

The gendered dimensions of violent extremism in North Africa: approaches, policy and practice

Third expert meeting report

Sherine El Taraboulsi-McCarthy and Rachel George, Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
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Introduction

The Regional Platform on Gender and Countering and Preventing Violent Extremism in North Africa, co-hosted by UN Women and the UN Counter Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) in partnership with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has convened experts from North Africa over the past two years in a series of in-person and online discussions to share expertise and learning on gender and countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) in the region. The Platform is a flexible space for knowledge exchange both at national and regional levels across North Africa. Participants are senior government and civil society experts as well as academics from the five North African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia) and they offer strong technical and policy expertise that is entrenched in their local and regional contexts.¹

The third face to face meeting was held on the 19th and 20th of November 2019 in Tunis, Tunisia. It built on the discussions that had taken place in the previous two meetings and worked towards further consolidating the Platform as a hub for regional thought leadership on gender and C/PVE. The meeting focused on critically unpacking existing state and society responses to violent extremism in the five countries, the identification of key regional and local stakeholders in countering and preventing violent extremism, as well as discussing successes and failures in C/PVE programming and policies, all from a North African perspective. It also placed a particular emphasis on the challenges associated with returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in the region.

Overall, members of the Platform emphasized the need for a more robust understanding of gender dynamics and their links to violent extremism, one that benefits from regional expertise and in-depth local knowledge. They also called for an intersectional approach to gender and violent extremism, gender-sensitive programming and evidence-based policies that are founded on North-African needs as well as historical and cultural specificities. While they expressed shared priorities, the members also described how national policies and approaches in the region differ which may constitute a challenge for a regional approach but can also be an opportunity for sharing expertise and good practice, and a

¹ The members of the Platform do not represent the official views of their countries.

recognition of comparative advantages that each country has. An appetite for shared regional learning and continued engagement on C/PVE and gender expressed in the previous meetings remained strong. From the experiences of female returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs), to approaches of North African state and civil society actors to support women and gender issues as part of C/PVE, stakeholders working in North Africa hold a number of shared interests and concerns. A need for ongoing regional strategic exchange and learning, including in relation to the engagement of RFTFs and the role of civil society was reasserted.

Three main areas of interest emerged from the workshop that constitute challenges for policymakers, researchers and civil society leaders engaging in gender and C/PVE in North Africa. Those can also be viewed as potential opportunities for successful gender-sensitive engagement on C/PVE. The first area is the centrality of contextual considerations that are specific to the region. Those included geopolitical considerations, breakdown of governance and stability, history and collective memory and experience and finally, perceptions and attitudes to masculinity and femininity. The second area is that of stakeholder engagement, who the key stakeholders are, how to engage them and where the blockages are. Beyond the dichotomy of securitized and non-securitized approaches, they discussed the broadening of the scope of stakeholders engaged in C/PVE in their countries such as the educational sector and the private sector. Finally, the third area is that of state policies and existing programming to gender and C/PVE in North Africa. This report synthesizes discussions that took place during the two-day meeting and identifies key insights and outputs as well as pathways and opportunities for the Platform going forward.

Key outcomes

- **The members reasserted the need for continued strategic exchange of good practice and learning in North Africa on gender and C/PVE, especially with a focus on shared definitions and an understanding of regional priorities.** Because most of the language used to describe acts and policies related to violent extremism originates from the West, the members saw the Platform as a vehicle through which a shared regional understanding of terminology related to violent extremism can be established, one that builds on common threats and historical experiences in the region. They also saw the Platform as a means to consolidate effective regional learning and coordinate action.
- **Experts restated their concern about the dearth of data on violent extremism in the region. They asserted the importance of methodological rigor and gathering more empirical evidence and data to support policy-making in the region.** To address this data gap, they saw the Platform's role as twofold in this regard: First, to facilitate cooperation between researchers, academics, think tanks, civil society organizations and governments in order to identify critical gaps in existing analysis on C/PVE and gender in the region, and second, to ensure that emerging regional research and analysis is communicated to policymakers in the region and globally. Tunisia's National Commission on Counter-terrorism, for example, is one site for fact finding and policy learning exchange in the region. Another is the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies based in Cairo. They also highlighted the need for C/PVE work to be better informed by the cultural and historical context of each country and in the region and experiences of instability, such as the experiences of conflict in the 1990s in Algeria, the role of tribes and community dynamics, and the current conflict in Libya.
- **Some members highlighted the need for a more inclusive approach to C/PVE programming that would include actors previously considered marginal to C/PVE policy and programming. For example, while C/PVE programmes have focused on education mainly at universities, one member called for a focus on education in North Africa by enhancing informal education and training.** This includes vocational training and civic education in prisons and in other community settings, as part of a gendered approach to C/PVE in North Africa.

