Deradicalisation experiences
in the Middle Eastern and North African countries

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Introduction

The problem of growing Islamist radicalism, violent extremism, and their consequences in the form of terrorist attacks affect both Western countries and Muslim-majority states. In the 21st century we witness the development of international terrorism – the scale of attacks, their number and size.[1] The events of 9/11 led to a lasting social change and altered public perceptions of radical attitudes. According to a survey by the US Pew Research Center, even 20 years after the events the fight against terrorism remained for 74% of US citizens one of the top priority tasks for Congress and the President, more important than the economy or job creation.[2] Similarly in Europe, terrorist attacks over the last two decades have influenced changes in foreign and domestic policy and also caused social unrest and concerns about the internal security of states. Attacks carried out in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries target various people and organisations,[3] but the burden and consequences of these actions are primarily borne by the local communities.

Terrorism motivated by radical Islam began to play a dominant role in the 1990s.[4] Ultraradical Islamist groups also consider Muslims who adhere to a different branch of Islam or who are insufficiently radical in their beliefs to be 'infidels'. A significant factor contributing to the increased terrorist threat was the declaration of a self-proclaimed caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria by the so-called Islamic State in 2014. Thousands of foreigners flocked to the region to join the fight. Some of them later returned to their countries of origin to carry out terrorist attacks or to recruit new members to the organisation. The ideological starting point for Islamist radicals' propaganda efforts is fundamentalism, preaching the concept of 'purity' and literal interpretation of the religion. Often this interpretation (of Qur'an and hadith) is deliberately falsified, resulting in radicalisation of attitudes and beliefs, both religious and political, which can lead to terrorism.[5]

Confronted by the growing threat of terrorist attacks by Islamist radicals, the authorities of not only European, but also African and Middle Eastern countries face the challenge of countering radicalisation and violent extremism (including terrorism), continuing departures of radicals to Syria (or other destinations where terrorist groups are active) to join extremist groups, and the rehabilitation of radicalised fighters who return home.[6]

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1. H. Ritchie et al., "Terrorism," *Our World in Data*, 2013, accessed April 30, 2023, https://ourworldindata.org/terrorism.

2. *Two Decades Later, the Enduring Legacy of 9/11*, Pew Research Center, September 2021, accessed April 30, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/02/two-decades-later-the-enduring-legacy-of-9-11/.

3. D. Dory, "Tourism and international terrorism: a cartographic approach," *Via Tourism Review*, no. 19 (July 2021), ISSN: 2259-924X, doi:10.4000/viatourism.7243.

4. G. Martin and F. Prager, *Terrorism: an international perspective* (SAGE, 2019), p. 24-63, ISBN: 978-1-5264-5994-7.

5. J. Piwowarski, J. Depo, and P. Pajorski, *Fundamentalizm islamski a terroryzm w XXI wieku* (Kraków: Wyższa Szkoła Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego i Indywidualnego „Apeiron" w Krakowie, 2015), ISBN: 978-83-64035-39-5.

6. D. Weggemans and B. d. Graaf, *Reintegrating Jihadist extremist detainees: helping extremist offenders back*

Background

The issue of preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism can be analysed from different angles. It should be noted that the debate on these issues has been taken up in many countries around the world, both by researchers and experts, as well as by governments. According to data collected by Hamed El-Said for the UN in 2009, in the first decade of the 21st century, at least 34 out of 192 UN member states declared having a strategy or public policy on deradicalisation or counter-radicalisation. These included six Arab states (Algeria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen) and ten European states (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom).[7] Since then, the number of countries working on such a strategy or policy has been consistently increasing. To address the cause, governments, academic institutions, and think tanks have concentrated on the sources and mechanisms behind radicalization.

At the same time, the reverse process – deradicalisation – has received far less attention. The difficulty in grasping the essence of the concept of deradicalisation lies on one hand in its cognitive nature – the change that would take place in the consciousness of individuals, and on the other hand in the fact that it is not a mirror image of radicalisation.[8] For this reason, the Thesis provides the general definition of the concept, before continuing to discuss specific aspects of deradicalisation in the context of Middle Eastern and North African countries.

The research subject of this Dissertation are the public policies of selected countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia) and the measures they take to counter and prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. In particular, the work characterises current and past deradicalisation programmes. However, not all countries in the MENA region have such measures in place, and the level of complexity of their security policies varies significantly, despite international recomendations.[9] The Thesis outlines efforts of selected countries – Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia, where no deradicalisation programmes are currently carried out, and Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan – where such programmes are implemented. Additionally, the research includes the Egyptian and Iraqi historical experience of deradicalisation.

into society, Contemporary terrorism studies (London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 13-50, ISBN: 978-1-138-73135-6.

