

RESISTING RADICALIZATION

Exploring the
Nonoccurrence
of Violent
Extremism

edited by
Morten Bøås, Gilad Ben-Nun,
Ulf Engel, and Kari Osland

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*In memory of Kjetil Selvik, our dear friend,
colleague, and contributor, who passed away
during the production of this book*

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External Donors and the Marketing of P/CVE: Niger, Tunisia, and Syria

*Laura Berlingozzi, Silvia Carenzi,
and Daniela Musina*

Twenty years after September 11 and the subsequent launch of the war on terror (WoT), the counterterrorism agenda has shown its limitations. To achieve better results, traditional hard enemy-centric military approaches have been coupled with “softer” population-centric approaches, namely, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). External donors, including the European Union (EU), have devoted enormous funding to the P/CVE agenda in so-called fragile countries.

The European Union’s cooperation with African and Middle Eastern countries to prevent and counter violent extremism has received increased scholarly attention following several terrorist attacks in Europe in the last decade (Bøås et al. 2021; Raineri et al. 2020). The EU’s emphasis on promoting so-called good governance, democracy, and human rights to prevent violent extremism has gone hand in hand with a growing path toward prioritizing a “security first” approach (Skare 2022).

In these contexts, the legacy of colonialism has endured over time. Post-colonial states inherited strong traditional leadership and well-trained militaries, along with limited public health and education facilities in some cases (Wilén 2023) or unequal access to public services and social justice in others. Although these legacies have caused harm, they should not be misconstrued as perpetual victimhood or a lack of agency among national political elites. These elites have developed strategic competencies and have employed “extraversion” mechanisms (Bayart and Ellis 2000) to mobilize resources based on their unequal relationships with external partners.

In this chapter, we delve into the evolution of these interrelated dynamics: on one side, how a range of donors have sustained efforts and shaped narratives in the P/CVE spheres, and on the other, how states have sought

to adapt their narratives by portraying themselves as trustworthy partners and proactive upholders of P/CVE and counterterrorism policies to attract economic and military assistance. To do so, we adopt a comparative approach among three case studies across different regions in the broader Mediterranean—namely, Niger in West Africa, Tunisia in North Africa, and Syria in the Middle East. These cases show various levels of authoritarian restoration, repression, and democratic backsliding. Similarly, they hold distinct positions vis-à-vis Western countries and international partners. Yet, they display several similarities in their discourses and practices of extraversion in P/CVE and counterterrorism.

For instance, in line with Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA (PREVEX) project analysis, all three cases have known occurrences of violent extremism that was driven by common factors such as youth unemployment and socioeconomic marginalization that have been exacerbated by environmental challenges, population growth, and lack of state-delivered services, which contribute to heightened competition for resources, creating a fertile ground for extremist ideologies (Bøås et al. 2021). The resulting identity-based cleavages and perceived inequalities provide opportunities for violent entrepreneurs to exploit grievances. On the basis of PREVEX findings, we identify how the scattered and fragmented EU activities fall short of developing a holistic, multiscale, and multithematic P/CVE model (Ben-Nun and Engel 2022b).

In the chapter, we employ qualitative text and discourse analysis to examine patterns of actors' positionality vis-à-vis external actors and how these interactions shape and co-construct their identities. Specifically, the concept of extraversion is utilized to understand how actors compensate for their difficulties in power autonomization by strategically mobilizing resources on the basis of their unequal relationships with external partners, and it offers a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of political power in postcolonial states. We shed light on the complex interactions and power dynamics between national and external actors in shaping political outcomes—stressing how political elites actively participate in the *mise en dépendence* of their societies. Additionally, this approach provides insights into how identity construction is shaped by external influences, such as donor and sponsor countries, and how actors navigate these influences to accrue power and legitimacy.

The findings of the analysis reveal that ruling elites in Niger, Tunisia, and Syria have sought to capitalize on fears of extremism and portray themselves in their discourse as key actors in the domains of P/CVE and counterterrorism. Nevertheless, the cross-case findings show a noteworthy disparity (Niger, Tunisia) or a complete divergence (Syria) between the external image projected by these countries and their actual behavior. P/CVE policies are often used as political tools by governments to gain

international support and bolster domestic consensus rather than to genuinely address violent extremism. It is important to understand the interplay between external and internal political dynamics and how counterterrorism strategies can negatively interact across governance levels.