- **The members diverged on the identification of rehabilitation and reintegration of former violent extremists as a priority for the region.** Some argued that it was more a priority for Western states rather than for North Africa while others argued that the reason why the region’s governments and civil society shy away from addressing those issues is due to the public rejection of accepting former extremists in their communities. A number of experts stressed the importance of discussing rehabilitation and reintegration from a gendered perspective especially where the families of ISIL fighters in camps in north eastern Syria, for example, are concerned.
- **The members reasserted the need for more sustainable, long-term funding for civic organisations working on C/PVE, including women’s civil society organizations.** They also highlighted the absence of regional donors and an over-reliance on international funding. There was a discussion of the challenges of accepting funding from states that are party to wars in the region.

Global considerations on gender and violent extremism

The meeting began with a contextualisation of North African security challenges. Two key areas of focus that continue to gain international attention since the previous expert meeting were noted. First, the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), and second, the role of local women civil society organizations in countering and preventing violent extremism. Despite noting a ‘growing interest in gender in the past months’ across the international community, women’s rate of return from violent extremist activity is still extremely low. According to the CTED Trends Report (2019), it is estimated that only four per cent of all recorded returnees from Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic are women and that those women account for around five per cent of women who travelled to the conflict zones. This low rate of return suggests ‘an urgent need for closer analysis of the reasons why women are not returning; ways to facilitate their return in a human rights-compliant manner; and the fate of those who have returned’ (CTED, 2019)². The UN Security Council (UNSC) has requested that Member States develop gender-sensitive prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for returnees (UNSC 2396). Speakers noted that it is increasingly urgent that states develop such gender-sensitive strategies given the ‘untenable’ situation in camps such as in north eastern Syria and the increasing challenges of returning ISIL members.³

Speakers reinforced the different roles that women play within terrorist organizations, some of whom are victims, and some are perpetrators. In some cases, women can also be both at the same time. Moreover, within the category of perpetrators, there are different types, depending on the degree of their involvement in terrorist activity, which is difficult to establish because of challenges in gathering evidence. It was noted that women working in civil society organizations that focus on returnees have in-depth knowledge of the situation of returning women and their challenges, which is why they need additional support from donors, regional and international actors. It is also important to ensure that women CSOs are not adversely affected by the global counter-terrorism regime and potential setbacks of an over-securitisation of their work which could, for example, have a negative impact on their accessibility to funds and services.⁴

² CTED Trends Report. (2019). “Gender Dimensions of the Response to Returning Foreign Fighters: Research Perspectives.” Available through: https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Feb_2019_CTED_Trends_Report.pdf

³ It is worth noting here that there is no clear evidence to date that directly links migration (or human mobility more generally) to violent extremism. It is also important to distinguish here between correlation and causation. While some migrants have been implicated in acts of violent extremism, there is no evidence that migration is a cause of violent extremism. As argued by Koser and Cunningham (2017), “some refugees may be fleeing direct experiences of violent extremism; other migrants may be leaving their homes because of factors related to the emergence of violent extremism, for example, lack of opportunities to make a living for themselves and their families” (Koser and Cunningham, 2017). Moreover, “some migrants and refugees may themselves perpetrate acts of violence because of their traumatic migration experience; others partly due to conditions in the countries where they arrive, or for reasons not related to either situation” (Koser and Cunningham, 2017).

⁴ For more details on the adverse effects of counter-terrorism policies on civil society organizations, see: Gordon, Stuart and Sherine El Taraboulsi – McCarthy (2018) “Counter-terrorism, bank de-risking and humanitarian response: a path forward” ODI Working Paper. Available through: <https://www.odi.org/publications/11180-counter-terrorism-bank-de-risking-and-humanitarian-response-path-forward> [6 Jan. 2020]

Taking Nigeria as a case study, speakers highlighted the challenges faced by women-led civil society organizations that focus on C/PVE and particularly on the rehabilitation and reintegration of women who flee Boko Haram in Nigeria.⁵ In northern Nigeria, the once local threat posed by Boko Haram has grown into a dynamic and harrowing national and regional challenge, with violence spreading to Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The Islamist terrorist group remains extremely complex in its religious, political and economic dimensions. Women have joined through abductions as well as voluntarily in search for financial gain or empowerment.

