



The role of culture in preventing and reducing violent extremism

This working paper aims at highlighting the role of culture and the arts in preventing, countering and reducing the consequences of violent extremism. MORE EUROPE – external cultural relations has invited Dr. Asiem El Difraoui, a political scientist, specialised inter alia in jihadism, prevention and de-radicalisation strategies, to explore how cultural activities, artistic projects, the promotion of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue(s) can help prevent and reduce violent extremism. The paper concludes with some recommendations for further exploration of the issue by policy-makers, cultural institutions and stakeholders.

In their Joint Communication “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations”,¹ the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) recognize that many European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries face protracted challenges such as political tension, economic upheaval, violent radicalization and continuous migratory flows. The Joint Communication also states that, in this context, cultural cooperation and exchange on cultural policies can contribute to the stabilisation of these countries.

The ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) implies a long-term engagement of the European Union (EU) with its neighbours while simultaneously considering their pressing needs. Yet, and as underlined in the Joint Communication, the most urgent challenge in many countries of the Neighbourhood is stabilisation on political, economic and social levels. As causes of such instability often reside outside the security domain, the EU’s approach must seek to comprehensively address sources of instability across sectors. Poverty, inequality, a sense of injustice, corruption, weak economic and social development and the

lack of opportunity, particularly for young people, can be sources of instability, steering a sense of vulnerability that can lead to radicalization and violent extremism. Within this context, we believe that strengthening cultural relations and consistently supporting the cultural sector and its civil society actors in the region can contribute significantly to the enhancement of ENP priorities – namely the creation of employment through *inter alia* the promotion of cultural and creative industries, the reduction of factors driving to migration, the enhancement of security and social stability in the region, *etc.* – and hereby support the prevention and the countering of violent extremism.

According to an Ipsos poll for the Anna Lindh Foundation, 54 percent of the concerned populations in the Southern Mediterranean believe that cultural and artistic initiatives are a very efficient tool to prevent and deal with conflicts and radicalization, while further 22 percent believe that such initiatives are at least somewhat efficient.² This poll also highlights that meeting and interacting with people from Europe positively influenced the views and perceptions of Europe and the Europeans for 48 per cent of the respondents

¹ European Commission & European External Action Service, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council “Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations”, JOIN/2016/029 final, 8 June 2016, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN%3A2016%3A29%3AFIN>.

² Anna Lindh Foundation/Ipsos MORI, *Intercultural Trends Survey in the Euro-Med region*, 3rd Edition, 27 April 2017, <http://www.annalindhfoundation.org/intercultural-trends-euro-med-region>.

from the MENA region.³ Thus, fostering intercultural dialogue and exchange between Europe and its southern neighbours could decisively influence mutual understanding and common interests, which will counter radicalization processes in the long run. This dialogue, if embedded in a regional, sustainable and comprehensive form of cultural support, will also help countering increasing polarization within societies.

Preventing, countering and reducing the consequences of violent extremism

N.B. The term culture in this paper encompasses fine arts and literature, contemporary culture (especially youth culture), as well as traditional culture. These different forms of culture are considered to be on an equal-footing and interconnected. In this understanding, culture is also put in relation to larger political, economic, historic and social conditions and developments.

Several examples in this paper have been drawn from the Tunisian experience, as many activities and actions have been taken at both the level of the government and the level of civil society organisations and private foundations. Nevertheless, examples from other countries in the region have been identified and mentioned, although research and evidence in this area is scarce and would deserve to be followed-up and further explored in the future.

The important role culture and arts can play in preventing and confronting violent extremism, and in mitigating its consequences, has only recently become a topic of discussion among experts and

practitioners and is slowly developing into an area of research in Social Sciences.⁴

We would suggest a strong relationship between flourishing cultural spheres and the reduction of violent extremism. Arts, culture and cultural exchanges contribute strongly to the creation of individual or collective social capital by building and strengthening social networks. Social capital, in the approach of several social scientists and counter-terrorism experts, is one of the most crucial variables for individual and collective resilience.⁵

At EU level, the recently released “Strategic Approach to Resilience” is aiming at strengthening, among others, the capacity of societies, communities and individuals to manage opportunities and risks in a peaceful and stable manner, and to build, maintain or restore livelihoods in the face of major pressures.⁶ In this view, it is crucial to go beyond crisis containment to develop long-term strategies and approaches to vulnerabilities, while focusing on anticipation and prevention. In order to reach such goals, other methodologies and actors are needed. In a long-term perspective, culture plays a central role for social cohesion and civil peace. Through the active participation of civil society, local actors are empowered and take actively responsibility for the development of their societies.

