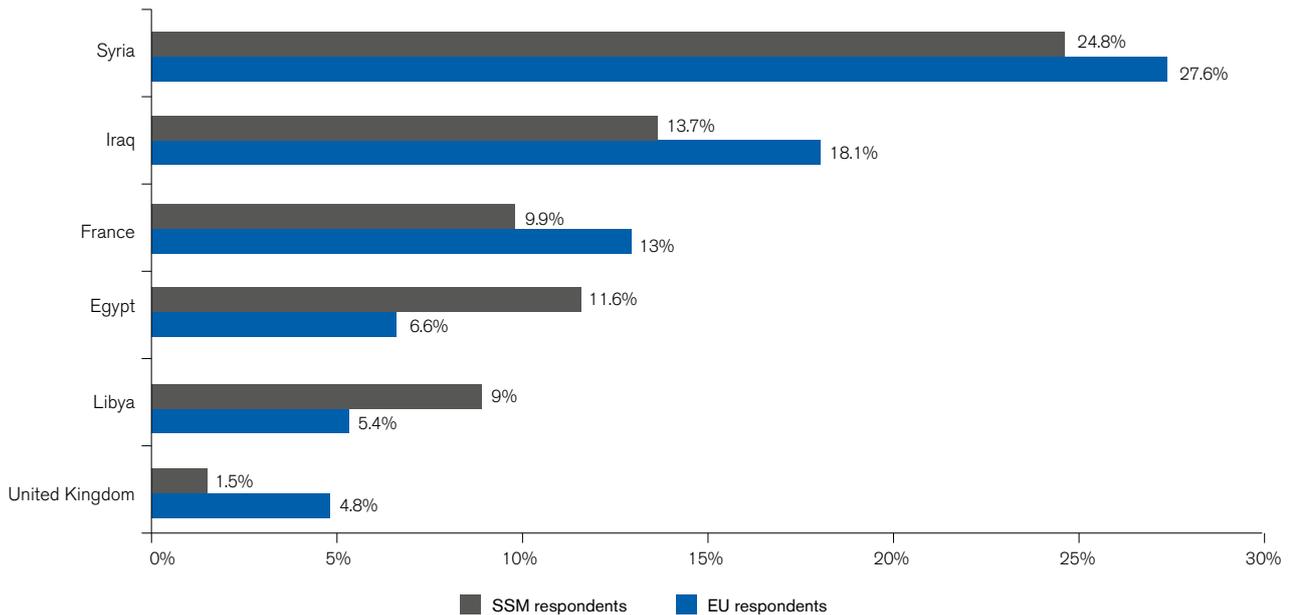
In the 1980s many opposition members were executed and thousands were imprisoned and tortured. Underground networks, prisons and secret groups were fertile environments for radical and extremist seeds to grow and flourish. Extremist ideologies, such as Al-Qaeda, were imported from Salafist Jihadist group rhetoric against dictators and tyrants. The government's closure of Islamic universities teaching the moderate traditional Maliki Islamic school of thought and the neglecting of Islamic scholars gave way to many young Jihadist activists and zealots becoming the new religious leaders. Calls for Jihad, revolt, violent resistance and rebellion against a tyrant found listening ears from many young people. A leader that silenced any free voice, impoverished a rich nation and imposed his personal philosophy on the people gave no choice to youths but to revolt.

Young people in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s found all venues blocked for expressing their opinions, aiming for a peaceful change and living a decent life. The situation is best described by the Libyan Arabic proverb "Oppression leads to explosion", and explosion it was on 17 February 2011. The post-revolution Libyan governments and society face the challenge of violent extremism that was inherited from the previous regime in an environment of conflict, the spread of arms and proliferation of militias. Understanding the root causes of violent extremism and analysing the current context is the right way to find sustainable solutions to the phenomena. Libya, with its proximity to Europe and being a Euro-Mediterranean country, affects and is affected by its region and surroundings. As illustrated by the results of the Euromed Survey, Libya is likely to

continue to suffer from violent extremism in the coming years, which is a threat to its stability as well as the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole.

Graph 1: Which of these countries* are likely to become targets or continue being targeted by violent extremism in the upcoming years?

(results show first choice out of three)



* Respondents had a drop-down menu with the 43 Euro-Mediterranean countries (members of the Union for the Mediterranean) as well as Russia, the US and the Gulf countries, Iran and Iraq.

