All Party Parliamentary Group – British Council
Building Resilience to Radicalisation Inquiry

Submission from:

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Key points

- There is no single or common driver of violent extremism across contexts. What drives someone to join an extremist group differs from context to context and from person to person. It is risky to propose there is a single, typical demographic that can be deemed more vulnerable than others to recruitment by extremist groups.
- Responses to violent extremism therefore need to be tailored to context, understanding and responding to multiple drivers of violent extremism, recognising that there is no blueprint that will apply across the MENA region or even across one country. Implementers and policy makers therefore need to get comfortable with this complexity.
- The language of 'violent extremism' is very contentious. Definitions of who or what group counts as 'violent extremist' differ heavily from one context to another, and using the labels CVE/PVE in programming can be counterproductive as they risk stigmatising the wider target group (most of whom are at no risk at all of becoming either extremist or violent). Implementers should adopt a more specific and explicit 'say what you see' approach: e.g. in responding to the drivers of violent extremism, projects may aim to strengthen governance and political participation, respond to livelihood needs, help reduce the sense of exclusion and alienation of people who feel marginalised by the status quo, or help those affected by war deal with trauma.
- Approaches that invest only in offering counter narratives to the narratives espoused by extremist groups should be treated with caution, as they alone do not address the drivers of violent extremism and are therefore limited in long-term effectiveness.
- There is evidence of locally contextualised and locally-led interventions reducing vulnerability to violent extremism. Successful projects understand and deal with underlying drivers, avoid stigmatising participants by using the language of 'violent extremism', are long-term in their approach and are implemented by community-based organisations in collaboration with a range of partners including local authorities, research institutions, educational institutions and international organisations.
- Working with community based organisations is particularly important on the issue of violent extremism, as their access to highly vulnerable groups and their legitimacy on the ground cannot be matched by international organisations, nor governments.
- Working to address the drivers of violent extremism requires working in areas where extremist groups are actively recruiting. It is therefore a high risk activity for all involved. Robust risk management is essential, and implementers need to consider their funding sources, and identity of partner organisations more carefully than normal. In some contexts, operating visibly with UK government funding or affiliations could put an organisation at risk in terms of its perceived neutrality, or even the safety of staff.
- In conflict contexts such as Syria, education institutions act as vital social support networks and provide children with routine and a connection to trusted adults that can protect against their recruitment into violent extremist groups. However, in countries where unemployment is high, the likelihood that young people may graduate without jobs to go to, needs to be taken into account. One way of doing this could be to connect education with enterprise training and job creation.
- Extremism thrives on simplified black and white narratives. Global inequalities and international interventions in the region can risk fuelling these, and need to be addressed as part of a wider, long-term UK government strategy on tackling drivers of violent extremism.

This submission draws on Alert's experience of implementing projects aimed at addressing the drivers of violent extremism in Tunisia and Syria, and within Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon and Turkey. Our research findings regarding what drives vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist groups in these contexts is outlined first, followed by two project case studies: one on using political participation tools to reduce young people's political marginalisation in Tunisia; the second on using peace education to increase resilience to recruitment by armed groups amongst young Syrians.

Factors that drive vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist groups

International Alert's research undertaken in December 2015 and January 2016 with 311 young Syrians in Syria and in refugee communities in Lebanon and Turkey, their families and community members, reveals four key factors driving vulnerability. These are:
1. A lack of economic opportunity. This relates primarily to young people inside Syria, particularly young men, upon whom falls the burden of providing for themselves and their family. Armed groups offer a stipend, which alone can act as a major factor for joining where no other opportunity to generate an income exists.
2. The disruptive social context and experiences of violence, displacement, trauma and loss. Young people interviewed for the research cited a desire to avenge the deaths of friends and family at the hands of the Assad regime as a reason for joining armed groups. This can also explain in part why people join Jabat Al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate, which is seen as a legitimate opposition to Assad. This is less of a factor in why people join ISIS, which is not seen as a legitimate actor in the Syrian revolution.
3. Deprivation of personal (psychological) needs for efficacy, autonomy and purpose. For many Syrians, the war has taken away their sense of control over their lives and deprived them of a sense of meaning and purpose. Armed groups, including extremist groups, respond to this need by offering a sense of purpose, control and significance.
   "People can find a new meaning to their life in extremism. Extremism opens a door to a new life where they are wanted. They can be useful again and get to take part in something that is big, huge – all while doing God's work. The idea of establishing an Islamic State provides hope [for] their lives." Syrian male, Lebanon
4. Degradation of education infrastructure and opportunities to learn. For those in Syria, the collapse of the education system has created a gap that armed groups have filled. For those in Syria not able to attend school at all, vulnerability is increasing due to the absence of positive and structured environments that education brings. In refugee communities, poor access to education facilities and experience of discrimination contribute to feelings of loss, marginalisation and anger.[1]

