Preventing terrorism in the south

by Annelies Pauwels

The EU has identified its 'Southern Neighbourhood', a region defined for the purposes of the Union's framework for cooperation with 10 partner countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as a priority area for counter-terrorism funding. In 2015, the EU spent the bulk of the €334 million it allocated to counter-terrorism around the globe on this region, and it is looking to further enhance cooperation in this field with its southern partners. Its primary aim is twofold: to help secure its neighbours (where terrorist attacks are increasing) and to prevent terrorism within the EU (which is increasingly linked to the MENA).

However, dialogues to boost counter-terrorism co-operation with partner states are proceeding slowly. Many governments in the region are reluctant to engage further with the EU on the matter as they remain unconvinced by the European push for a tripartite engagement, which includes civil society actors. Moreover, the EU's preventive approach compels partner states to address their own failures which are some of the root causes of terrorism. This local resistance is forcing the EU to reconsider how (and if) a Western approach should be exported to the region.

EU actions in the region

Terrorism is a matter of great concern for every country in the Southern Neighbourhood, with Syria,

Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Israel all particularly high up on the Global Terrorism Index. But terrorism remains a concern also in states which reported lower incident rates, such as Algeria and Tunisia, where at least 16 and 17 terrorist acts took place, respectively, in 2015. Moreover, terrorist activities in the region have intensified since the Arab Spring: in 2015, for example, Egypt suffered 577 terrorist attacks, a 3,000% increase compared to the number in 2011.

The EU's approach to counter-terrorism in the region includes areas which go beyond strictly military- and security-based interpretations of counter-terrorism such as building state capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, and ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law. More recently, Europe also increased its focus on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Within the MENA region, much of the EU's counter-radicalisation efforts are aimed at lowering the appeal of terrorist groups and focus on empowering and integrating marginalised segments of society. In doing so, the EU works with both national and local authorities, as well as with civil society actors. Governments are supported through capacity-building activities and the development of national counter-terrorism or counter-radicalisation strategies. The EU also engages grassroots organisations in order to reach out to at-risk communities. These

groups aim to address the push and pull factors of radicalisation among vulnerable groups, promote moderation and tolerance, and improve social cohesion and intercommunal understanding.

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have both been identified as at-risk groups. In 2015, the MENA accounted for more than 30% of global displacement, with approximately 2.7 million refugees and almost 14 million IDPs – the majority of whom were fleeing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq. Lebanon and Jordan, which host the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, are shouldering a particularly heavy burden in the current refugee crisis. The EU helps both countries by improving facilities and provisions in refugee camps (mainly through its Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis – the so-called 'Madad Fund'), but also focuses on the prevention of radicalisation among refugees and their host communities. The threat is real: in June 2016 a terrorist attack took place just outside Jordan's informal refugee camp known as 'the berm', located in the no-man's land between the Jordanian-Syrian borders.

Prisons across the MENA are also notorious breeding grounds for extremism and terrorism. For example, a 2015 suicide attack perpetrated in northern Lebanon was organised from within the walls of the country's largest detention facility, the Roumieh prison. Not only has this prison played a role in the recruitment of terrorists, but it has also served, in the words of Interior Minister Nohad al-Machnouk, as "an operations room for Daesh".

Like elsewhere in the region, Lebanon's prisons are overcrowded (with 56% of the prison population in pre-trial detention). Moreover, prisoners are not separated with respect to the charges they face (for instance, no distinction is made between radicalised and at-risk offenders) or by age, which increases the chances of at-risk youths being recruited (forcibly or otherwise) by terrorist and criminal groups. In acknowledgement of this fact, the EU has been cooperating with Beirut for several years to prevent terrorist recruitment in prisons by increasing the capacity of Lebanon's justice system and improving prison conditions. For instance, the EU has funded a €1.2 million project to improve medical and sanitary conditions and infrastructure in prisons and made a contribution of €9 million to strengthen juvenile justice and promote a protective environment for juveniles in prisons.

Across the Mediterranean in Tunisia, another EU-funded project is focused on promoting realistic livelihood alternatives in marginalised border communities. Through the project, the EU attempts to involve these groups in border security and border management. While smuggling by border communities was largely overlooked by the Ben Ali regime, after the Arab Spring a tougher stance was adopted in the fight against terrorism, which included clampdowns on smuggling networks. However, the lack of alternative employment opportunities alienated border communities and contributed to forcing some to follow other, more radical paths. For instance, the Kasserine governorate near the Algerian border or the town of Ben Guerdane, close to the frontier with Libya, have seen proportionally high numbers of young people join jihadist networks in Iraq, Syria and Libya, or commit terror attacks in their home country.