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

Therefore, Libya's challenges and solutions to its violent extremism problem should be well understood and supported by its Euro-Mediterranean neighbours. In this article I shall explore the causes of and solution to the violent extremism challenge Libya faces and how Libya and its Euro-Mediterranean neighbours can overcome this challenge and its implications for the region. The results of the Euromed Survey will allow me to illustrate some parts of this analysis, particularly those related to drivers of violent extremism and ways to confront it.

Causes

Injustice

Exclusion in its political, social and economic forms is a cause of radicalisation and extremism (see El Difraoui "Authoritarianism and Radicalisation towards Violent Extremism" p. 34). Political and socioeconomic grievances are strong drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. For more than four decades only pro-Gaddafi revolutionary committees enjoyed the status of true patriotic citizens, giving them socioeconomic and political privileges. All non-members of the Gaddafi revolutionary committees were marginalised and excluded from any sort of political participation or socioeconomic privileges. Normal citizens who were non-members of the revolutionary committees lived their daily life suffering injustice, hoping that change would come and in many ways their hearts secretly supported any form of opposition to their repressor including radical violent means. Oppression and injustice were the most effective tools of recruiting youths to radical and extremist groups. Leaders of such groups found it easy to convince oppressed youths to defend their rights with all possible means, including violence.

Political and socioeconomic grievances are strong drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in Libya.

Themes like Jihad, violent resistance and martyrdom were adopted by youths facing the totalitarian regime.