In Tunisia, Alert's research in the Tunis suburbs of Ettadhamen and Douer Hicher in 2014 with over 800 18-34 year olds shows a similarly complex web of factors driving vulnerability. Young people in these suburbs, seen as fertile recruiting grounds for jihadi Salafist groups, report experiencing layers of exclusion – they are marginalised because of where they live, marginalised economically, and marginalised from the political sphere. There was a particularly acute sense of disillusionment and frustration with the political transition: 90% say that nothing has changed or the situation has worsened since the revolution and 98.8% felt that politicians worked for their personal interest rather than the common good. The interaction that young people have with the state are often negative and confrontation, with corruption and police violence seen as key concerns for most. In this context, Salafist groups have moved in to fill the gap, delivering key services to the population and offering disenfranchised young people a sense of belonging and a platform for action.[2]

In both cases, ideology was not found to be a primary driving factor for people joining extremist groups. Instead, religion and ideology are used to make sense of or justify the decision to turn to violence as a heroic, spiritual or moral act. However, interviewees also cite religious values as a reason not to turn to violence.

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[1] International Alert (2016) Why Young Syrians Choose to Fight, accessible here: http://www.international-alert.org/publications/why-young-syrians-choose-fight
[2] Lamloum, O (2015) Politics on The Margins in Tunisia, accessible here http://www.international-alert.org/publications/politics-margins-tunisia

Projects that address drivers of vulnerability to violent extremism

Case study 1: Strengthening the relationship between young Tunisians and the state in the suburbs of Tunis[3]

The problem
The issue of youth inclusion in marginalised areas is one of the most important, yet challenging, issues in post-revolution Tunisia. The high hopes of young people, one of the most active groups in the revolution, have turned to bitterness, in the face of chronic underemployment, underdevelopment and political exclusion. Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher, two working class towns situated in Greater Tunis, embody this shift. In both places young people played a decisive role in the social uprisings that led to the fall of the former regime in 2011. Today, however, both communities suffer from stigmas associated with poverty, crime and Salafism (fundamentalist Islam), an image that has been accentuated by the Tunisian media following a series of clashes between the police and Salafist groups. Both towns are seen as recruiting grounds for groups promoting violent extremism, including those sending Tunisians to Syria for jihad.

The response

Understanding the drivers of vulnerability to violent extremism

Based on the premise that consolidation of a peaceful democratic transition in Tunisia, including addressing threats to this peace such as violent extremism, requires the empowerment of excluded communities and the strengthening of their voices, International Alert is working with young people in the towns of Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher. The first stage of the project in 2014 consisted of conducting research, the first of its kind in Tunisia. Alert collaborated with local social scientists to conduct a quantitative and qualitative study of over 740 18 to 34 year olds living in these towns. Young enumerators were recruited from the Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher and given training in field research techniques. Over 740 young people completed a questionnaire on their perceptions of their neighbourhood, schooling, career path, relations with local institutions and police, political views and religious practices.

The results revealed that the marginalisation and exclusion of young people takes many forms: social, economic, urban, cultural and political. Youth unemployment is particularly high among graduates, and as a result young people do not believe that going to school will promote their social prospects; instead, most say that they go to school to keep their parents happy. Only 10 per cent of young people think that their situation has improved since the revolution, and most say that they are disillusioned with the revolution, and express a defiant attitude towards politicians. Young people are very suspicious of institutions because of corruption, a lack of accountability and feelings of marginalisation.