Within that context, work on reintegration continues to be controversial. First, because women returnees are still suffering from a public backlash and the rejection of their families and the community around them. They are still considered "criminals" and not "victims", especially because their own communities had been subjected to the crimes of Boko Haram and have lost their children and relatives. Second, because women returnees and their families continue to receive limited economic and psychosocial support. A federal government programme to provide safe homes and support those returning as part of a reintegration strategy remains under-resourced and as a result, the majority of the women relapse and return to violence. It was highlighted that returning women need socioeconomic support and the backing of women-led organisations, which are stretched. Good programming practices were provided. Those included: educating societies about the reasons why these women joined Boko Haram in the first place, providing economic opportunities for the women returnees to ensure they do not return to the terrorist organization, and rooting responses in the realities of women's experiences in Boko Haram.

North African priorities: contextual considerations, stakeholder engagement and policies

Following the discussion of the global context on gender and C/PVE, the workshop focused on the North African experience and perspective linking it to global considerations and best practice while maintaining focus on challenges and opportunities specific to the North African context. The workshop also presented an opportunity for the members to discuss the potential role to be played by the Platform in light of complex geopolitical realities in the region and the transnational nature of violence.⁶ In the two days, experts discussed the role played by different sectors (judicial, religious, civil society, education) in combatting violent extremism in their countries, opportunities for a cross sectoral approach and challenges. They also discussed various points of convergence and divergence of state policies on the issue of returnees. Finally, they addressed the issue of coordination among different actors as related to countering and preventing violent extremism with a focus on securitized and non-securitized approaches. Successful prevention of violent extremism requires environments which are not conducive to re-radicalisation. With multiple actors and sectors needed to support PVE work across the private sector, governments and civil society, and the need for all of these efforts to be gender-sensitive, they explored how these actors' work can be best coordinated for a more holistic and effective approach.

Overall, experts problematized the Western or global trusteeship over C/PVE in the region and called for closer attention to the North African experience and an amplification of the North African voice. Although the experts highlighted the usefulness of existing UN Frameworks addressing gender and C/PVE such as UNSC resolutions 2242 and 2396 and other guiding principles such as the Malta Principles, they continued to express a need for more practical and concrete tools and guidance that are

⁵ For an account on the need for an understanding of power dynamics and the complex narratives of women returnees, see: Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia (2018) "The women rescued from Boko Haram who are returning to their captors." *The New Yorker*. Available through: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-women-rescued-from-boko-haram-who-are-returning-to-their-captors?verso=true>

⁶ Cross-border challenges (such as arms trade) in the region indicate the transnational nature of VE, which could, in turn, equally benefit from transnational exchange of civil society and other PVE actors (El Taraboulsi, 2016). A North African approach could draw on regional engagement and lesson sharing on C/PVE, which has been explored in the context of Europe, for example, in programmes such as the EU-led Mothers for Life and the Women and Extremism network, which have supported regional dialogue, events and programming. The US Institute of Peace (USIP) has developed a guide to new practices in P/CVE evaluation in 2019 drawing on global experiences (Holmer, Bauman and Aryeinejad, 2018), but more work is needed to coordinate and engage actors to developing more impactful programmes and bring learning from national to regional and global platforms.

regionally driven and focused. They saw a gap between international conventions and geopolitical challenges as well as practical realities in their countries.⁷ Platform Members agreed that further work to develop practice-informed strategies that are locally led and informed are needed, and that further regional and international collaboration would be helpful to share good practice and learning.

Three main areas of interest emerged from the workshop that constitute challenges for policymakers, researchers and civil society leaders engaging in gender and C/PVE in North Africa as well as potential opportunities for gender-sensitive engagement on C/PVE. The first area is the centrality of contextual considerations that are specific to the region. Those included geopolitical considerations, breakdown of governance and stability, history and collective memory and experience and finally, perceptions and attitudes to masculinity and femininity. The second area is that of stakeholder engagement, who the key stakeholders are, how to engage them and where the blockages are. Beyond the dichotomy of securitized and non-securitized approaches, they discussed the broadening of the scope of stakeholders engaged in C/PVE in their countries such as the educational sector and the private sector. Finally, the third area is that of state policies and existing programming to gender and C/PVE in North Africa. Below is a detailed report on the members' views on those three areas.