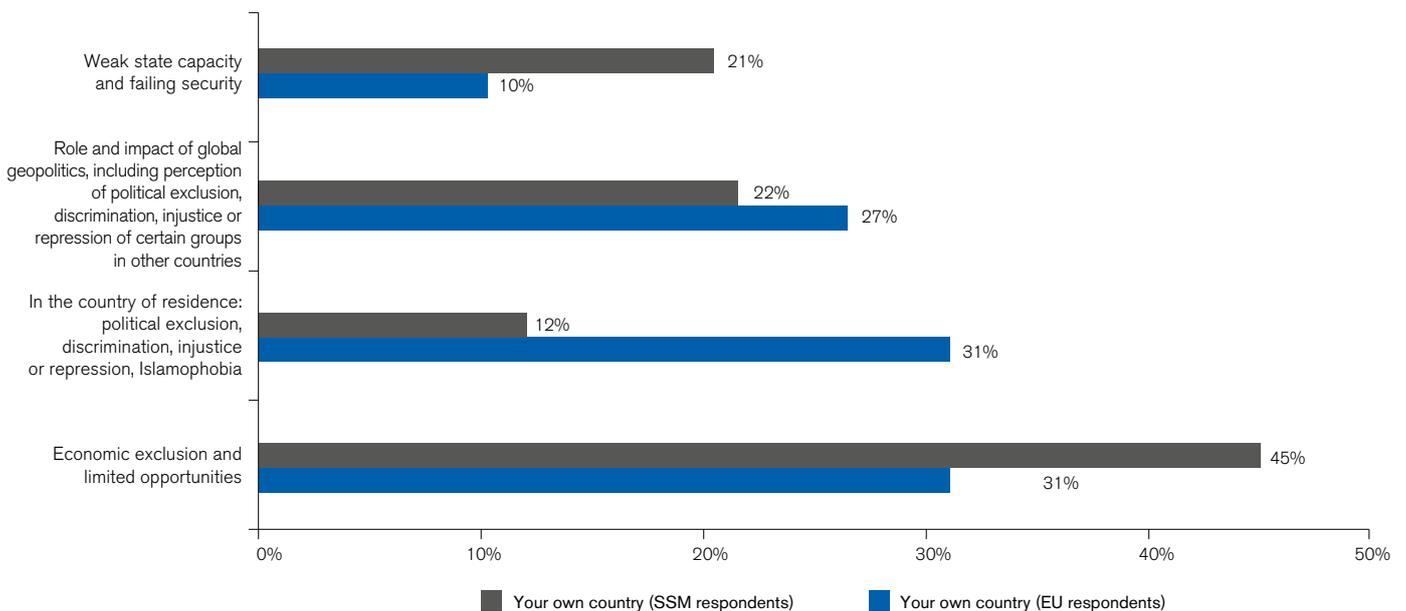
Cultural and Ideological

Ideology played a crucial role in radicalising many young Libyans. Radical religious interpretations and narratives of Islam were adopted by angry youths. Themes like Jihad, violent resistance and martyrdom were adopted by youths facing the totalitarian regime either secretly underground or in prisons. Many Islamic jurisprudential rulings (Fatwas) calling for Jihad were taken out of context to recruit, mobilise and arm youths by Jihadist Salfist extremist groups. With the lack of Islamic educational institutions and the long marginalisation of Islamic scholars, such groups were the only source of Fatwas for youths. The Malaki moderate traditional Islamic schools, universities and scholars were all silenced or marginalised by the Gaddafi regime, opening the door for importing violent extremist Fatwas from the Salafist Jihadist extremist school.

Socioeconomic Grievances

As illustrated by the results of the Euromed Survey, poverty, unemployment and socioeconomic exclusion are all drivers of radicalism, especially when they are interconnected with a belief that you are a citizen of a rich country. A young man who believes that his country is rich and that the regime is depriving him of his country's riches is bound to have many grievances.

Graph 2: Drivers providing fertile ground for the development of violent extremism.
(% of the most significant driver by group of countries)



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

Not being able to benefit from the country's wealth to live a decent life can only lead to radicalisation.

Knowing that a small privileged group of society is enjoying the country's resources (oil and gas) and not being able to benefit from the country's wealth to live a decent life can only lead to radicalisation. Young Libyans had a famous saying during Gaddafi's regime that "we are a rich country with a poor population". Libya with all its riches scored relatively low on the human and economic development indicators.

The post-revolution governments since the break of the armed conflict in 2014 have not been able to accomplish any reforms to the economy. In the last three years the economy has collapsed with the Libyan Dinar losing 80% of its value. These economic failures are a strong driver towards more chaos, conflict and rise of violent extremism.

International Interventions

In Libya and the Arab countries, Western policies were always in favour of Western interests no matter who ruled our countries or how bad they were governed. Authoritarian, repressive regimes, including Gaddafi's, were tolerated for decades with little concern for the livelihood of the people, democracy or human rights. The only intervention on the side of the people, their freedom, human rights and prosperity were in 2011 in support of the Arab Spring. Many Libyans thought that it was a new Western policy shift from supporting tyrants to supporting peoples' rights and democracy. Unfortunately, after the success of the Libyan revolution the Western intervention stopped short of supporting Libya in nation building. This policy of refraining from intervening in state building, socioeconomic development and security sector reform was seen as betraying the revolutions.

Worse than that is the claim by some Western politicians that intervening to support the revolutions against authoritarian regimes was a mistake, as if the people do not deserve to be free and live in a democratic country. Such opinions and claims can only send the wrong message to youths that Western policies support tyrants and oppressive regimes as they can make better bargains with them. Policies of some Western governments supporting Hefter, a military dictator seen by many Libyans as the incarnation of Gaddafi, are a clear setback to the 2011 policies of supporting the people's uprising for a free democratic prosperous Libya. Hefter, after failing to come to power through a military coup in February 2014 in the capital Tripoli, returned to Benghazi with his Karama (Dignity) campaign against "Terrorism". Since then the country has entered into civil war, chaos and a power vacuum, as illustrated by the comment of a Swiss respondent to the Euromed Survey.

The process of state-rebuilding in these countries will undoubtedly be accompanied by violent extremism, especially if there is a power vacuum as in Libya or if power is contested by multiple actors.

Swiss respondent

The policies of some Western countries to support military dictators claiming to fight terrorism can only fuel radicalisation, violent extremism and spread chaos in Libya and the region.