The study also confirms that young people encounter difficulties as a result of the stigmas attached to their neighbourhoods. These stigmas serve to widen inequalities, particularly in terms of young people's access to jobs. Both towns have very few cultural and sports facilities, and they are marked by high rates of drug consumption, particularly cannabis and Subutex, a heroin substitute. Young people nonetheless have a strong sense of identity associated with their residential area, creating a sense of solidarity.

Further, when young people sympathise with Salafism, it is for two main reasons: either political, because they share its anti-system ideology, or residential, because they feel a sense of solidarity with young Salafist activists who live in the same neighbourhood as them and with whom they share

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[3] Adapted from a longer article by Lamoum, O (2016), available here:
http://www.civicus.org/~civicusadmin/images/documents/SOCS2016/Working%20towards%20the%20inclusion%20of%20youth-%20the%20case%20of%20Ettadhamen%20and%20Douar%20Hicher%20in%20Tunisia.pdf

the same daily suffering and deprivation. Many young people from Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen have left for Syria since 2011. The friends and families of those who have gone to fight in Syria are worried about what will happen to them when they return.

Following up on the findings

The research has shown that the key requirement needed to promote the inclusion of young people is the construction of their confidence in the state. This should be built through the reinforcement of young people's ability to have a voice in local governance, and by involving them in processes of participatory democracy where they are able to articulate their needs and expectations towards the public policies of the state.

From August 2015, International Alert has been implementing a series of activities that aim to address the social and political marginalisation felt by young people. This 18 month project combines International Alert's dialogue and mediation experience, and tried and tested dialogue and political participation methodologies, with innovative digital community mapping tools. It is targeted towards previously overlooked young people, and tackles marginalisation where it is most needed, by using the following approaches:

- Building trust and establishing lasting partnerships between local authorities and young people by creating sustainable consultation mechanisms.
- Encouraging young people, and the general population of Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher, to exchange views with local and national authorities through a participatory dialogue process. This process aims to connect local people's voices to the national level and central government.
- Stimulating local development in Ettadhamen and Douar Hicher and promoting youth employment by establishing two or three pilot initiatives to set up solidarity-based social economy enterprises.

Through an inclusive approach, the project has succeeded in setting up a platform of CSOs in Ettadhamen, which helped to reach out to a number of young people to participate in the project's activities. International Alert also adopted various methods to reach out to and recruit participants; these included an open call for applications through a poster campaign, and contacts with high schools to facilitate access to young people deemed as harder to reach. More than 30 young people, gender balanced and from various backgrounds, were selected and trained in various topics such as leadership, local democratic governance, local elections and accountability and street art.

The crucial tool that was designed to strengthen the coherence of the group, increase its visibility and run the process in a fun and progressive way was the OpenStreetMap. This innovative tool, never used before in Tunisia, is a digital mapping project that allows young people to work together to create an interactive map of their neighbourhood. Its use can be seen as a pioneering exercise in social re-appropriation, geared towards both identifying problems and suggesting ways to improve neighbourhood life. For example, young people can map locations not marked on official maps, unsafe areas, such as those prone to accidents or violence, social requirements and facilities in need of development. In addition, the objective of OpenStreetMap is to give young people the opportunity to inform and influence local government constructively. This tool has already achieved this: the local authority has now begun to invite young people to consultation meetings, and has agreed to allocate 50% of the municipality's 2017 development budget based on a participatory budgeting process, integrating a focus on young people's needs.
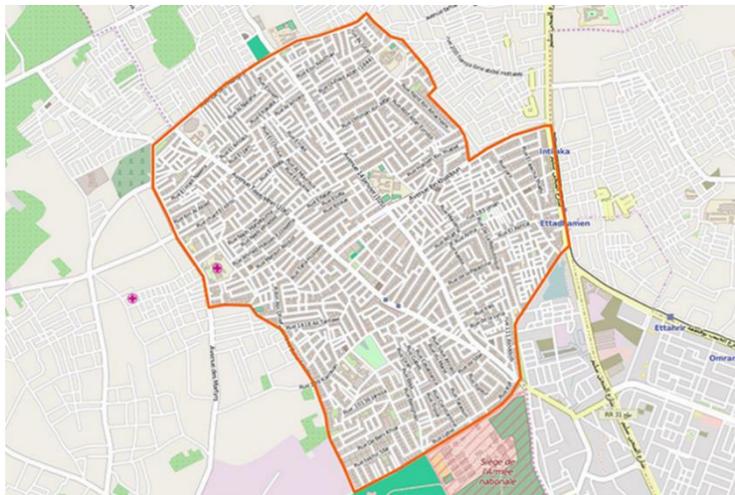
<u>Case study 2: Using peace education to reduce young Syrian's vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups</u>