First we operationalize the concept of extraversion; second, delve into each case study; and finally, draw conclusions and make policy recommendations based on a comparative cross-country analysis.

P/CVE: A Field for Political Extraversion

The concept of extraversion, as it was theorized by Bayart (2010, 20), refers to the capacity of states and state elites to capitalize in one way or another on their position of dependence on the world system and to “mobilize resources derived from their unequal relationship with the external environment.” According to this perspective, dependency and outward orientation are crucial to the configuration of internal politics as state elites mobilize external resources to produce power centralization and manage internal populations (Bayart and Ellis 2000). The concept of extraversion is also valuable for framing contemporary processes of transformation of postcolonial states, including security-related processes, such as the P/CVE sphere. Just as other intervention concepts and constructs (such as “good governance” and “reform conditionality”) mediate the adoption of these agendas, P/CVE is a field of intervention that also determines the entanglement of these contexts in the world system (Bayart 2010).

The manifestations of extraversion processes exhibit variability across different contexts. Whereas it involves providing exclusive resource access to loyal social groups or classes in certain situations, in others, it relies more on manipulating factional and social struggles. These dynamics contribute to reducing states’ dependence on and accountability to internal resources for governance (De Waal 2009). Indeed, even though they are all former colonies or protectorates, Niger, Tunisia, and Syria present different levels of economic dependency and market integration; have diverse historical, socioeconomic bases; and are more or less reliant on internal resource extraction or production. Global asymmetries of wealth and power and histories of subjection do not necessarily imply passiveness and do not exclude performative roles by dependent countries. From a *long durée* perspective, strategies of extraversion date to precolonial and then colonial times but represent a useful heuristic tool to understand the postcolonial state confronted with unprecedented levels of heterogeneity in aid and resource provision by a plethora of donors.

Even though the concept of extraversion has been applied to economic, humanitarian, and developmental aid, it is less utilized in the field of security.

This is surprising given the global prioritization of security politics, which, continuing from colonial times and especially since the WoT, intertwines with financial and developmental agendas and reflects the “security-development nexus” mantra (Beall, Goodfellow, and Putzel 2006). In particular, today, transnational P/CVE agendas provide massive opportunities for ruling elites or strategically positioned (non)state actors to capitalize on them.

Besides opening channels for material provisions to militaries and police for both reactive and preemptive scopes, P/CVE agendas also offer maneuvering ground at the symbolic and discursive levels, to an extent, where governments and other recipients can play on ideas and perceptions linked to reputation, efficacy, and exceptionalism, as the three case studies presented in this chapter illustrate. Extraversion, in this sense, resorts to manipulation of perceptions, where states have the power to play “belief games” (Fisher 2014) by leveraging racially biased perceptions of Africa and the Middle East as incubators of our century’s most dangerous “terrorist” threats.

Since 2001, P/CVE has emerged as the new frontier for risk- and threat-based extraversion, as illustrated by the designation of “terror zones” in Africa and the Middle East during the WoT. State elites, recognizing the benefits, have actively supported these designations. The Algerian positioning vis-à-vis the “crisis” in Mali as a regional bulwark against the spillover effects is emblematic (Keenan 2013; see also Keen and Andersson 2018). Not only images of strength but also those of alleged “fragility” are bargained to secure external support, and these often coexist with contradictory but equally pervasive “good reformer” discourses (Fisher 2014). In an era where capacity-building and other technical paradigms characterize the new ascendant parable of interventionism and, arguably, of war and warlike action, extraversion as an orientation to external resources but also sources of authority and legitimacy seems to illuminate connections between inequality and coercive political centralization and transnational P/CVE agendas in postcolonial settings.

Niger: Between Adaptive Strategies and Bargaining Power

The influence of global jihadist franchises is significantly increasing, making sub-Saharan Africa an emerging epicenter of global jihadism (IEP 2022). Niger, situated in the central Sahel region, faces numerous challenges, including illicit migration, drug trafficking, intercommunal and interethnic rivalries, depletion of natural resources, and the presence of various armed groups that have expanded since the early 2000s (Thurston 2020). In the northwestern and southeastern regions, jihadi governance has largely replaced state control, with groups like the Islamic State Sahel

Province (ISSP) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) operating in these areas (Bøås and Strazzari 2020).