Contextual considerations: geopolitics and historical memory

A critical insight emerging from the two-day meeting is the centrality of contextual dynamics and politics to effective policy making and programming on C/PVE in the region. The members seemed united in their frustration at projects implemented in their countries that only pay lip service to the local context without understanding local priorities, culture and history. The historical and contemporary experiences of geopolitical developments and conflict in the region have created layers that shape the various forces around which violent extremism is practiced. According to the members, those experiences also hold the key to effective response such as developments in the area of gender equality. The members also highlighted how countries in North Africa share geopolitical threats and challenges and that they have shared or parallel experiences of political instability.

Geopolitics of conflict

Members of the Platform stressed that working on gender and C/PVE on the ground does not happen in a vacuum, it requires some level of political stability for it to be effective and they focused in particular on the conflict in Libya. They stated that talks about countering and preventing violent extremism in North Africa without the return of security, stability and governance to Libya will not bear fruit. They called for an intensification of efforts, coordination and cooperation among themselves, and with the international community to restore stability to Libya, and in turn to the region. A member from Libya also called for more transparency in funding projects that focus on C/PVE in her country. She described how some funds are politically-motivated and come from countries that have influence on or are party to the conflict in Libya, and as a result, its programmes lack credibility in the eyes of the people.

Political upheavals in the region, however, are not all divisive.⁸ They have also resulted in a positive instability through the destabilization of patriarchal structures,⁹ according to some of the members. The

⁷ While various country experiences and programmes are emerging, as an article by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has argued, there is no agreed set of practices or approaches to implement or evaluate the impact of programmes aimed at C/PVE (USIP, 2018).

⁸ For an interesting account of how the Algerian uprisings of 2019 have changed the political landscape of the country and how it led to the decline in influence of the Islamist extremists, see: Tripp, Aili Mari (2019) "Beyond Islamist Extremism: Women and the Algerian Uprisings of 2019" CMI Brief, available through: <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6983-beyond-islamist-extremism-women-and-the-algerian-uprisings-of-2019>

⁹ The intersection of gender issues with C/PVE, seen broadly to include the influence of socially accepted attitudes about ideal masculinity and femininity on violence, the formation of gender roles in society, gendered messaging in recruitment and deradicalization programming, and the various role(s) of women and girls in preventing and perpetrating violence, continued to frame discussions of the Platform. The members discussed the link between violence and sexism. Recent research in Libya conducted by Monash University and UN Women launched in November 2019, for example, has highlighted the core linkage between 'hostile sexist attitudes toward women and support for violence against

emergence of feminist movements and gender equality and women's empowerment initiatives in the region have shaped the contemporary political context, and offer strengths from which to further embed and develop gender-sensitive programming. Women have played active roles in politics in the region, including in the context of the 2011 uprisings and aftermath, have shaped North Africa's trajectory. Women's active engagement in Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria, for example, has included political protesting and participating in the political process, as well as in peacebuilding processes in a diversity of contexts.

History and collective memory

The members pointed out the importance of taking history and collective memory into account when developing C/PVE programmes and policies. One of the members from Algeria referred to her country's experience in tackling Islamist violence in the 1990s and that it is this experience that could explain why there are fewer Algerians in Islamist terror groups today. Another member from Libya pointed out that Libya's current situation is the result of key historical junctures that need to be taken in account in order to understand the current conflict as well as identify opportunities for peace. She described how the 1950s (following independence in 1951) witnessed a flourishing of women's active engagement in political, social and cultural spheres in Libya and that it was after the rise of Gaddafi and the development of authoritarianism, that more conservative attitudes towards religion and women were adopted and with that came a decline in the freedom of women, and the rise of different forms of domestic and extreme political violence. This history of trauma cannot be separated from sound and effective programming and policies on gender and C/PVE.

Stakeholder engagement: reaching out to the margins

The two-day meeting featured a discussion on key local and regional stakeholders to engage at national and regional levels in policies and programming on gender and C/PVE. Members of the Platform highlighted the need to engage stakeholders that tend to be on the margins of current C/PVE policies and practice such as informal education and training institutes and women-led civic and community organisations. A holistic approach to addressing violent extremism in the region, they argued, requires the engagement of non-traditional actors, such as those in the informal and formal areas of education and health service provision, tribal leaders, women-led organisations, the private sector and the media in addition to civil society and religious institutions. They also called for new ways of partnering across sectors. Members agreed on a shared priority to further develop an understanding of these potential stakeholders and bring in new ideas and ways of working around a wider view of C/PVE that includes women's perspectives and a more gender-sensitive approach to engaging new actors.