The problem

The radicalisation of Syrian children and young people within Syria and in neighbouring countries represents a growing challenge to peace. Young people are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by extremist groups, and yet, beyond anecdotal evidence, there is little understanding of what makes people vulnerable and how education projects can prevent radicalisation. This project seeks to address this gap.

The response

In 2015-2016, Alert alongside four local implementing partners engaged 7,111 children aged 6–18 and youth aged 18+ in a range of peace education interventions in Syria, Lebanon and Turkey over a six month period.

The project tested the potential for peace education to address the damage that the conflict in Syria has had on young people and to increase their resilience to recruitment into armed groups. Through both formal and informal education structures project activities aimed to increase young people's skills and capacity for nonviolence, develop social and life skills, develop individual and group resources, develop resilience and build support networks. Peace education not only provides people with the skills and values necessary to manage conflict without violence, but also encourages them to critically analyse conflicts around and within them – including understanding the structural and cultural factors that underpin conflict and injustice.

After only six months, the pilot project has demonstrated solid evidence that peace education can successfully support psychosocial resilience and reduce the risk of children and young people engaging in violence. It has achieved this in the following ways:

1. Providing supportive social networks through the creation of physical and emotional safe spaces, where children and young people can share their fears and concerns with people they can trust. This provides them with regular contact with trained mentors to talk about issues affecting them and directly counters violent narratives and the pull of violence.
2. Promoting psychosocial resilience and wellbeing, which increases young people's ability to make sense of the conflict and limit the impact it has on their lives, helping them to see themselves as survivors not victims, and be able to play a positive, non-violent role in their communities. Modules focus on helping children to develop positive coping strategies, a sense of purpose and dignity, and positive belonging.
3. Building bridges across divides and fostering intercultural understanding and respect for diversity, through exposure to alternative perspectives, fostering respect, empathy and understanding for other groups and affiliations. This provides opportunities for increased mixed interaction, as well as modules on respecting difference and diversity and challenging stereotypes.
4. Providing alternatives to violence and delegitimising violence, by countering the normalisation of violence, providing non-violent narratives and pro-peace messages, as well as equipping young people with the skills to manage tensions in a non-violent way.
5. Encouraging alternative non-violent avenues for community activism and engagement, by focusing on empowerment and helping children navigate an eventual post-conflict environment, emphasising their agency and ability to bring about social change. Initiatives provide alternative, non-violent outlets to achieve a sense of empowerment, status and personal significance.
6. Protecting the most vulnerable, hard-to-reach children, such as children living on the streets. Modules develop their understanding about protection, rights and basic life skills, as well as introducing them to community safeguarding and referral mechanisms.

> "*In Syria, children who aren't engaged in [psycho-social] activities like this are so vulnerable to recruitment, they could be directly recruited by Da'esh or Al-Nusra. Without this, children would look elsewhere for this need to be fulfilled, which would make them vulnerable to armed groups, particularly ideological groups which specifically address this need in their recruitment practices. We give them tools to express themselves in the community, rather than using weapons to express anger at their losses.*" (Interview with a facilitator in Beirut, Lebanon, February 2016)