To tackle these issues, over the last decade, the European Union's involvement in Niger has intensified in recognition of its importance as a critical country in the Sahel—a region deemed a “strategic priority for the EU and its member states.” The EU's strategy for the Sahel is based on an integrated approach that focuses on the security-development nexus to strengthen “a solid and long-standing partnership . . . that can facilitate the adoption of common positions to address common challenges.” In the EU policy discourse, the Sahel region is frequently depicted as grappling with complex situations involving mutually exacerbating vulnerabilities, fragilities, and insecurity (Council of the EU 2021). This portrayal reinforces the existence of an internal-external security nexus (Blockmans et al. 2020).

Niger's economic fragility is highlighted by its low ranking on the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index (HDI): it is currently 189th out of 191 countries (UNDP 2021). Areas with social and economic marginalization, various insecurities, religious or ideological indoctrination, strong state security responses, fragile masculinities, and long-standing grievances are more likely to foster violent extremism (Bøås et al. 2021). To combat this fragility, Niger has established an Inter-ministerial Committee to monitor and improve its HDI ranking and developmental status. Additionally, external partners like the EU have committed to a stabilization agenda to strengthen Niger's state capacity, particularly in the security sector (Marsh et al. 2020). Thus, beyond development aid, Niger obtains other benefits from cooperating with the EU, which includes the externalization of both migration-management and security-building costs (Colomba-Petteng 2019), whereby security and migration operate as “bargaining chips.” Niger serves as a key transit country for migrants en route to North Africa and Europe and thus holds a significant position as the EU's first border in West Africa (Idrissa 2021). The mutual dependence between Niger and the EU has deepened since the onset of the 2015 “migration crisis” in Europe (Collet and Ahad 2017). Although the EU has emerged as the primary donor to Niger, Niamey has become increasingly indispensable to the EU's efforts in the areas of migration and security.

The EU's broader intervention in Niger, particularly in the field of P/CVE, is part of the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, which views the relationship between the Sahel and the EU as mutually beneficial (EEAS 2011) and aims for a stable Sahel to fully realize economic opportunities through a win-win partnership (Council of the EU 2021). As scholars from the PREVEX project outlined, the EU has encouraged, assisted, and guided Nigerien authorities in adopting various strategies related to security and development. These include Niger's Security and Development Strategy, Internal Security Strategy, Sustainable

Development and Inclusive Growth Strategy, and National Border Policy and Comprehensive National Migration Policy (Raineri et al. 2020). However, if the European Union conceptualizes its intervention in terms of mutual benefit, it is essential to consider how the Nigerien government perceives these developments.

Historically, Niger has been considered unstable because of four coups (in 1974, 1996, 1999, and 2010) since its independence from France in 1960. However, 2011 marked a significant shift in its political trajectory and EU-Sahel relations. In March 2011, the EU adopted its first strategy for the Sahel, which addressed irregular migration and terrorism and coincided with Mahamadou Issoufou becoming president of Niger. President Issoufou sought EU support for Niger's security sector, and this led to the establishment of the EU civilian mission EUCAP Sahel Niger in 2012, which aims to strengthen Niger's security by enhancing law enforcement capacities, providing technical assistance to the justice system, and improving border management to address irregular migration. The creation of EUCAP Sahel Niger resulted from mutual interests: Niger sought help in combating terrorism and handling migration issues, and the EU aimed to increase its regional engagement. President Issoufou emphasized international cooperation to prevent weapons smuggling via migrant routes (Frowd 2018) and used EU resources to bolster Niger's strategic goals and cultivate an image of stability (Ibrahim 2014).

During Mahamadou Issoufou's presidency in Niger, Prime Minister Brigi Rafini significantly advanced Niger's development objectives by leveraging his extensive knowledge of European institutions and his consensus-building skills. As an alumnus of both the Nigerien and French National School of Administration (ENA), Rafini crucially deployed his expertise in international aid to secure funding for development initiatives. He served as prime minister for a decade, which overlapped with Issoufou's two terms, and they collaborated to attract European investments and expand security and defense partnerships. A key component of their strategy involved expanding Niger's diplomatic reach to leverage external resources and expertise.

