

Strategies Sectors | **Culture & Society**

On the Urgency of Combatting Stereotypes about Violent Extremism in Europe

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The terrorist attacks in Europe over the past few years have left traces; traces which the perpetrators of these attacks specifically and scrupulously intended to leave. Among them: crumbling societal cohesion, rampant Islamophobia, increased room for manoeuvre for populist movements and prejudices that are becoming consolidated in the public opinion. In this context, it is urgent to counter a number of stereotypes and recall certain fundamental tenets regarding violent extremism, obvious for some but unfortunately difficult to spread among public opinion. This is one of the aims of the Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors that the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) conducts every year: to make a greater number of people aware of the voice of experts engaged in one way or another in Euro-Mediterranean relations in order to deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices. The eighth edition of the Euromed Survey, taken in 2017, was precisely dedicated to violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean region and the results lend themselves to questioning certain Eurocentric reflexes.¹

European Union Member States Are Neither the Only Countries Hit nor the Most Deeply Affected by Violent Extremism

A number of European countries have been struck by terrorist attacks over the past few years. Accord-

ing to the Eurobarometer, for the first time, terrorism was perceived in Spring 2017 as the most important problem facing the EU. To the question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?"; 44% of Europeans surveyed answered "terrorism."²

Moved, at times blinded and misinformed by the media, Europeans have a tendency to view their territory as the main target of terrorism coming from elsewhere. However, we must recall that violent extremism strikes well beyond the EU borders. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, it even strikes the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries more. According to an American study,³ in 2017, 19,121 people were killed in terrorist attacks in the MENA region while 238 were killed in western Europe.

The results of the Euromed Survey allow us to re-situate debate to bring it into accurate proportion and recall that the EU is not, in fact, the main victim of violent extremism. As illustrated in Chart 17, survey participants only identified a single European country among the five they singled out as most likely to be exposed to violent extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean space in the forthcoming years.

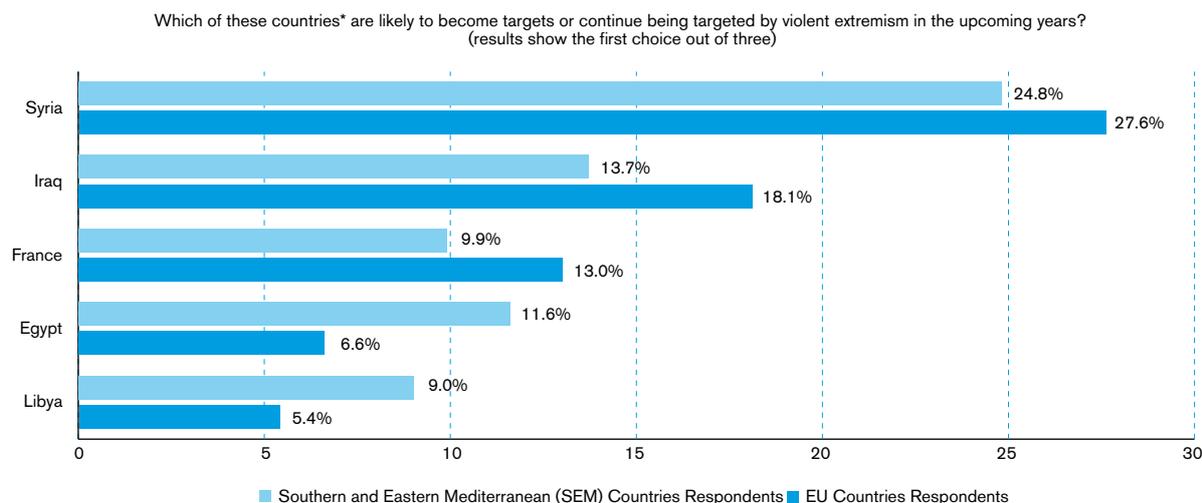
Violent Extremism Is Not a Phenomenon Imported to Europe from the South Mediterranean Region

The corollary to the preceding idea is that violent extremism is too often perceived in Europe as a phenomenon imported from the southern Mediterranean region. Two remarks are in order to counter this idea, existing diffusely in European public opinion.