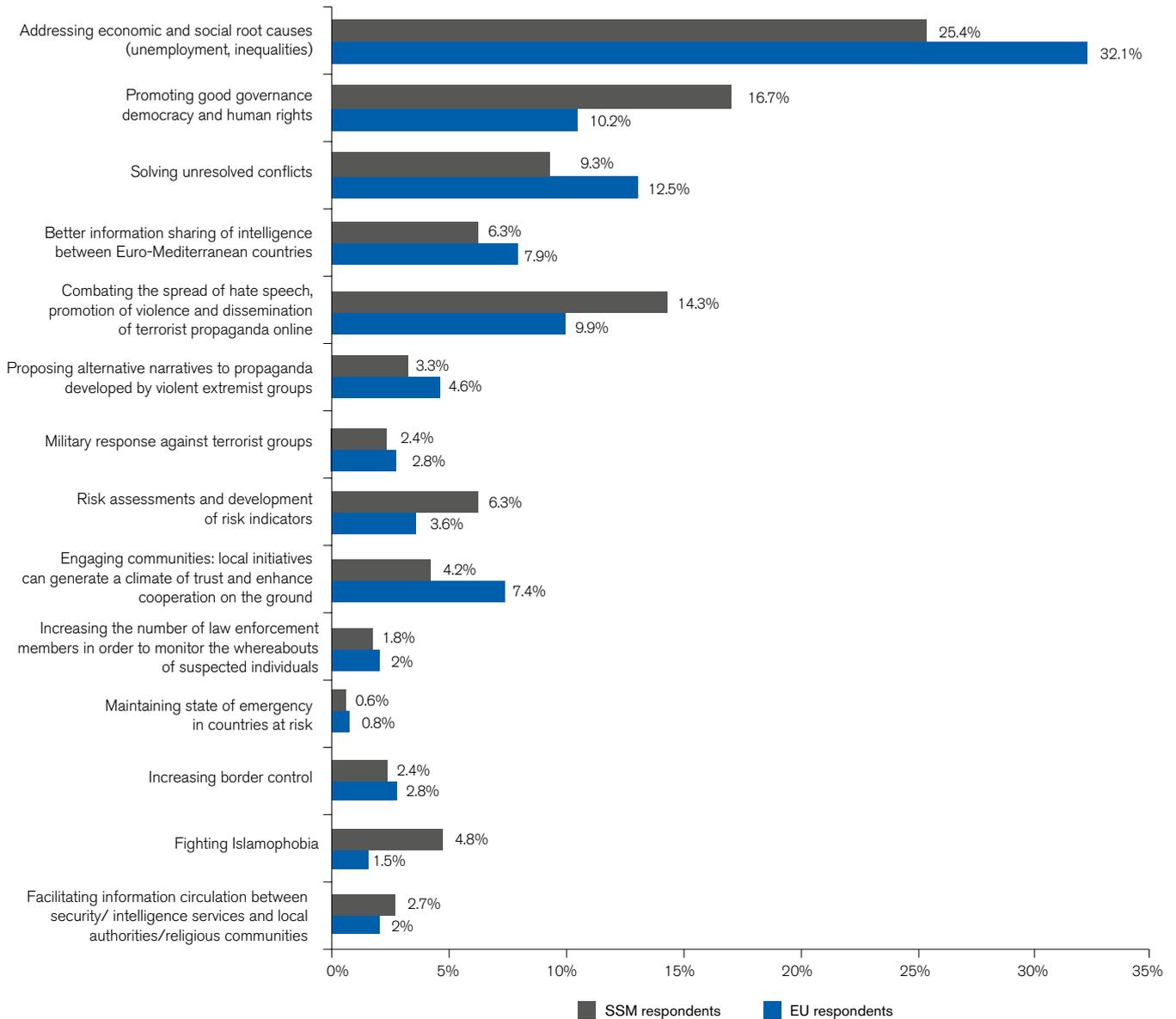
Solutions

Inclusion

Political and socioeconomic inclusion of all components of society including youths is essential for deradicalisation, stability and peace building. World states that were able to include their political opponents and religious political parties such as Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia and Israel are a good example of including politically moderate and extremist religious parties in their democratic political system.

After the success of the Libyan revolution the Western intervention stopped short of supporting Libya in nation building.

Graph 3: 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

Political inclusion gives ideological radicals an opportunity to express themselves peacefully rather than violently.

Such political inclusion gives ideological radicals an opportunity to express themselves peacefully rather than violently. Many of the radical groups and parties deradicalise by joining the democratic process. Entering into the democratic game of alliances, elections, campaigning and joining political coalitions softens many of the extreme views of these parties. Socioeconomic inclusion is also an effective tool of deradicalisation, demobilisation and disarming of armed radical groups. SMEs and economic opportunities attract many of the youths who otherwise would be attracted by extremist militant groups. Interviews that were conducted after the Libyan revolution in 2012 showed that more than 42% of armed revolutionaries including Islamic extremists were willing to demobilise and disarm in exchange for an opportunity to establish a small business (LPRD, 2015).