The struggle for more cooperation

The EU is currently trying to establish enhanced counter-terrorism political dialogues with strategic countries in the region. The Union has already held similar dialogues with Tunisia and Lebanon, is initialising the process with Jordan, and exploring avenues for closer cooperation with Algeria and Egypt. The dialogues are, however, proceeding slowly due to contradicting visions of what is deemed the 'right' approach to fighting terrorism. Some states in the region display a preference for the military model of counter-terrorism similar to the one employed by the US armed forces – Egypt, for instance, appears to be more interested in receiving military and law enforcement equipment from the EU rather than capacity-building. The added value of the EU in counter-terrorism, in particular in light of its rather modest financial support when compared to other actors in the region, is sometimes questioned as well.

Another source of tension is the EU's vision that a tripartite engagement is necessary to counter violent extremism in the region. Across the MENA, levels of mistrust between state actors and civil society are high, especially given the current context of intensified crackdowns on civil society actors. Since the outbreak of mass protests in 2011, the Egyptian authorities have been waging a broad systematic

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Terrorism in the MENA since the Arab Spring

■ Attacks (left axis) ● Fatalities (right axis)
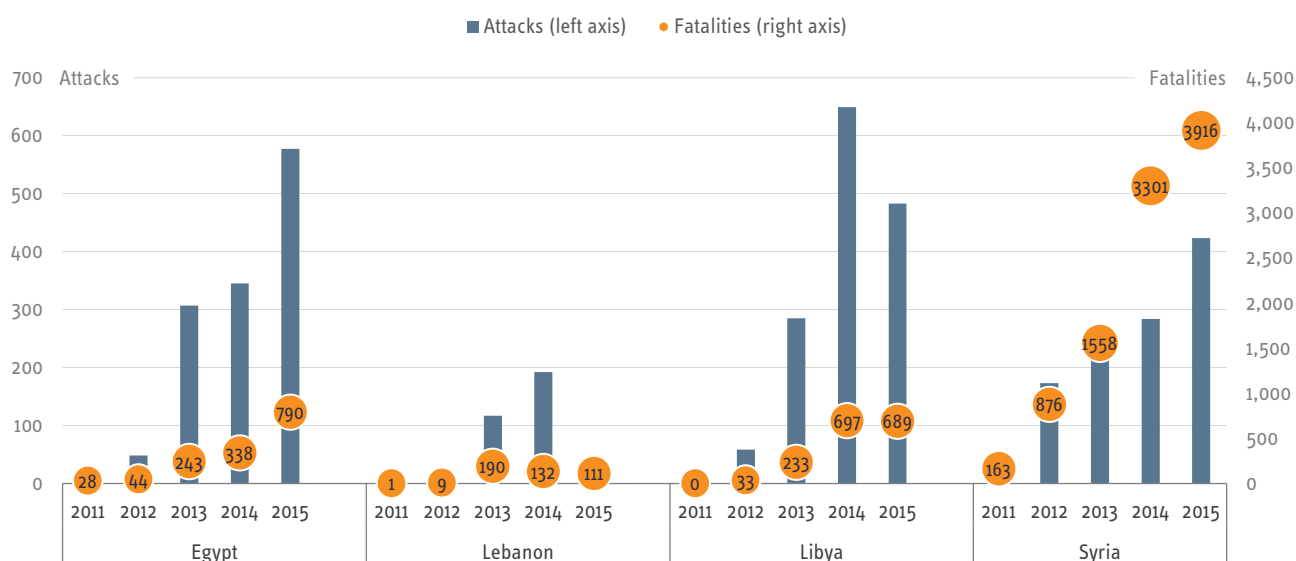
Data source: Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).

campaign to clamp down on the emergence of an independent civil society in the country. That encouraging government-civil society cooperation is a difficult endeavour recently became clear further east in Pakistan (which is not part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) framework), where an EU CVE-pilot project was suspended due to Islamabad's concerns over the extent of civil society involvement.

This issue might also prove to be an obstacle for the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network's (RAN) engagement with local partners in the MENA region. The RAN, an important CVE actor within the EU, is currently taking its first steps in third countries, some of which are in the Southern Neighbourhood. One of the network's principal challenges is to convince national governments to allow it to conduct capacity-building training programmes with local civil society actors.

The reluctance of some southern partners to enhance counter-terrorism cooperation with the EU is also linked to the strong focus on empowering and integrating marginalised segments of society in EU-funded projects. This is related, in some cases, to the fact that state absence in the region has been a driver of radicalisation. Terrorist groups take advantage of poorly-governed regions, assuming the role of the state to gain the support of socio-economically disadvantaged and marginalised individuals. Daesh's territorial expansion, for example, has been largely grounded in providing locals with goods and services, (e.g. distribution of food and medicine), exerting religious control (e.g. destroying alcohol and cigarettes), and performing

basic governance activities (e.g. taking over judicial functions).

