



**The British Council All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG)**

**Building Resilience to Radicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa**

**Written evidence from the British Council**

**30 November 2016**

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## 1. Executive summary

- Cultural relations are an important way of fostering greater mutual understanding between cultures, and can thereby help to address the underlying structural causes of radicalisation to extremist ideologies.
- The British Council's work tackles the underlying structural causes by building the capacities of individuals, communities and governments, and by fostering trust and understanding between the people and governments of the UK and Middle East and North Africa (MENA).
- Its programmes encourage individuals to engage with difference, think critically and gain skills that help them negotiate their future. They also facilitate a more open and responsive relationship between communities and governments, and support lasting systemic change.
- Engaging directly with young people and providing them with opportunity for agency over their lives addresses a core driver of Violent Extremism (VE) – a sense of hopelessness and loss of control that is prevalent among MENA youth due to the extended period that graduates spend waiting for employment and economic independence (*'waithood'*).
- Radicalisation factors are highly individual and localised. By developing local capacity and working with a range of partners across society, cultural relations actors can support local actors to develop understanding of the issues and best ways to respond.
- Youth empowerment programmes need to work hand-in-hand with efforts to encourage governments to adopt policies that respond to youth aspirations for change and employment; otherwise, there is a risk that programmes will raise expectations and determination to confront the authorities when youth find that there are no outlets for their new skills and capabilities.
- Independent evaluations demonstrate that British Council programmes have a significant positive impact on individuals, providing them with a sense of agency and the skills and confidence needed to take action on issues that matter to them. The programmes also address systemic problems, by improving dialogue between state and civil society on how best to tackle VE groups.
- Over the next five years the British Council plans to run programmes specifically designed to build resilience to radicalisation. These programmes will draw on: its learning from over 80 years' experience in running cultural relations programmes with young people in the MENA region; the results of a pilot project currently underway that focuses specifically on resilience to radicalisation; and the emerging international evidence base on how to build resilience to VE. These future programmes will offer alternative pathways for young people at risk of extremism in countries of strategic interest to the UK.

## **2. The British Council**

2.1 The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries.

2.2 We make a lasting difference to the security of the UK by fostering engagement and debate across cultures in strategically important countries. We contribute to the UK's prosperity by building trust to create favourable conditions for trade, investment and tourism, and by adopting shared approaches to solve shared problems. Our work also supports the UK's international influence by increasing connections and networks with decision makers globally, including the number of people who know and trust the UK.

2.3 Using the cultural resources of the UK we make a positive contribution to the people, institutions and governments of the countries we work with. This changes lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. In turn these relationships enrich UK culture and society.

2.4 We work with over 100 countries worldwide. These include all of the places of high priority for the UK, from China, India, Brazil and Russia, to North America and the European Union and Commonwealth countries, to the Middle East and North Africa. We are at the forefront of the UK's international networks and soft power.

2.5 Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications.

## **3. The role of cultural relations in preventing extremism**

3.1 Cultural exchange is recognised in the 1945 founding constitution of UNESCO as a way of tackling a number of drivers of conflict – ignorance, suspicion and mistrust between peoples. The building blocks of cultural relations - a willingness to listen, engage, share experience and understanding and respect difference - are important tools for fostering greater mutual understanding between cultures, potentially reducing the risk of radicalisation to extremist ideologies, and building long-term global stability.

3.2 The British Council was founded in 1934 as part of the UK's effort to counter fascism by using the cultural resources of the UK to build 'friendly knowledge and understanding' of the UK around the world. Today we continue our work to create trust and reduce antipathy towards the UK. The impact of this work is demonstrated by the results of our annual impact survey which show increases in young people's knowledge, understanding and relationships with the UK after participation in our programmes. Research by Yougov and Ipsos MORI for the British Council has also established a clear link between those individuals who participate in cultural relations

programmes and increased trust in the UK, including in countries with historic distrust in the UK<sup>1</sup>.

3.3 The British Council defines extremism as “a radical ideology which opposes core British and universal values set out in the Charter of the United Nations” and violent extremism as “the use of violence to further the aims of this radical ideology”.

3.4 Radicalisation is a culmination of micro-processes and flash-points in an individual’s relationship with state, society and culture. Cultural relations organisations are well positioned to understand this process around the world. The British Council has long focussed on the people, communities and issues at the heart of the VE question. Under the cultural relations and education remit established in our Royal Charter, we deliver programmes that contribute to individual, community and government capacity, resilience and growth.