The stakeholders discussed included the following:

Education and health

The members highlighted the importance of focusing on the sectors of education and health in order to create an environment that is not conducive to the spread of violent extremism. With regards to education, a member from Tunisia called for broadening the focus of current C/PVE programming beyond universities to include civic education and other forms of informal education and skills training. Based on research he conducted on Tunisian prisons, he argued that with school dropout rates remaining high in Tunisia, terrorist groups are able to attract disenfranchised youth. They also highlighted the need for further prevention work in the religious space, as some men and women were exported to ISIS through radicalisation in mosques, and there is a need for other pathways to religious education that are not radical. With regards to the health sector, the members highlighted the need for more robust

women' and support for violent extremism. The role of patriarchal, harmful sexist attitudes in perpetuating violence indicates that work on gender equality is a necessary element of C/PVE.

psychosocial support programmes and funding, including those which work to address the gender-dimensions of psychosocial health and take a gender-sensitive and gender-aware approach to mental health.

The media

The members highlighted the role of public opinion and the media in shaping C/PVE efforts in various ways.

The members also reflected on the role played by new media including social media in recruitment of terrorists as well as shaping public attitudes and perceptions of those engaged in violent extremism. The members asserted that the popularity of social media has presented new challenges and opportunities for reaching wide groups of people in North Africa. Evidence suggests that men and women are radicalised in different ways online. For example, some people including women are being radicalized online in North Africa and use social media in particular ways, but exact data and figures are not available. Some actors, for example the Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF) in Tunisia, have engaged the media in developing videos and rap songs to produce materials with messaging to counter violent extremism.

Negative public opinion about government support services provided to returning members of Boko Haram in camps in Nigeria, for example, limited the government's capacity to support their rehabilitation and reintegration. In North Africa, negative public opinion has resulted in a reluctance on the part of governments to explicitly engage in supporting rehabilitation and reintegration programmes. The members highlighted that media's portrayal of gender issues and individuals who participate in violent extremism shape how C/PVE policies and programmes are perceived and received by the public and, in turn, their effectiveness because those programmes essentially need the community's buy-in. Some North African countries such as Tunisia are developing programmes which engage media and technology to support C/PVE programming such as Tunisian TV and radio programmes.

Civil society organizations

The members stressed that women civil society organizations play an important role in the region and can do more to support work on gender and C/PVE both at the local and regional levels. Experts from the Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF) in Tunisia highlighted their experiences of work on C/PVE, for example, in supporting media campaigns that seek to de-radicalize young people. They also pointed out that civil society organizations in Tunisia have been actively engaging the police force in tackling the threat of terrorism. One organization, for example, has trained policewomen in Tunisia (about 120 women have been trained to date) to develop their skills of negotiation and operational capacity. In Morocco, women-led and focused civil society organizations have worked closely with the government to support national level action on C/PVE. Throughout the sessions, experts reasserted the important role of women across society in supporting C/PVE, including as supporting early warning in communities and families to prevent violence.

Religious institutions

The members underscored the central role of religious institutions in the region. They discussed the potential pacifist role of Sufis in Libya, for example, and the success of religious training programmes in Tunisia and Morocco. It should be pointed out, however, that connections between some of these religious associations and the state has been the cause for a questioning of their credibility and independence by the public.

Policies and programming

State approaches to C/PVE, policies and programmes vary in North Africa. State policies in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco have focused on social programming with a focus on the prevention of violent extremism within communities and in prisons. Egypt has focused more on a national counterterrorism strategy oriented primarily within the security sector. The conflict in Libya and breakdown in governance has led to difficulties in coordinating programmes on C/PVE as well as an absence of a national strategy until now. In general, the members highlighted that there has been lack of regional and national coordination even within existing government bodies and that in some cases, different ministries were not working together efficiently on joint programming. Another level of coordination would be between government and civil society organizations and the private sector which, the members described, remains also limited in the region.