¹ *Euromed Survey of Experts and Actors 8th edition. Violent Extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean Region*. Barcelona: IEMed, 2017. www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publicacions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2017/contents

² Study carried out by TNS Opinion & Social at the request of the European Commission (Spring 2017), Standard Eurobarometer 87, QA5, available at the following URL, clicking on "Public Opinion in the European Union - Presentation": <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2142>

³ Global Terrorism Database, US National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, www.start.umd.edu/gtd/



* 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.

First of all, it is worth remembering that violent extremism is also generated within the EU borders. The process of radicalization of the majority of the perpetrators of attacks in European countries over the past few years most often took place within the European countries themselves. According to a recent study, 73% of perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the West between 2014 and 2017 were citizens of the countries where the attack took place.⁴ Unfortunately, confusion between the origins of perpetrators of terrorist acts and their nationality is frequent. To some extent, the debates in France on the revocation of nationality illustrates the difficulty some people have in accepting that some of the perpetrators of terrorist acts could be French and could have been radicalized in France. By the same token, the absurd contests between countries consisting of stating that a greater number of 'foreign fighters' comes from the other country or accusing the other one of being responsible for a terrorist with dual nationality, are all signs demonstrating the absence of serious reflection on the matter of responsibilities.

Secondly, violent extremism also refers to the abuses and crimes committed in conflict zones, and in particular in Syria by Daesh recruits from all over the world, and particularly from European countries. According to a study by The Soufan Center,⁵ in Oc-

tober 2017, the total number of foreign fighters from western Europe was 5,778. The increasing tension in debates in certain countries on the return of foreign fighters (and in this case, not only in Europe, but also in countries such as Tunisia) has had the effect of obliterating the issue of the crimes committed by Europeans in other countries. Once again, the results of the Euromed Survey call for this dimension not to be neglected.

Europe Bears a Serious Responsibility in the Emergence of this Phenomenon

European countries should also acknowledge their own responsibilities and the mechanisms driving youth growing up in Europe to turn to violent extremism. This is what the Euromed Survey participants seem to be saying when they identify the governments of Western countries as the main actors responsible for the emergence of violent extremism, a result that should not be overlooked and that the respondents explain in reference to the consequences of certain military interventions, weapons exports by certain European countries to south and east Mediterranean countries or to some of their neighbours, and to rising populist and Islamophobic trends.

⁴ VIDINO, Lorenzo, MARONE, Francesco and ENTENMANN, Eva. *Fear Thy Neighbor. Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West*. Milano: Ledizioni, 2017.

⁵ BARRET, Richard. *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*. The Soufan Center, 2017.

Relativizing the Preponderance of the Religious Factor in the Phenomenon of Violent Extremism

Despite fierce debate among researchers as to the role of religion in the process of radicalization, European public opinion has a tendency to associate, without a great deal of scruples, the phenomenon of violent extremism with a particular religion, and to assign the perpetrators of terrorist acts motivations of a religious order.

Euromed Survey respondents are inclined to believe that, at the root of the process leading to vio-

lent extremism, there is more a perception of discrimination, injustice or humiliation than a religious approach (Chart 18) and according to them, it is not primarily in religious communities that an individual is the most likely to become a violent extremist (Chart 19). These results thus tend to support the argument that 'Islamism' is not involved in the onset of the radicalization process but can become a dressing in later stages of radicalism. Motivations of a material or social order, however, must not be underestimated either as sources driving individuals to join the ranks of Daesh, eager for recognition and resources.