3.5 Cultural relations work can help tackle radicalisation’s underlying causes. This is demonstrated in the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, which identifies seven priority areas for action, all of which have strong cultural relations’ components:

- 3.5.1) dialogue and conflict prevention;
- 3.5.2) strengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law;
- 3.5.3) engaging communities;
- 3.5.4) empowering youth;
- 3.5.6) gender equality and empowering women;
- 3.5.7) education, skill development and employment facilitation
- 3.5.8) strategic communication, the internet and social media.

3.6 British Council programmes cover all seven priority areas of the UN Plan, as well as those laid out in the UK’s 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review -- building partnerships with opponents of extremism; building more cohesive communities; and building partners’ capacity to tackle extremism’s root causes.

3.7 Its interventions are always upstream of the moment at which ‘extremism’ becomes ‘VE’. Cultural relations’ work is about building relationships, trust and understanding, and therefore complements ‘hard security’ measures. It deals with VE’s root causes, not its symptoms. .

3.8 The British Council is able to work effectively in this area because of:

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Trust Pays’, British Council report, 2012.

<http://intranet.britishcouncil.org/Site/externalrelations/ThoughtLeadership/Pages/TrustPays.aspx>

- 3.8.1) the high levels of trust and respect it commands as a result of its long-term commitment to the region, its non-partisan approach, consistent delivery, and cultural relations' approach of responding to local problems (rather than imposing pre-prepared solutions);
- 3.8.2) its extensive networks across society that span the whole spectrum of society, from governments and elites to the grass-roots and young people; and
- 3.8.3) its operational independence from UK government which enables it to act as a 'safe space' for dialogue and convening state, civil society and communities to devise solutions.

As a result, the British Council offers strategic value to the UK in its efforts to prevent violent extremism.

#### **4 Extremism in MENA**

4.1 VE groups that use ideological justifications and terrorist tactics have expanded across the region over the past decade. This is a result of the rise in conflict and weakening of state authority in many areas<sup>2</sup>. VE is often a symptom of conflict and the state's overreliance on force in its relations with society – the majority of terrorist activity over the past 25 years has occurred in places where the state engages frequently in political violence or where a broader armed conflict already exists<sup>3</sup>.

4.2 The vast majority of the region's 200 million young people reject VE groups, viewing them instead as among the region's greatest threats<sup>4</sup>, endangering their physical security, escalating conflict and substantially reducing their living standards.

4.3 A small minority of the region's population is attracted to VE movements. Research<sup>5</sup> suggests that these individuals are located in specific communities that have often been marginalised or excluded because of ethnicity or religious

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<sup>2</sup> A RAND report notes that the number of jihadist groups have increased by 58% since 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2015, Institute for Economics & Peace.

<sup>4</sup> Asda'a Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey 2016 and Arab Human Development report, 2016 (executive summary, page 34).

<sup>5</sup> "Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review", RUSI, October 2015, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers\\_of\\_Radicalisation\\_Literature\\_Review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a0899d40f0b64974000192/Drivers_of_Radicalisation_Literature_Review.pdf)

difference<sup>6</sup>. VE groups use a range of factors to appeal to individuals and communities, including:

4.3.1) **‘structural motivators’**; a sense of injustice at issues such as social and economic marginalisation, current regional conflicts (particularly in Syria and Iraq) or historic conflicts and foreign policy actions, sectarian tensions, repressive security force practices, economic inequality, corruption, and poor public service provision and governance structures.<sup>7</sup>

4.3.2) **‘individual incentives’** such as the need for a sense of belonging, adventure or higher purpose; material enticements, or expected rewards in the afterlife. In MENA many young people are trapped in ‘waithood’<sup>8</sup> -- lacking sufficient income to leave their parent’s home, marry and support a family, they are unable to become full adults in the eyes of society. In an increasingly jobless world a sense of hopelessness often drives a desire to find a “cause”, a livelihood and sense of worth.

4.3.3) **‘enabling factors’** such as the presence of ‘radical’ mentors (including religious leaders, close friends), access to ‘radical’ online communities, access to weaponry or other relevant items, a comparative lack of state influence, familial support, and tacit support/lack of opposition from the surrounding community.

4.4 VE groups develop powerful narratives, which espouse the wholesale destruction of the current system through violence; and its replacement with a utopian new order which claims to return to ‘authentic’ values, social justice and strong public service provision<sup>9</sup>.

