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The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) has carried out seven “Euromed Surveys” so far based on a broad sample of policy-makers and experts with the objective of covering the main issues on the political agenda of the region and monitoring the progress in Euro-Mediterranean perceptions and policies. After dedicating last year’s Survey to the management of human movements and migrations in the Euro-Mediterranean region, the IEMed decided to dedicate this year’s edition to violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

The 8th Euromed Survey was conducted among 6,500 experts and actors from the 43 countries that are members of the Union for the Mediterranean, 746 responses were received, which constitutes a representative sample of this expert community. In addition to the descriptive report of the results and the annexes that set out the results in a comprehensive and visual manner, this publication also gives some space to more in-depth analyses of a few strategic issues related to violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region. The objective of the “qualitative analysis” written by renowned experts is to offer keys to better understand some of the main issues at stake.

The topic of the survey was identified at the beginning of 2017 and the survey itself was conducted in spring 2017. This survey is part of a determined and consistent effort that the IEMed has made over the last few years to analyse and facilitate the understanding of this phenomenon through a number of activities and publications. While doing so, the IEMed has not only tried to decode the causes and impact of the phenomenon as well as the policy responses deployed to face it, but has also insisted again and again on its truly global and in particular Euro-Mediterranean dimension. Steadfastly, it has also tried to contribute to fighting prejudices and misperceptions that too often pollute the debate on violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Violent extremism is not affecting primarily and mostly European Union countries. Violent extremism is not imported from the southern Mediterranean. As much as it is important to understand that all countries of the region are affected and that violent extremism is also prospering in European Union countries, it is necessary to acknowledge that the root causes of extremism are numerous. The profiles of extremists are so varied that it is difficult to establish a general diagnosis and devise simple recipes or policies to address the issue. However, in addition to other factors such as values and identity crisis or low socioeconomic prospects, it is important to acknowledge that creeping Islamophobia, the surge of populist and nationalist groups in the EU and the continuation or the reproduction of authoritarianism in the southern Mediterranean region are factors that fuel violent extremism.

The Euromed Survey was designed to capture all these elements. The questionnaire is structured around three main groups of questions. First, it focuses on the environments, causes as well as mechanisms that favour the surge of violent extremism at the societal and individual level. The second group of questions looks into the impact of violent extremism while the last part is dedicated to the policy response to violent extremism.

On the Context, Drivers and Mechanisms that Favour the Surge of Violent Extremism

This batch of questions aims to assess the opinion of the respondents on the environments, drivers and mechanisms that favour the surge of violent extremism in a society and at the more individual level.

Asked to identify in which environments individuals are more likely to be turned into violent extremists, a majority of respondents answer “conflict zones” and think that Syria and Iraq are the two countries more likely to continue suffering from violent extremism in the upcoming years. While there is a tendency in the European public opinion to consider EU countries as primary victims and targets of violent extremism, this serves as a useful reminder that this is not the case. This result also relates to another finding of the survey which attributes the main responsibility for the surge of violent extremism to governments and state authorities, either because of their participation in military interventions, or because of the way they deal with domestic developments.

Within the European Union, France remains the most exposed country according to the respondents, who interestingly are generally more prone to consider that other countries are exposed to the threat of violent extremism than their own. After “conflict zones”, the internet and social media is seen as the main terrain that facilitates the surge of violent extremism. Interestingly, respondents from Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries are more prone than their European counterparts to identify “religious communities” as a fertile environment for the development of violent extremism.

As mentioned above, the issue of the drivers of “radicalisation” is extremely complex. The IEMed is therefore sceptical with simplifying discourses of those who put all their eggs into one basket and pretend to explain the phenomenon of violent extremism only through the lenses of one theory. Both the design and the results of this survey acknowledge this difficulty. Overall, respondents seem to be of the opinion that violent extremism is to be understood mainly as a social rather than as a religious phenomenon. “Weak state capacity, economic exclusion and limited opportunities” are seen as key drivers of violent extremism in Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries. In turn, “political exclusion and discrimination” is seen as key driver in EU countries, in particular according to respondents from Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries. At a more individual level, respondents agree to consider that the most significant individual driver to violent extremism is the perceived humiliation and discrimination from the society in the country of residence on ethnic, national, linguistic or religious grounds.