Cultural identity

Asserting a cultural identity – here defined as a dynamic and open identity – as well as a rich and diverse cultural heritage creates resilience to extremist ideologies and their narratives that promote fallacious and deceitful concepts of, for

³ *Intercultural Trends Survey in the Euro-Med region*, op. cit.

⁴ E.g. “Performing Sustainability. Cultures and Development in West-Africa” by the University of Maiduguri (Nigeria), the University of Cape Coast (Ghana) and the University of Hildesheim (Germany). The project aims to elaborate local strategies to overcome conflicts and traumatic experiences through culture and education projects. See: <https://ucc.edu.gh/notice/call-proposals-daad-graduate-school-performing-sustainability-cultures-and-development-west>.

⁵ Personal interview with Susan Szmania, Senior Researcher, National

Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland, June 2017, <http://www.start.umd.edu/people/susan-szmania>.

⁶ European Commission & European External Action Service, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council “A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s external action”, JOIN(2017) 21 final, 7 June 2017, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017JC0021&from=EN>.

example, Islamic identity or of extreme nationalism.

Indeed, jihadists, even more than other extremist groups, have constructed what can be considered a grand narrative, a closed worldview. To do so, they have hijacked Islamic history and key symbols and concepts like jihad itself to portray jihadists as the only “true community of believers” and promote a salvation myth. A myth that, in its core, promotes the idea of becoming a “martyr” through suicide attacks – a Machiavellian weapon for asymmetrical warfare. It is crucial to confront the jihadi imagery as extremists have not only annexed Islamic visual symbolism but also flooded the Internet with their horror movies inspired by the worst productions of Western societies.

Fine arts and literature in this context can counter the jihadi narrative, for example through the promotion of the numerous achievements of Arab-Islamic sciences, architecture, poetry, literature and music, to show that at its apogee, Arab-Islamic culture was very open, tolerant and strongly enriched by Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian-Persian influences. These facts are unknown to the majority of younger Arabs. The promotion of culture can constitute a strong source of pride that can counter extremist narrative. As several young Egyptians and Tunisians aged between 18-25 pointed out in interviews, there seem to be, among their age group, a rejection of the present and a longing for the mythical time in Islamic history that the jihadi ideology projects.⁷ The achievements of the Arab-Islamic culture are an important tool to refute the historic and cultural distortions of extremism.

Culture and artistic projects embedded in more recent history can likewise serve as a useful preventive measure. For instance, a remarkable exhibition in Tunis entitled “The rise of a nation”,

organized by the Rambourg Foundation, displayed for the first time ever Tunisia’s Ottoman history and diversity. Hereby, it filled the historical and cultural gap of a culturally diverse period, which has been obscured for a long time by the Tunisian authoritarian rulers, in order to legitimate their own regimes.⁸

Contemporary cultural creations can promote free and critical thinking and create narratives that counter the collective uncritical spirit of extremist ideologies, especially if creatively disseminated through the media.

Youth culture too can create pride, but also constitute a very efficient means of expression for frustrations and grievances, allowing to reach a wide audience. As a reminder, rap and graffiti artists played a crucial role at the beginning of the transformation processes in the Arab world, especially in Tunisia and Egypt. In fact, they still play a crucial role, as the example of the Tunisian rap song “Houmani” confirms. Its lyrics highlight the major problems confronting Tunisian society: youth unemployment, poverty, lack of opportunities, police violence and the resulting escape into drugs. The song has about 28 million clicks on YouTube – a substantial number in relation to the 10 million Tunisians inhabitants.

Other examples of contemporary culture in the region, such as Arab music contests on satellite TV, illustrate that Arab artists can create positive role models and attract a huge number of followers and fans, and thus help to make extremism less attractive. A further example is the mobile exhibition entitled “*Le monde entier est une mosquée*” that was on show as part of the annual Jaw Festival in Carthage, Tunisia, where artists expressed themselves both in an open and provocative way, and tried to occupy public spaces that have for too long been left to extremism.⁹

⁷ Interviews conducted in Cairo in November 2016 and in Tunis in March 2017.