4.5 With governments often restricting legitimate channels for expressing grievances, VE narratives use governance failures as a basis to argue that violence is the only route to change. Research indicates that they often flourish in communities where

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart, F. “Horizontal inequalities as a cause of conflict: a review of CRISE findings  
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b0e40f0b64974000936/CRISE-Overview-1.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Search for Common Ground op cit p. 1. For a detailed discussion of the way in which potential recruits start down a path to extremism which begins with shared outrage at injustice and exclusion see Sageman (2008) “Leaderless Jihad” Princeton University Press Press.

<sup>8</sup> Explanation of the term ‘waithood’ at <http://www.sahwa.eu/BLOG/Young-adults-or-Adult-waithood>

<sup>9</sup> Jihadism Transformed, A Alwan.

4.5.1) state policy has failed to deliver positive futures for young people (high unemployment, weak service provision) and

4.5.2) the state over-relies on its coercive function to manage citizen concerns and protests<sup>10</sup>.

4.6 There is evidence to suggest that an education which limits capacity for critical thinking and promotes a binary approach to the world makes young people more vulnerable to the 'tunnel vision' of extremist ideology<sup>11</sup>.

## **5. Current British Council interventions**

5.1 The British Council's programmes are designed with the primary objective of serving its mandate of promoting cultural relationships with the UK through the arts, education and society; and a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom and English language, but have clear broader benefits for global security and stability.

5.2 They provide space for individuals to engage with difference, think critically, develop their personal capacity and gain skills to

5.2.1) enable individuals to survive and thrive despite a bleak future;

5.2.2) help them become "self-starters" who create positive alternative pathways for themselves; and

5.2.3) potentially provide them with the confidence and peer group connections to resist binary and violent narratives.

5.3 They are based on the following organisational principles:

**5.3.1 Building trust and understanding across all levels of society.** The British Council convenes different groups to address underlying structural problems that can lead to radicalisation, creating space for improved co-operation between citizens and the state.

**5.3.2 Creating opportunities for individuals.** We provide positive pathways for young leaders and improve young people's skills, employability and life

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between joblessness and instability in Egypt see "Egypt's Economy: State of Denial" The Economist, August 6-12<sup>th</sup> 2016, p. 40. For a discussion of the position of youth and its relationship to instability and violent extremism in the Arab World see the Economist "Look Forward in Anger" The Economist, August 6-12<sup>th</sup> 2016 pp 18-20.

<sup>11</sup> Integrative Complexity (IC) programme, Cambridge University, 2012; Immunising the Mind, British Council paper by Martin Rose, 2015.

chances. We work with the state to ensure that there are greater opportunities for young people to use their skills and potential.

**5.3.3 Developing understanding of other cultures.** We encourage new ways of seeing the world and appreciating difference through debate, dialogue and critical thinking skills; and strengthen the development of creativity and experience of the arts.

**5.3.4 Strengthening societies.** We encourage young people to take a more active role in their societies, we support government-citizen dialogue, institution-building and reform; and we promote respect for the rule of law and the rules-based international system.

5.4 The British Council's work in arts, education, English language and civil society plays a significant role in building individual capacity, creating opportunity, strengthening societies and building trust and understanding:

5.4.1 Society programmes build the capacity of individuals, communities and systems by improving individuals' skills and employment prospects, giving marginalised youth a sense of agency, empowering women, and encouraging creativity and new ways of seeing and experiencing the world. They help build more open and legitimate institutions and stronger communities that have better capacity to work together to prevent and reduce conflict; and they strengthen good governance, human rights, and the rule of law.

5.4.2 Educational interventions, both in curriculum and pedagogy, offer much potential for efforts to prevent radicalisation: teaching young people to think critically, and enabling them to challenge religious and political extremism in their own communities. System reform, especially rebalancing in favour of vocational education and revising higher education curricula and teaching methodologies, will help alleviate graduate unemployment. It can also tackle the issue of binary approaches to complex problems, which studies indicate can increase vulnerability to radicalisation.

5.4.3 The arts are a powerful way to foster dialogue and build social cohesion in fragile- and conflict-affected societies. They help bolster a positive vision of national identity at a time of crisis, and provide space for different communities to meet and discuss difficult issues, by establishing "a system of values and references that can foster communication among different

groups”<sup>12</sup>. Artistic exchange helps open individuals’ minds to diverse cultures (including the UK’s) and forms of expression, and helps challenge stereotypes, thereby providing a strong counterweight to the exclusivist mono-culture of extremists.