The nature of terrorist threats, while transnational, also vary in the region. In Egypt, concerns include threats from terrorist groups like *Welayat* Sinai, loyal to ISIL, which operates in Northern Sinai, those from the militant arm of the Muslim Brotherhood and leaderless/small-cell groups, as well as those leaving to participate in terrorism abroad (Ragab, 2016). To respond to these threats, Egypt's counterterrorism legislation has criminalized any activity with foreign organisations to conduct terrorism inside and outside of the country, and, under Article 86 of the penal code, potential sanctions for convicted terrorist activity include the capital punishment. Prevention strategies remain limited beyond the security sphere, although there is some debate on the standardisation of sermons in mosques, there are not formal programmes within religious institutions framed around gender and C/PVE, which could be explored in the country. Members of the Platform from Egypt highlighted approaches to the empowerment of women as an important activity in need of further expansion to support women's economic autonomy and empowerment. Those approaches can also be a means through which factors which can lead women themselves into extremism are addressed, as well as to support wider social gender equality as a means of combatting harmful gendered norms which can be a driver of extremism. For example, programmes in Egypt exist to support funding women entrepreneurs and small businesses to help empower women economically.

Morocco and Tunisia have developed a number of civic activities within prisons and in communities to address the challenge of violent extremism. Morocco has also focused on the issue of returning foreign terrorist fighters. They have focused on religious programmes through for example the *mourchidates* programme which included the training of female quran experts or spiritual guides (the *mourchidates*), and which aims at fighting radical Islam, through support for steering away from radical ideologies and extremist Islamist discourses. Tunisian programmes have included work with the education sector, universities, and youth centres. This and other forms of prevention have fallen under the prevention pillar of Tunisia's National Strategy, which also includes pillars on protection, judicial proceedings and retaliation, and engages work on countering terrorism violent extremism across government ministries including those focusing on culture, education, media, and religious affairs.¹⁰

In Algeria, the members pointed out that there is a need for more data on Algerians joining ISIS and other domestic terror threats. They also called for a closer analysis of the experience of de-radicalization in Algeria, they stated that there are examples of Algerian women successfully leading community activities that focus on prevention.

In Libya, government C/PVE work is more limited due to the constraints of security concerns in the region. Nate Wilson, USIP Country Director for Libya, gave a presentation to the Platform on a range

¹⁰ Counter Extremism Project (2019) 'Tunisia: Extremism & Counter-extremism' Available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/tunisia>; https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/country_pdf/TN-07252019.pdf. Also see US Department of State (2018) 'Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 – Tunisia'. Available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f7813.html>.

of programmes outside of the government working on C/PVE through education. For example, USIP programming Libya has included programmes teaching CVE skills and knowledge among civil society and police forces, as well as programming engaging with youth and particularly young women as key PVE actors in the south of Libya. But conflict between the UN-backed government based in Tripoli and the Haftar-led forces in Benghazi continues to breed instability.

Returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs): a case in point

In North Africa, returnees and their gendered dimensions are dealt with differently. Significant numbers of extremist foreign fighters today travelled from North Africa to Syria, particularly from Tunisia and, to a smaller extent, Egypt and Morocco, and some have been women – although the data and numbers have been difficult to track. The increasing challenge of their return and reintegration is putting pressures on states and communities in the five countries (Renard, 2019). And, overall, countries in the region are still “lacking a comprehensive approach for dealing with returnees...In the absence of a comprehensive and long-term approach, including ambitious prevention and inclusion programmes” and concerns over the latest wave of returnees to North Africa from Syria mean “the challenge of returning fighters will soon re-emerge in a new form...” (Ibid, 8).

Morocco’s current policies on returnees include legal and security measures linked in deradicalization programming in prisons and other social initiatives engaging returnees, while Tunisia and Egypt have less systematic or developed social programmes to engage returnees, with more security-driven priorities (Renard, 2019). The approach in Egypt is based on a national counterterrorism policy which places C/PVE work primarily in the security sector. Members from Egypt stated that there are other security challenges that Egypt continues to deal with. For example, Egypt has taken in Syrian refugees, following the uprisings in 2012, without placing them in camps, instead placing them straight into societies. This has created challenges for social cohesion and could potentially lead to a security threat.

In Morocco, there is a national level commitment that Moroccan citizenship will not be removed for returning FTFs. Women who have returned in Morocco have been provided early release, under the presumption that they are broadly considered ‘victims’ and to present less of a threat. Many of these returnees have faced social stigma and exclusion. In some cases, former VE actors in Moroccan prisons were separated from regular prisoners to try to stop recruitment (drawing on a US model) but more work needs to be done on new methods. A number of Moroccan programmes, including the Musalha programme, the post 2015 Hadar plan, the revision of the antiterrorism law in 2003, creation of the CNDH, Radicalisme Non Merci-AREF, formation of the 2015 Institut Mohammed VI Rabita Mohammedia des Oulemas, and a number of associations have emerged to aim to address the gender dimensions and complexity of threats, and more work is needed to engage civil society and the intersectionality and continuum of violence¹¹.