⁸ Exhibition “*L’Éveil d’une nation. L’art à l’aube d’une Tunisie moderne (1837-1881)*”, <http://www.leveldunation.com>.

⁹ Sarra Mezgar, “*Et si on allait voir l’exposition d’exception ‘Le monde entier est une mosquée’ à Carthage ce weekend ?*”, Out.tn, in HuffPost Maghreb, 29 May 2015, http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2015/05/29/le-monde-entier-est-une-m_n_7469812.html.

Cinema too can clearly play a large role in countering polarization and preventing violent extremism. The films of the Egyptian filmmaker, Amr Salama, produced under difficult censorship conditions, are an example in kind. In the comedy “Excuse my French”, he counters religious stereotypes and extremism with the tale of a Christian boy in an exclusively Muslim school.

Three levels of prevention

Social scientist as well as counter-terrorism specialists distinguish between three levels of prevention:

1. Primary prevention, addressing societies at large,
2. Secondary prevention, targeting particularly vulnerable groups, and
3. Tertiary prevention, focussing on already partially radicalized groups and individuals.

Artistic expressions, cultural projects and enhanced inter-cultural dialogue can operate as useful tools on all three levels. The Tunisian government, for example, seems to take this into account. The summary of the Tunisian cultural policies survey of January 2017 lists the changes and updates implemented in the Tunisian cultural policy from early 2015 to late 2016, and how these connect to changes in the Tunisian society and politics. The most prominent developments include the government roping the cultural sector in prevention and counter-terrorism programmes, while making the cultural sector more independent from government work and increasing the number of civic cultural initiatives.¹⁰

¹⁰ “Cultural Policy in Tunisia: An Exploratory Survey”, Cultural Policy in The Arab Region, January 2017, <http://www.arabcp.org/page/712>.

¹¹ Yassine Bellamine, “Bientôt un centre culturel des arts et des métiers au Mont Sammama à l’initiative de la Fondation Rambourg (VIDÉOS)”, *Huffpost Tunisie*, 7 June 2017, http://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/06/06/centre-culturel-mont-sammama_n_16981052.html.

The Tunisian civil society organisations are also getting increasingly active. Olfa Terras–Rambourg, the initiator of the Rambourg Foundation that will create the “*Centre des arts et des métiers*” in the Mount Smema Region, a hotbed for Jihadism in Tunisia, explains that her initiative is motivated by a strong demand from within the population, “who wanted culture”. She herself sees the advancement of arts and culture as being “at the heart of the struggle against exclusion and extremism”.¹¹ In 2013 already, the 48-hour arts event “*de Colline en Colline*” took place in three towns in northern, central and southern Tunisia where Islamist extremists were recruiting. The involved artists wanted to consciously confront extremism with art.¹²

A more recent example is the Jabal theatre in the very marginalised region of Kasserine (Tunisia), where there is a high proportion of jihadi sympathisers. The director of the theatre, Adnen Felali, a 42-year-old teacher, uses traditional culture and drama to oppose the jihadi narrative of violence, and tries specifically to reach children, who are “the future of our country”. A young Tunisian woman attending the Jabal theatre, herself severely wounded by landmines laid by the jihadists or the security forces fighting against them, is convinced that “culture is the best weapon against backwardness, darkness and terrorism.”¹³

Tunisian civil society, with the support of the Tunisian government, is hence already operating on primary and secondary prevention.

Other examples show how culture in various forms has also been used in terms of tertiary prevention, for the rehabilitation of extremists for example, as demonstrated with jihadists in German prisons.¹⁴

¹² Sana Tamzini in Meike Lettau, *Kunst und Kulturvermittlung in Transformationsprozessen*, Master Thesis, Institut für Kulturpolitik, Universität Hildesheim, 2013.

¹³ AFP, “Upstaging jihad in Tunisia’s impoverished mountains”, *DailyMail Online*, 3 March 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4277516/Upstaging-jihad-Tunisias-impoverished-mountains.html>.