5.4.4 Improving young people’s knowledge of the English language can be transformational, providing a skill that increases employability and their ability to engage with British and international culture and people. According to the EF English language proficiency index “English is a key driver of economic competitiveness at both the individual and national levels. Higher English proficiency correlates with higher incomes, better quality of life, more dynamic business environments, greater connectivity, and more innovation”.<sup>13</sup>

5.5 The British Council’s cultural relations interventions complement the work of HMG, specifically the FCO, DFID, and are aligned with the Government’s emerging International Delivery Plan for Countering Extremism (IDP).

5.6 The British Council works alongside other international organisations active in this field, such as Mercy Corps, International Alert and Search For Common Ground, partnering on projects and exchanging best practice and learning derived from this work.

### **Current programmes that address Violent Extremism’s underlying causes**

5.7 The British Council is running a portfolio of large-scale programmes that build capacity at the individual, community and government/systems level and which address the long-term structural issues at the root of violent extremism, for example by fostering dialogue, strengthening good governance, empowering women and youth (see point 3.5).

These programmes operate in MENA, as well as other strategically important areas such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Kenya.

Some examples include:

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<sup>12</sup> Cultural and creative spillovers in Europe, October 2015.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.ef.co.uk/epi/about-epi/executive-summary/>

- 5.7.1 a debating network, **Young Arab Voices**, seeks to foster a culture of open and inclusive dialogue, and gives young people the skills to influence decision-makers. Since 2012, the programme has reached over 100,000 young people in North Africa. A report by the think tank Chatham House viewed YAV as one of the region's most successful skills transfer and training initiatives, fostering critical thinking skills not supplied by the formal education system, and as creating a culture of more inclusive debate and dialogue<sup>14</sup>.
- 5.7.2 a local activist network in Syria and neighbouring countries, **Mobaderoon** empowers young people to make change in their communities, and build trust and understanding. Comprising 5,000 local activists, it promotes an inclusive vision of citizenship that bridges the civil war's divides. Activists work together on community projects, from schooling and conflict resolution, to traditional storytelling. An independent evaluation by the INTRAC consultancy found that participants had gained a sense of agency and hope, and thought about people from other religious and ethnic communities in a different way<sup>15</sup>.
- 5.7.3 a programme to empower women, **Women Participating in Public Life**, has provided community leadership training to over 4,500 people, and strengthened civil society groups' capacity to advocate for policy change on women's issues. An independent evaluation of the programme reported that participants had gained a sense of agency, self-confidence and new skills in dispute mediation, research and public speaking<sup>16</sup>. One Moroccan participant said the skills she gained on the programme helped her win election to her political party's local leadership, and stand in local elections. An Egyptian participant was able to advocate more effectively for enshrining gender equality in the new Egyptian constitution.
- 5.7.4 an art exhibition in Tripoli and Benghazi, **Street Arts**, brought together works by young Libyan graffiti artists with that of established international

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<sup>14</sup> Young Arab Voices: Moving Youth Policy from Debate into Action, Chatham House report, May 2016.

<sup>15</sup> A MIXED METHODS EVALUATION OF THE MOBADEROON NETWORK (ACTIVE CITIZENS PROGRAMME), INTRAC report, March 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Evaluation: Women Participating in Public Life, IOD Parc.

street artists. The first large-scale international arts event in Libya following the 2011 revolution, the exhibition explored visual techniques, as well as the political and social dimensions of street art, which have particular significance in North Africa as a way to articulate opinions outside the conventional channels of political debate.

5.7.5 an academic skills training programme, **LASER**, seeks to reintegrate Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon into the education system by providing them with English language and academic skills training; access to and support for high-quality accredited online higher education courses from providers such as the Open University; and access to MOOCs in Arabic and English. The programme aims to provide positive pathways to Syrian refugees facing social and economic exclusion, and develop their capacity to contribute to post-war reconstruction.

5.7.6 beyond MENA, the **Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme** has supported security and peace-building institutions to become more inclusive and accountable, and has produced independent research to influence policymakers to build sustainable peace. The programme contributed to the inclusion of a wider range of actors from across government and civil society in the process to formulate a new National Security Strategy, which shifted policy away from a military-only approach to a more comprehensive one.