Tunisia reports holding the highest ratio of foreign fighters to citizens in the world. The members reported a lack of openness and transparency in dealing with returnees, which remains a critical issue, and the members suggested problematic narratives being perpetuated in the media that thwart efforts for reintegration. Algerian members of the Platform expressed shared concerns about returnees, but noted the particular significance of the country’s historical experiences of violence including its civil war of the 1990s in shaping the contemporary context. Algerian policies on reconciliation have included the *Rahma* (mercy) and Civil Concord policies launched in 1995 and 1999, and later the Charter of National

¹¹ See discussions of some of these Moroccan programmes, for example, in ‘Socio-economic development and violent extremism in Morocco,’ DGAP, Available at https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/sammelpublikation_marokko_2019.pdf and ‘A gendered approach to countering violent extremism’, Brookings, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Women-CVE-Formatted-72914-Couture-FINAL2.pdf>.

Reconciliation approved by referendum in 2005¹². A new legal framework for the implementation of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation was launched in 2006 along with a number of presidential decrees to support victims of violent extremism and support reconciliation within communities. Together these policies have aimed to help in putting communities back together and promoting social cohesion and ‘civil harmony’ in Algeria and addressing issues such as injuries, property damage and suffering, but the processes have been disjointed, and in some cases violent perpetrators were given new identities and settled in new villages and new approaches are needed. Experts discussed that ‘practically no’ women are returning from Iraq or Syria – a reported 179 Algerians who joined ISIS led to only about four reported returnees coming back to Algeria.

The Libyan context is shaped fundamentally by the political context currently of significant instability. For example, war has shaped negative consequences on education and health in Libya. For returnees, detainees including women lack a comprehensive attention and legal framework to address issues of rehabilitation. The law for counterterrorism needs strengthening and nuance, and women’s oppression for example as victims of sexual violence has not been adequately dealt with. Some laws exist which require improved implementation and gender sensitivity, for example, to deal with returning mothers.

Pathways forward: Towards a more harmonised approach to gender and C/PVE across North Africa

Based on two years of meetings, the Platform has matured and developed, drawing forward in its third in-person meeting several insights and opportunities which could be built on through future activities.

A path forward should build on the following:

1. The Platform’s progress and momentum on gender and C/PVE: Insights and opportunities

1. Moving from conceptual confusion to good practice

In previous meetings, experts diverged on definitions and lacked consensus on the concepts of gender and violent extremism. This failure to agree on definitions and concepts hinder dialogue on C/PVE in the region and have contributed to conceptual confusion. Through the Platform’s online and in-person meetings and discussions, these divergences on concepts were raised and debated in various ways. Ultimately, an agreement was reached in the third meeting on the concept of ‘violent extremism’, where experts agreed on a definition as: ‘*A reference to beliefs, ideas or actions by individuals or groups, that support various forms of violence or use it in order to achieve ideological, religious, political or ethnic aims.*’ In converging on this definition, the members agreed on the need to move from focusing on concepts to moving forward on policy and practice, and this agreement indicated an important result of the two years of dialogue. The discussion around the concept emphasised the importance of ethnicity as one of the areas which can motivate violence. The members also stressed the idea that VE is not just about beliefs, but also about ideas. They also emphasised the importance of understanding the multiple faces of violence – it is not just physical, but also emotional. They emphasised the perspective that understandings of violence must include both physical and emotional aspects. These convergences in understanding of the meaning of VE and movement from conceptual confusion to practice should inform better practice and programming in the region as well as better engagement with international actors and could be built on in future dialogues and activities.

2. The importance of new stakeholders and partnerships

¹² ‘Algeria and deradicalization: An experience to share’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria. Available at [http://www.konsulat-algerien.de/derad-en%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.konsulat-algerien.de/derad-en%20(1).pdf).

The Platform's activities highlighted the need to engage new stakeholders beyond those traditionally active in work on C/PVE. While governments, civil society and the security sector remain critical actors globally and in North Africa, experts agreed on a need to innovate and bring in new players to the conversation. By building new channels for discussion and response around violence, gender inequality and social issues, the Platform could develop deeper and more nuanced discussion around the complex drivers of VE and ideas for policy and programming. For example, experts discussed the importance of looking beyond the traditional education system to engage those in the informal education space to find new solutions to support C/PVE and bring in new and unexpected actors to meet the critical challenges raised by VE in prisons, communities, religious institutions and other social spaces. A common desire raised by experts for these new perspectives and further multi-sectoral work helped provide a shared understanding of a forward-looking agenda for gender and C/PVE in the region.

