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Building Resilience to Radicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Opening comments, Claire Spencer:

There is a tendency to generalise on this topic, when we should be more precise about definitions of the term and why radicalisation concerns us. The main concern is when it translates into violence and terrorism. How this type of radicalisation manifests itself across the MENA region is not as widely as some observers might think. Despite widespread youth unemployment and political exclusion, I would argue that specific circumstances in North Africa and the Middle East shape the kind of trajectory that violent extremism takes, and where the majority of recruits to takfiri-jihadist groups come from. Disproportionately it is North Africans, or Europeans of North African descent, who, through proximity and diaspora links, most concern our security in Europe, which is where I'll focus my comments.

In Morocco, for example, a third respectively of 'foreign fighters' to have joined armed groups in Syria come from three areas: peripheral areas of Casablanca, Fez and the Tangier-Tetouan region of northern Morocco; in Tunisia, recruitees are disproportionately drawn from the Kasserine province (including Sidi Bou Sid where Arab Spring started), Ben Ghardane on border with Libya, Bizerte in the north and the outskirts of the capital Tunis.

In Algeria, there are very few 'foreign fighters' – explained largely by the inoculation effect, still, of the internal war of the 1990s between militant jihadist groups and the army-backed regime, causing 200,000 deaths in circumstances that have still not been fully explored. The Algerian government has also spent considerable sums of money on housing and social and physical infrastructure in the wake of the Arab Spring which has improved lives: as oil price falls have weakened Algeria's foreign currency reserves, we may see a rise in social unrest when recent levels of social spending can no longer be sustained.

In Egypt, a fatigue with violence after the overturn of the Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013, and its replacement with an authoritarian-leaning system that clamps down on all expression of social and political discontent has driven jihadist groups into the Sinai peninsula – where the Egyptian army is struggling to contain them.

In Libya, it is the vacuum in central power that allowed for ISIS/Daesh to set up its own base in Sirte, symbolically also Qaddafi's home town. UN estimates are that anywhere between 2,000 and 7,000 fighters have been drawn there from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Mali, Morocco and Mauritania.

In assessing how to build resilience to radicalisation, the first thing to acknowledge is that upwards of 99% of the target groups for recruitment to these groups and ideologies, namely, youth between late teenage to their late 20s, are not joining or buying into violent ideologies. Despite some evidence of a gliding effect from a radical ideology such as Salafism to violent extremism, there are also other critical factors at play. The Tunisian assassin (Seifeddine Rezgui) of 30 British tourists near Sousse in June 2015 had a background in drinking, break-dancing and drugs, and had previously worked at the Port al-Kantaoui resort as an '*animateur*' in charge of organizing games for children and evening events. His 'conversion' such as it was, to radical Islam, came late in the day – suggesting that material and psychological elements were already in place for him to be susceptible

to recruiters' messaging in Kairouan, where he had graduated with an engineering degree. As the oldest university city in North Africa, Kairouan is symbolically a place that ISIS/Daesh has targeted as a place to integrate within their version of 'Dar el Islam'.

This mixture of drugs, alcohol, petty criminality, and precarious lifestyles – with few sustainable jobs and prospects - is a common feature in all the North African regions and cities I have cited. To differing degrees, the phenomenon of marginalisation and socio-political exclusion is also a common factor in the vulnerability of some communities and individuals to espousing the kind of violent radicalisation I've described. It also argues in favour of responses being targeted to specific circumstances in the most susceptible urban and rural communities.

I emphasise this, since there is a risk of over-generalising the risk of radicalisation to include all unemployed youths, or all those who show an interest in radical forms of Islamic expression. It is well-known, for example, that the majority of Muslim Brotherhood affiliated and Salafist groups across the MENA region do not endorse the violent zero-sum thinking of groups such as Daesh/ISIS. There may be circumstances in which the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas in Gaza have espoused violence, but it has generally been contextual (ie they are under attack in Egypt, or are pursuing an intermittent war against Israel). The more nihilistic kind of takfiri-jihadism – which Shiraz Maher describes very well in its AQ and Daesh/ISIS forms in a short video 'explainer' on the Chatham House website, which I recommend (https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/chatham-house-primer-jihadism) – threatens anyone, anywhere who is not part of their narrowly defined sect.

In a definitional sense, we are facing an ideological phenomenon that crosses borders and evolves as it is adopted according to circumstances. Shiraz Maher points out quite cogently that we should be looking more at the transformation of Al Qaeda for ideological evolution in coming years rather than Daesh/ISIS which produces operational manuals more than original and coherent thought. The latter's main innovation has been its particular concept of the so-called Caliphate and rules of engagement with the enemy and governance – all of which are rejected as too extreme an interpretation of 'jihad' and 'tawhid' by mainstream Salafi thought. It also explains why one of the ways the Moroccan monarchy has sought to contain the extremes of this thinking has been to reach out to Salafist leaders in Morocco, who have more ideological authority than the jihadist recruiters. The recruiters themselves are often former drug-dealers or criminals, who take the path of enticing non-believers and believers alike through appealing to the circumstances of the individuals they are targeting. This may be as much 'sex and drugs and rock and roll' as any religious precepts, which as I noted before in the case of Seifeddine Rezgui in Sousse (and in the case of the Tunisian terrorist in Nice in July 2016, whose affiliation to ISIS was, at best, marginal) comes very late in the day in terms of the motivation to act.

As a final note, this has led a number of analysts re-characterising the phenomenon of radicalisation as 'a rapid conversion to jihadism' – to use the phrase of the French academic Jean-Pierre Filiu publishing in 'Le Monde' in July 2016 (http://filiu.blog.lemonde.fr/2016/07/17/une-radicalisation-tres-rapide-cela-sappelle-une-conversion/). Rather than the lengthy process that the word 'radicalisation' implies, it means the addition, very late in the day, of religious justifications or legitimisation to a pre-existing condition of frustration, alienation, anger against governments and whole societies blamed for the hopelessness of the individual's circumstances. That these

frustrations do not in practice justify the acts committed does not by any means undermine the reality of the internal logic that leads to them, or the susceptibility of the individual in question falling prey to them. In the explanation of the French academic Professor Olivier Roy, these individuals do not so much represent the radicalisation of Islam, as the 'Islamisation of radicalism' (http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/11/24/le-djihadisme-une-revolte-generationnelle-et-nihiliste_4815992_3232.html) brought about through poverty, marginalisation, social resentment and psychic disorders.

Thus, the building of resilience in this context has to target and encompass the pre-existing socio-economic, psychological and political conditioning end of the spectrum as much as it does the elaboration of security and prevention strategies, including through education and deradicalisation programmes. Although the latter is currently the preferred approach of most governments, including in the UK, in reality, it means intervening late in the day, prioritising the symptoms over the environmental triggers for the individuals most directly concerned, and risks spreading the net of limited security resources across too wide a population. As has already been seen in recent criticisms of official strategies such as 'Prevent' in the UK, this approach also provokes potentially negative, if unintended, outcomes if particular communities of Muslims feel singled-out as targets of policy, rather than as active participants in identifying and fine-tuning specific causal links in context. In the MENA region, as much as in the UK, the most pertinent analysis and responses to the violent end of the radicalism spectrum lies in combining socio-economic measures with the expertise of specialists in psycho-social conditioning to identify those individuals most at risk in well-defined, and often very localised, context.