¹⁴ Jess Gormley and Alex Healey, “How a German prison is using theatre to de-radicalise young Isis volunteers – video”, *The Guardian*,

Even if the European experience can often not be directly implemented elsewhere, it is a useful indicator of what can be achieved. More generally, there are huge possibilities in terms of art therapy, for example for children who have been traumatised by the extremely violent conflict in Syria. Lebanon-based NGO Action4Hope works closely with displaced people who have fled from wars and violent political turmoil, providing them with the means for freedom of expression, healing, art therapy, creativity and communication.¹⁵

The Artistic Director of Clown Me In, an NGO from Lebanon, Ms. Sabine Chouchair, says clowning, for instance, is a powerful tool to take youth out of extremist ideology circles. “I have worked with unemployed youth in northern Lebanon, which is a hotspot of sectarian violence. Most of them were either fighters in the civil war or potential recruits by the militant groups. We turned the cafes — where they used to hang out — into cultural cafes, and organised clowning and theatre performances.”¹⁶

Focus on the media

A comprehensive and creative media strategy reaching a large audience would contribute to decrease polarization, which itself is a crucial push factor to non-violent and violent extremism.¹⁷ This is not only true in terms of polarization within the societies of the southern Mediterranean or the growing cleavage between Europe and its southern Mediterranean neighbours, but also applies to our own societies in Europe.

Media coverage, which today focuses largely on terrorism, destruction and the refugee crisis,

creates fear among Europeans and pushes a considerable number of them to populism, islamophobia and sometimes violent extremism. This type of media coverage is also perceived as extremely stigmatizing by the people of the southern Mediterranean and can be considered as a trigger for violent extremism itself.

Efficient media distribution of arts and culture produced in the southern Mediterranean would bring European and Arab audiences and their dynamic civil societies closer.¹⁸ It would help to counter the processes of “othering” and stigmatization that instils fear and leads to polarization, and vigorously illustrate that we have more in common than what divides us.

6 March 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2017/mar/06/german-youth-prison-theatre-isis-volunteers-video?CMP=share_btn_fb.

¹⁵ Action for Hope, <http://act4hope.org/>.

¹⁶ Sabine Chouchair, Artistic Director of Clown Me In, <http://clownme-in.blogspot.be/p/about-us.html>.

¹⁷ A cross-media strategy is needed, *i.e.* one encompassing traditional and new media and thus maximizing the effect of asymmetrical

resource mobilization that makes it possible to reach a large audience with limited means, as the Arab youth demonstrated at the beginning of what was then labelled “the Arab Spring”.

¹⁸ A good example is the Shubbak Festival, London’s largest biennial festival of contemporary Arab culture, <http://www.shubbak.co.uk/shubbak-festival-2017/>.

Recommendations

- **Highlight the shared European-Arab and Mediterranean heritage**, including the achievements of Arab-Islamic culture and its openness, in order to create resilience to extremist narratives.
- **Support open and diverse cultural activities**, including artistic expressions, foster forms of pride in one's identity as a powerful deterrent against extremism, since they reinforce a sense of belonging and ownership.
- **Facilitate, at national, regional and international levels, in the Arab world and Europe, all forms of cultural and artistic expression among youth** that create a sense of recognition, that foster cultural exchange and create an incentive to identify with, produce and create in the local context, while remaining open to the outside world and to exchanges.
- **Enhance support to traditional culture** creates a sense of belonging, which also counters extremism in the sense that it fills the identity vacuum in which the extremists aim to create radical new identities.
- **Support urgently visual art productions**, be it painting, cinema, TV or theatre to counter visual symbolism spread through the Internet and social media.
- At the same time, **provide special support to decentralised cultural programmes and initiatives in marginalized or remote areas** that encourage independent and critical thinking, especially for young people. This could be done, for instance, through the creation of an award for regional cultural and artistic production designed to enhance the participation of youth in marginalized areas in culture.
- **Encourage and support the production and distribution of multiple and original alternative narratives on a grassroots level**. This requires an active scouting for new initiatives, and should be completed with awareness-raising campaigns on local and national levels.
- **Develop a sustainable and effective strategy of media and social media**, including the dissemination of artistic productions.
- **Considerably improve the EU's communication with its Neighbours' civil societies**, by exploiting all the possibilities the Internet, social media and cross-media allow for in terms of asymmetrical resource mobilization.
- **Engage EU Delegations in ENP countries on culture**: have them collaborate with local civil society and other cultural institutions and donors active in the region, provide their staff with training on international cultural relations and the role of culture in preventing and countering violent extremism.

Author

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