3. Understanding the local: the importance of stability

Another insight developed through the meetings is the fact that global actors often acknowledge the importance of 'local context' but fail to account for the nuances and perceptions of context on the ground. Platform experts continually highlighted the importance of stability and called for a nuanced and localised understanding of what constitutes stability in the region. While stability is often perceived internationally as linked to strengthened civil society, democratisation and international engagement, Platform experts highlighted the importance of a local understanding of stability. In Platform meetings, experts shared information and highlighted the realities of the national context in Libya, Algeria, or Egypt, for example, where vastly different security contexts, demographics and national histories shape everything from gender dynamics, to violence, and state-society relations. This collective understanding of the links between cultural context and national history, stability and gender and the importance of the many layers to the local context relevant to C/PVE were critically assessed and brought to the regional debate across multiple topics.

4. The centrality of transnational violence in North Africa

Transnational violence in North Africa and its effects on gender and C/PVE have been central to the various discussions on C/PVE. Transnational links and experiences of transnational violence, for example, between Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have been central to Platform discussions and a shared concern. Shared borders and linked geographies of North African countries raised shared concerns. While there is growing recognition of the transnational nature of violence, and the importance of transnational coordination in response, experts also continually identified a concern regarding the dearth of verified data and evidence on VE, which can lead to distrust at the policy level between states in North Africa. A path forward could progress a discussion of these issues.

5. The need to enhance trust and networks

A final critical insight from multiple Platform meetings is the importance of enhancing trust at the level of policy as a means of ensuring more effective C/PVE practice. Concerns about trust are central in North Africa and are both personal and political. The fact that there is emerging practice in the region, including around gender and bringing in women's perspectives in C/PVE, is knowledge that has been drawn forward by the Platform that needs to be further networked globally. There is also a shared concern around a sense of 'western trusteeship' in the area of C/PVE that needs to be confronted, with meaningful networks and exchange at the regional and international level that elevate national knowledge and experience. National experts have expressed concern that their voices are not always prioritised in international fora, and this requires redress. Platform discussions helped raise concerns around networks, power and trust and could be built on.

II. Concrete action: Building a path forward for the Platform

Concrete action to build on the platform's development and maturity to-date include the following.

1. Consolidate the network

The platform on gender and C/PVE in North African can be further consolidated, and used in a two-fold manner, by (i) Helping the countries network and develop robust policies on C/PVE, and (ii) Linking the platform with global networks and opportunities. These developments could build on the progress

developed by three in-person meetings, including the current consolidation of an existing core membership and set of meeting reports and collected knowledge.

2. *Bring in new perspectives*

To bring in new perspectives and further develop and enhance the Platform, it could develop to engage stakeholders on the margins of C/PVE, and branch out beyond the usual government and civil society actors to bring in those from alternative sectors, such as education, areas of informal and community work, and to bring in the perspectives of young men and women and other new perspectives.

3. *Integrate new understandings of gender and violence*

The platform should consider how to integrate understandings of gender and violence, including how masculinity and politics connect in the region and globally, and embed these understandings in the network's structure and membership. The inclusion, for example, of young men as platform members could bring forward new perspective. The Platform could develop further its understanding of gender and how understandings of masculinities and femininities relate to VE and regional dynamics.

4. *Make more concrete Platform outputs*

The Platform will start producing short joint think pieces and policy briefs, co-authored by members, to contribute to regional and international policy and practice. These should amplify regional voices and expertise, including some of the non-traditional actors which could expand the Platform's reach and thinking to contribute to innovation in the area of C/PVE. Moreover, platform members will be connected at the national level to be able to work together on national policy issues pertaining to gender and P/CVE.

5. *Address experience, perspectives and advantages*

Finally, the Platform could work to address and understand the comparative advantage of local experts (and the valuable expertise, knowledge, experience and language skills they offer) and of international experts (such as the Platform's partners from UN Women, ODI and CTED, which bring access to networks, funding and global partnerships). Work to acknowledge and engage the relative strengths and access among various stakeholders could help enhance work and even the playing field for more effective action. Future steps to acknowledge and navigate these elements could help the Platform to build on its initial progress and develop more fine-tuned activities and action plans.

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ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
info@odi.org

odi.org
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