CHART 18 Drivers of Violent Extremism (Euromed Survey)

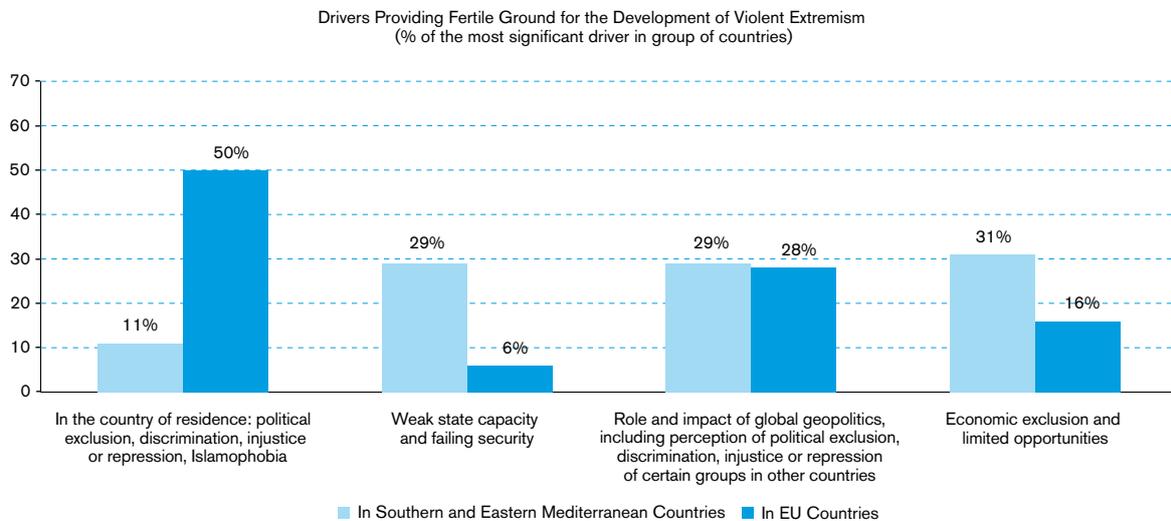
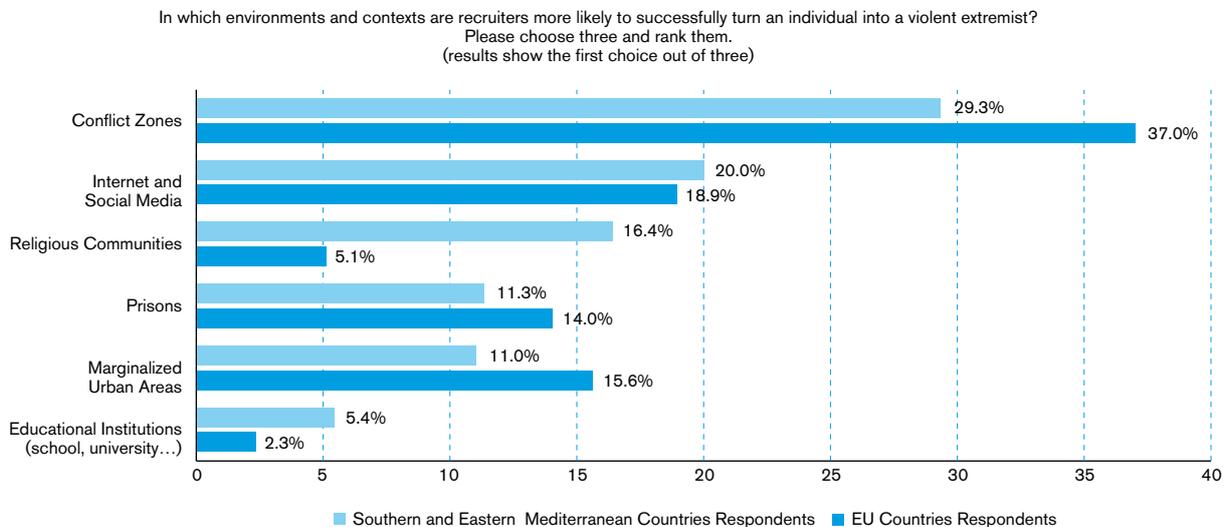
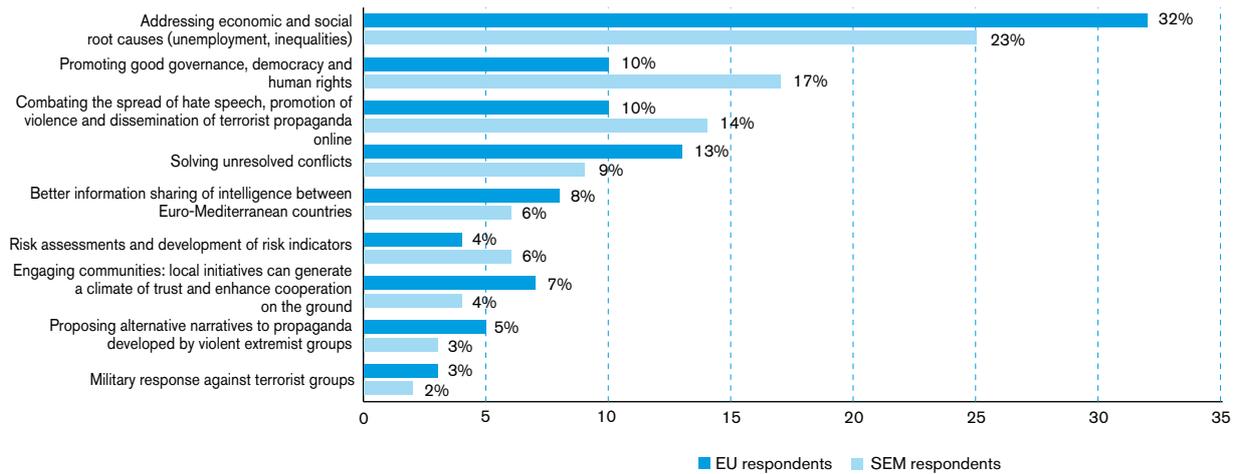