The recent spread of Daesh to North Africa illustrates the eagerness of terrorist groups to exploit the region's 'peripheral locations' (both in geographical and socio-economic terms). Ever since Daesh started losing territory in Syria and Iraq and began to look elsewhere, it has managed to establish footholds in Tunisia and Egypt, albeit to different degrees. In Tunisia, the group has been strengthening its ties with jihadists in Ben Guerdane. As mentioned previously, this city has long been known as an incubator for jihadists, many of which have fought abroad in countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Iraq.

Even today, the city continues to provide many of the foreign fighters – Tunisia has the largest amount of foreign fighters per capita in the world – that participate in jihad in Syria and Iraq, filling the ranks of either Daesh or its rival, al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra. The lack of educational and employment opportunities available to the city's young population (almost 20% of the city's inhabitants are between 20 and 29), in addition to higher than average levels of illiteracy, are push factors which drive the locals into the arms of international jihadists.

When the Egyptian terrorist organisation Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis pledged allegiance to Daesh and changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (one of their so-called Caliphate's provinces) in November 2014, it was clear that Daesh had begun to gain some traction in the Sinai, too. Like Ben Guerdane, the Sinai is also awash with multiple grievances. The

peninsula's local inhabitants, the Bedouins, have long been viewed with suspicion by the Egyptian government. This is due to the Israeli occupation of Sinai from 1967 to 1982 and the fact that the Bedouin tribes have been divided between Egypt and Israel since the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. Additionally, the areas beyond the Suez Canal were of little interest to the Mubarak regime. Whereas development projects since the 1980s led to the emergence of a lucrative tourism industry in the southern part of the peninsula, the north remained largely neglected.

Local grievances in the Sinai are also linked to the repressive counter-terrorism measures employed by the Egyptian government. In fact, extremist activity in the region has often been countered with heavy-handed military responses that made little distinction between civilians and jihadists. The destruction of houses, forced evictions and arbitrary detentions have all further exacerbated the locals' disenchantment. Such repressive measures only increased after the 2011 revolution, and again after the overthrow of President Morsi in July 2013.

A shift in approach

It comes as no surprise that partner countries in the Southern Neighbourhood lack faith in the EU's approach to counter-terrorism. The Union's current focus on engaging grassroots organisations and including 'suspect' communities can be interpreted as a knee-jerk reaction to the failure of repressive counter-terrorism approaches a decade ago.

Back then, some of the post-9/11 counter-terrorism measures reduced the political space for civil society actors around the globe. For instance, one specific recommendation of the Financial Action Task Force, an intergovernmental organisation that assists states in the fight against money laundering and counter-terrorist financing, left considerable space for states to toughen the transparency and accountability rules for civil society organisations, and 'justified' the restriction of civil society space in a number of countries. Non-governmental organisations in the MENA were hit particularly hard, with Islamic charities often suspected of having links to terrorist groups.

Partner states also fear that the EU's civil society empowerment risks increasing the fragmented and polarised nature of their societies and deepening societal divisions. Prior to the Arab Spring, the EU had already engaged in civil society empowerment in the region, but using a different agenda. Since the early 1990s, for instance, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) has placed a strong emphasis on decentralised cooperation and civil society engagement, in the hope of diffusing democratic values. But while the region's desire for democracy might have led to the Arab Spring, the situation of civil society has only deteriorated since the popular uprisings. The 2017 Freedom House report on political rights and civil liberties states that the MENA region had the worst ratings in the world in 2016, with only 5% of its population considered 'free' (whereas 12% of the region's population was considered 'partly free' and 83% 'not free').

The EU's conditionality principle (i.e. funding in exchange for cooperation) might not be enough to bring southern partners on board. If the EU wants to secure its Southern Neighbourhood, it may need to convince partner states to adopt its preventive approach to terrorism using credible incentives. This could include, for instance, the speeding up of negotiations with its southern neighbours on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA). But DCFTA negotiations are currently on hold with Egypt (the EU is Cairo's main trading partner) due to the political instability that followed Morsi's removal. Similarly, the relaunch of negotiations with Morocco has been impeded by tensions over a December 2016 ruling by the European Court of Justice, which challenged Morocco's claim to Western Sahara as part of a bilateral trade agreement with the EU.

A renewed focus on enhancing bilateral trade agreements in the region could eventually help convince decision-makers in Southern Neighbourhood capitals to step up their counter-terrorism cooperation with the EU.

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