Dialogue, Awareness and Education

Talking, debating and negotiating with extremists might not be a policy favoured by Western governments but in the Libyan context it can save many lives and deradicalise many youths. Many of the young radicals and extremists have not been well educated or exposed to any free thinking environment. In the era of Gaddafi a person had one of two choices: either to believe in and follow the Green Book or adopt a rebellious philosophy. The trend amongst youths in the 1990s and 2000s was to adopt Jihadist Salafist ideologies where they found mental comfort in standing up to “Tyrants and Pharaohs”.

Most Arab countries (dictatorship regimes) have helped directly or indirectly in the surge of violent extremism by banning political and religious freedom. The imprisonment of Islamist leaders and their followers led to more radicalisation and gave them the illusion that they are being fought because they are on the right path, because their cause is the holiest.

German respondent

Talking and debating with these young extremists is an important method for deradicalisation. Violent extremist Islamic groups depend on misinterpretations of Islamic jurisdictions (Fatwa). By talking and debating with them it is possible to convince many of them of the weak basis of their hypothesis and that their Jihadist path is a deviation from Islamic jurisdictions. Spreading awareness in schools, universities and society about the misconceptions of Jihad and advocating a moderate Islamic narrative is also an important method of protecting youths from violent extremist ideologies. Empowering the traditional moderate Maliki Islamic school of thought by reopening its schools and universities and connecting them to the Maghreb Maliki educational institutions can stop the high wave of Salafism coming from the east.

In the Libyan context talking and debating with these young extremists is an important method for deradicalisation.

Socioeconomic Reintegration

The greatest challenge that Libya’s stabilisation faces is the lack of security caused by the proliferation of arms and armed groups. Millions of arms have been spread amongst Libyans during the revolution and continue to be in the hands of the population all over the country. Hundreds of armed groups in the country vary from ex-revolutionaries, ex-regime supporters, and tribal, extremist and criminal groups. Some efforts were started after the revolution in 2012-2013 by the Libyan Program for Reintegration and Development (LPRD) to reintegrate ex-revolutionaries into the new state, including socioeconomic reintegration and SMEs. Socioeconomic reintegration depends mainly on SMEs as it is the only way to provide ex-combatants with sustainable business and job opportunities with the current situation of the bloated public sector. Entrepreneurship and SMEs can create jobs and economic development in local communities where it is most needed. Municipalities can play an important role in reintegrating armed group members, including extremists, by providing them with rehabilitation, business incubation, training and financing new small businesses. Engaging ex-combatants in new businesses has proved to be a very effective method of reintegration and disarmament.

Positive International Policies

The West and our European neighbours have been intervening in our internal affairs since the colonial era. These interventions have been driven by mere economic and political interests. The West must admit that during the last century most of the policies on our region and Libya did not prioritise freedom, democracy and the prosperity of our people. Now is the time to change these policies and engage in a balanced sincere partnership with the people based on mutual benefits. The Arab Spring has opened the way for a new partnership between Europe and Libya based on the common values of freedom, democracy, human rights and open markets that the 17 February uprising called for. Unlike coordinating with authoritarian repressive regimes, partnering with democratic governments that represent the people could be the right framework for combating terrorism and violent extremism. Intervening to help the Libyan people to rebuild their new state by reconciliation, security sector reform, institution building, good governance and socioeconomic reforms would bring stability and prosperity to both sides of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion and Implications for the Euro-Mediterranean

Libya is at a crossroads: either it moves ahead into state building, stabilisation and socioeconomic development or it falls into more conflict.

Libya is a country of great importance for the Euro-Mediterranean region. With its unique location in the centre of North Africa, its abundant natural resources and its young human capital, Libya can contribute to the prosperity of the Euro-Mediterranean region. However, the fragile security context and the proliferation of armed groups have devastating consequences for its social stability and economic development. Libya is at a crossroads: either it moves ahead into state building, stabilisation and socioeconomic development or it falls into more conflict. Violent extremism, terrorism and chaos are a contagious disease that is affecting neighbouring countries and the Euro-Mediterranean. If the world is a small village then the Euro-Mediterranean is a farm in this village. Members of this farm must ensure all inhabitants security and well-being, otherwise the whole farm will suffer. The Euro-Mediterranean countries have no choice but to help Libya overcome its fragility, conflict and state building challenges to save Libya and the region from chaos.

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