## **6 Future cultural relations interventions**

**6.1** The British Council has drawn a number of valuable lessons on how cultural relations' interventions can best contribute to building resilience to radicalisation's underlying causes:

6.1.1) By developing a new positive vision that resonates emotionally with local youth and using proactive communications to extend its audience; this has the potential to strengthen national identity, build wider societal resilience, and counter the emotional pull of narratives created by extremist groups<sup>17</sup>;

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with British Council official.

- 6.1.2) By focussing on empowering youth rather than pacifying them (for example by enabling them to develop their skills, employability and work for social change) programmes can help address their socio-economic exclusion and inability to influence decision-making processes<sup>18</sup>;
- 6.1.3) By working hand-in-hand with national governments to ensure that their policies are more inclusive of youth and their aspirations for change and employment are adopted; otherwise, there is a risk that interventions will increase youth determination to confront the authorities when they find there is no legitimate outlet for their new capabilities<sup>19</sup>;
- 6.1.4) By working with partners across society (government, CSOs, security sector, religious leaders) we gain a more accurate picture of local issues driving radicalisation<sup>20</sup>, and can help local actors work together to devise more effective solutions.

## **Future programme plans**

6.2 Contributing to security and stability is one of the British Council's priority objectives over the next five years. As part of this objective, it aims to provide alternative pathways for young people at risk of extremism and to build on its experience of delivering programmes as set out above<sup>21</sup>.

6.3 Its planned programmes, created in cooperation with local partners, aim to increase the resilience of young leaders and enable positive collective action, social action projects, social entrepreneurship, and the creation of more positive narratives about nations, peoples and communities. They aim to foster collective problem-solving skills to enable communities to address localised issues that can create grievances.

6.4 The British Council is building its evidence base on the impact that its programmes have on increasing resilience to radicalisation. It will draw on learning

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<sup>18</sup> Summary: Addressing Violent Extremism – How can we do better?, Search For Common Ground.

<sup>19</sup> Young Arab Voices: Moving Youth Policy from Debate into Action, Chatham House report, May 2016

<sup>20</sup> COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MENA REGION: TIME TO RETHINK APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES, Euromesco policy paper, May 2016.

<sup>21</sup> British Council Corporate plan 2016-21

from a specific new pilot programme that focuses on building the resilience of youth at risk of radicalisation in vulnerable communities in several countries in the region. One of the first programmes designed by the British Council with very specific VE concerns as a key objective, it incorporates a number of new elements, namely:

- 6.4.1 its **concentration** on communities considered at particular risk from radicalisation due to the high number of individuals who have become foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria;
- 6.4.2 its **methodology** which underpins individual learning within a framework of regular practice and peer group learning/action, and complementary action/responses from youth, civil society and government participants;
- 6.4.3 its **coordinated media campaigns** that extend the reach and impact of the programme's community projects by encouraging other young people to take action to improve their communities;
- 6.4.4 its **adaption to local contexts**, through the development and delivery of programmes in collaboration with local partners and communities. The programmes are adapted to local needs through new research into young people's pathways.

6.5 The pilot focuses on resetting the relationship between state and civil society. Governments are encouraged to enable rather than obstruct youth programming and campaigns, while young people gain increased resilience that will help enable them to survive and thrive in spite of a bleak future, and encourage them to become "self-starters" who can create something themselves.

6.6 The British Council will use this evidence to assess how interventions work in specific contexts, and to assess the extent to which they build resilience, and help reduce the appeal of violent extremist narratives.

6.7 The British Council plans to carry out further VE-related work in schools, colleges and universities in countries of strategic interest to the UK. To achieve this we will be bidding for additional funding from the new Governance, Culture and Education Fund, established by the 2015 UK government Spending Review.

6.8 The British Council will work judiciously with national government institutions to strengthen their capacities and encourage them to work collaboratively with civil society.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural relations interventions can provide effective and sustainable solutions to the underlying causes of VE when they are delivered at scale over the long term, and are carefully adapted to the local environment in coordination with local partners. The British Council, with its long-term commitment to the region, its understanding of young people's aspirations and concerns, and its relationships of trust across state and society, aims to play a central part in the UK's international response to the problem. By building on our existing successful work, the British Council plans to provide more future programmes that are specially designed to address the marginalisation at the root of the VE problem, by providing 'positive pathways' for youth at risk of radicalisation, and by helping reset the relationship between state and civil society in conflict-affected and fragile societies.