CHART 19 The Breeding Grounds of Violent Extremism (Euromed Survey)



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)



Moreover, and although one admits that a certain type of violent extremism could be linked with 'Islamist' drift, we must be careful not to simplify violent extremism to only the latter cases. Violent extremism comes in multiple forms and can, for instance, be carried out by extreme right-wing fringe groups whose strength in certain European countries and in the United States is disturbing.

The Number of Victims of Violent Extremism Is Just the Tip of the Iceberg

The human toll of terrorist attacks in the Euro-Mediterranean area over the past few years is intolerable. Nonetheless, beyond the security dimension, violent extremism carries the seeds of more insidious threats to the very cohesion of our societies, and these threats are certainly grasped much less clearly by public opinion. Euromed Survey participants were not wrong when they indicated that one of the collateral effects of violent extremism is that it provides a tool for legitimization of authoritarian trends in some south Mediterranean countries, and for populist and nationalist trends in some north Mediterranean countries.

The Security Response Will Not Suffice

It can be inferred from all of the above that an exclusively security-oriented approach will not suffice to stem the phenomenon of violent extremism. On the contrary, tackling structural elements such as economic and social conditions that offer no future perspectives for young people, unresolved conflicts that feed resentment and chronic instability, or fostering good governance, democracy and human rights are all fronts that must be taken up to provide more effective responses for the long term (Chart 20).

As long as the factors identified in this article are not understood, cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean area in the struggle against violent extremism will continue to resemble a dialogue of the deaf where, in reality, no state seems ready to assume its responsibility, international conferences on violent extremism will continue to look like beauty contests, where each participant will continue to extoll the merits of measures implemented, and colossal sums will continue to be spent in vain on programmes intended to contribute to preventing or combatting violent extremism.