On the Impact of Violent Extremism

With the second block, we explore the mechanisms through which violent extremism is threatening the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean space as a whole, while at the same time putting this threat into perspective. Violent extremism is definitely a security threat for a number of countries and is indeed perceived as the main threat in the Euro-Mediterranean region. However, the dramatic and visual impact of terrorist attacks should not obliterate the fact that other phenomena affect the stability and security of the region and in particular right-wing extremism and Islamophobia as well as authoritarian trends. Further than this, it appears that these phenomena are connected with each other

to some extent: violent extremism fuels islamophobic and nationalist discourses in some countries and is used to legitimate authoritarian trends in others. Survey results show very clearly that the main perverse effect of those attacks is that they risk undermining cohesion in culturally diverse societies according to the respondents.

Terrorist attacks, terrorist groups and foreign fighters: these are three dimensions that one associates with the threat of violent extremism and that the survey looks into. Looking back to terrorist attacks that hit Euro-Mediterranean countries over the last years, it is important to acknowledge that each and every attack has a specific and important impact and that it is the accumulation of those attacks that shakes the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean region. Asked about the attacks that had the most harmful impact on the stability of the Euro-Mediterranean region as a whole, respondents do not necessarily refer to attacks that hit their respective countries. Overall, attacks that hit Paris over the last years as well as attacks in Tunisia tend to be identified as those that were most harmful. Turning to specific groups that are behind those attacks, respondents acknowledge the role of Daesh but also argue that defeating it will be neither easy nor sufficient. In a possible “post Daesh” scenario indeed, some existing organisations (in particular Al-Qaeda) are likely to take the lead and/or new jihadist organisations are likely to come up.

Finally, the threat of violent extremism is associated to a large extent with foreign terrorist fighters, defined as “individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict” (UN Security Council resolution 2178). Tackling the foreign fighters threat requires as a matter of priority improving cooperation between countries (including information sharing) as dealing with foreign fighters returning to their home countries only through a repressive angle will not be enough. Echoing debates that were held in some countries of the region, a majority of respondents agreed that preventing them from returning to their country of origin could not be an option.

On Policy Responses

The third block of this Survey aimed to capture respondents’ assessments on various aspects related to the policy response to violent extremism. To start with, it appears that a majority of respondents have a rather positive opinion of the efforts undertaken in their respective countries, although the results also show some variations from one country to the other. For example, respondents from Algeria and Morocco assess that the efforts of their respective countries are highly or very highly effective in much bigger proportions than Tunisian and Egyptian respondents. Within the EU, respondents from Spain or Italy tend to rate the efforts of their countries slightly more positively than respondents from other European countries such as France, Germany or Belgium.

In general it is perceived that the priority strand of actions to counter violent extremism is to deal with its root causes, including socio-economic ones. Security-oriented measures are not seen as the main priorities. Multilateral frameworks in particular could contribute to addressing these root causes (focus on the development agenda rather than focus on the security/counter terrorism agenda) and supporting those actors that can make a difference, in particular communities, civil society and local actors.

Respondents unambiguously highlight the need for more regional Euro-Mediterranean cooperation on preventing and countering violent extremism, acknowledge that there is a deficit of cooperation between security agencies of Mediterranean northern and southern countries, think that cooperation in this field should not remain only bilateral and not focus only on the security angle. A majority of respondents thinks that Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation fora to address violent extremism and exchange best practices are missing and a majority thinks that the Union for the Mediterranean could play a role in this regard.

As far as the European Union itself is concerned, scaling-up security-oriented measures within the European Union is not seen as a matter of priority. On the external front, respondents also agree to consider that “supporting good governance in non-EU countries in order to address underlying factors of radicalisation” is more of a priority than “contributing to strengthening security capacities of non-EU countries”. There is a perception gap regarding the importance to counter discrimination in the European Union as a matter of priority. Respondents from Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries have ranked “countering discrimination, including on the grounds of religion or belief, race or ethnic origin” as a number one priority in higher proportions than their European counterparts. In turn, “contributing to solving conflicts outside the EU that provide fertile ground for violent extremism” is ranked first by EU respondents. Respondents from Southern and Southeast Mediterranean countries are consistently rating the effectiveness of EU frameworks in higher proportions than their European counterparts. Targeted mechanisms such as the Radicalisation Awareness Network, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Office or the cooperation with IT and social media are seen as more effective than broad policy frameworks such as the European Neighbourhood Policy. The fight against terrorist financing is seen as an important strand while the reinforced checks introduced in the Schengen context are assessed as least relevant when it comes to counter-terrorism purposes.

Overall, results of this survey combined with open comments formulated by the respondents and the analytical articles offer very useful insights into the Euro-Mediterranean dimension of violent extremism. The responses do not systematically follow Northern vs. Southern Mediterranean patterns and show how countries in both rims of the Mediterranean face similar challenges. Results also call for enhanced Euro-Mediterranean cooperation confronting violent extremism, an objective that the IEMed will continue to pursue.