7. H. El-Said, "Deradicalization: Experiences in Europe and the Arab World," in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2017* (European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2017), accessed April 15, 2023, https://www.iemed.org/publication/deradicalization-experiences-in-europe-and-the-arab-world/.

8. "Deradicalisation," *Oxford Dictionary*, accessed December 19, 2021, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/deradicalization; O. Ashour, *The de-radicalization of Jihadists: transforming armed Islamist movements* (London: Routledge, 2010), ISBN: 978-0-415-58834-8; A. P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, March 2013.

9. *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (A/70/675)*, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.un.org/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/plan_action.pdf.

Research methods

The objectives of this Thesis were achieved by collecting information and performing analyses and evaluations of deradicalisation programmes and security policies in selected states in the MENA region. The Dissertation provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of actions taken by those countries in developing and implementing policies to prevent and counter radicalisation and violent extremism. The author conducted 12 individual in-depth interviews with researchers, experts, employees of non-governmental organisations and representatives of public authorities. The author also used SWOT and PEST analysis to explore the deradicalisation programmes and the macro-environment of the security policies implemented in each country.

Structure of the Thesis

This Dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 covers issues related to the concepts of radicalisation, extremism (including the definitional scope of terrorism), deradicalization and their place in public policies. It also contains an overview of the types of deradicalization programmes and the mechanisms by which states create and implement public policies. Chapter 2 discusses the specific environment of the Middle East and North Africa – its historical, political and cultural conditions, as well as factors that affect the creation of public policies in the countries of the region. The aspect of national and international security policy is also addressed, particularly in the context of international terrorism and its history. Emphasis is put on terrorism motivated by radical Islam, as well as Islamist terrorist organisations. Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the efforts of selected countries in the region to counter and prevent radicalisation and violent extremism (CVE/PVE). Chapter 3 describes the situation in Egypt, Tunisia, and Iraq, including historical deradicalization programmes. Since in these countries deradicalisation programmes are currently not being carried out, a PEST analysis was conducted to evaluate their security policy in countering and preventing radicalisation and violent extremism (including terrorism). Chapter 4 is devoted to policies in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Jordan, which have ongoing deradicalisation programmes. In this case, SWOT analysis was used to thoroughly examine the structure and functioning of these programmes.

Conclusions

The conclusions presented in this Thesis are in line with the hypothesis posed in the Introduction that deradicalisation policies can be effective for individuals. In the wider context of the problem – due to the threat posed by Islamist radicals and terrorist organisations and the dynamics on the geopolitical scene – deradicalisation processes do not have a significant im-

pact on increasing the level of security in the fight against terrorism. Nevertheless, the situation and the security policy on preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism in the presented states should be looked at multidimensionally and conclusions should be drawn carefully, as the actions undertaken in these states contribute to increasing the level of security and general conditions of their societies, even if their direct impact is minor.

The experience of deradicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa should be viewed through the prism of all actions taken by the countries of the region in their policies to prevent and counter radicalisation. These actions are complementary and together build the effectiveness of security policies in these countries. A realistic reduction of the level of radicalisation in each society requires the identification and understanding of the factors that influence radicalisation and that persuade individuals to use violence. These factors need to be countered in such a manner that actions motivated by violent extremism cease to be an attractive behavioural alternative. This goal can be achieved through education, implementing training, creating incentives, and building community engagement in spreading the narrative of non-violent behaviour. Such activities raise public awareness of the dangers of radicalisation and create a sense in society that it is in the interest of every citizen to engage in preventing and countering radicalisation. The provision of economic and psychological support to individuals after deradicalisation programmes is also very important in this context. Care and assistance in returning to society foster an easier and smoother reintegration, building correct social attitudes and thus reducing the likelihood of reradicalisation. The general idea of security policymaking to counter radicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa should also change. In the countries of the region (although not only there), deradicalisation programmes are created and implemented exclusively by state institutions, often of a repressive nature (army, police, security services), while a strong social element is missing. Cooperation with civil society and non-governmental organisations can not only broaden the perspective of the creators of deradicalisation initiatives, influence the standards, efficiency, and effectiveness of such programmes, but also build public trust in security policy and state actions to prevent and counter radicalisation.