Following the approval of EUCAP Sahel Niger, European embassies were quickly established by the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Italy, with Germany and Belgium also expressing interest in strengthening relations with Niger. During Issoufou's presidency, Niger developed a Strategy for the Security and Development of the Sahelo-Saharan Zones (Cabinet of the Prime Minister 2012) that closely mirrored the European strategy. This alignment highlighted the congruence of EU and Nigerien objectives and indicated the government's preference for adopting external models and procedures. Mohamed Bazoum, who assumed the presidency in April 2021 and was ousted in a coup d'état after two years in office, con-

tinued with this strategy. He effectively shaped the country's storyline to demonstrate Niger's ability to tackle a range of challenges and to align with the priorities of international donors. Amid the recent coups in neighboring countries, such as Mali (August 2020 and May 2021) and Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), Niger's 2021 elections were portrayed as the "first peaceful transfer of power in Niger's history" (Al Jazeera 2022). This narrative positioned Niger as a model of democracy in the Sahel, contrasting with the region's shift toward authoritarianism.

Despite the ongoing threat of jihadist insurgencies in the region, Niger has been portrayed as the *only* stable partner, which reinforces its image as a stronghold in regional security (Jeune Afrique 2022). In this context, Niger has increased its efforts and taken on an unprecedented expansive role in regional security dynamics. At the same time, while the Malian junta leader Assimi Goïta revoked defense agreements with France, President Bazoum invited foreign armies to redeploy in Niger (France 24 2022), and in particular the French counterterrorism mission Barkhane.

In July 2022, the European Union approved the disbursement of 25 million euros from the European Peace Facility to support the Nigerien Armed Forces in protecting Niger's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and civilians from terrorist threats (Council of the EU 2022). The EU plans to establish a technician training center and to construct a forward operating base in the Tillabéri region. Some scholars argue that this military aid has caused Nigerien elites to shift their reliance from development aid to military assistance (Bøås and Strazzari 2020).

The Niger-EU partnership saw significant developments, including a request by President Bazoum and Foreign Affairs Minister Ibrahim Yacoubou in November 2022 to deploy an EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) military partnership mission in Niger. Consequently, the EU established the EU Military Partnership Mission, launched in February 2023, with an initial three-year duration. The mission aims to enhance the military capacity of the Niger Armed Forces to combat terrorism. Additionally, for the first time, the EU agreed to provide lethal equipment through the European Peace Facility (Borrell 2023), marking a significant shift from its traditional "normative" stance.

In the EU discourse, resilience-based participatory engagements are more effective in preventing and countering violent extremism than top-down approaches focused on hard security. However, in practice, the EU tends to prioritize security concerns. As the EU seeks to distinguish its approach from that of other international actors, such as those inspired by the WoT, a combination of criminal justice-inspired policies and militaristic undertones is apparent. The EU's approach to the Sahel region's P/CVE policies, programs, and actions combines significant political prioritization with limited practical tools (Raineri et al. 2020).

Despite the EU's efforts to adhere to normative commitments, the lack of clear definitions and policy templates presents challenges. To address the limitations of hard-security approaches, the EU emphasizes trust building with local communities, in consideration of historical abuses by security forces, and sponsors disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. These activities aim to build stability and strengthen social cohesion and resilience to violent extremism. However, respondents to a PREVEX survey noted that most EU-sponsored P/CVE initiatives at the local level are implemented by local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on conflict analysis, intercommunity dialogue, early-warning-signs recognition, and violent extremism and radicalization prevention. PREVEX data indicate difficulties in implementing comprehensive, participatory, and inclusive strategies, reveal a significant gap between intentions and actual implementation, and highlight the need for a more coordinated framework to achieve robust outcomes in strengthening resilience and creating nonoccurrence environments (Bøås et al. 2021).

By successfully projecting an image of stability, Niger has established itself as a key player in P/CVE in the region. This positioning enables Niger to secure a dominant role and reap various benefits. Despite this, the effectiveness of Niger's P/CVE policies, including the EU Military Partnership Mission, EUCAP Sahel Niger, and DDR programs, remains uncertain, particularly after the July 2023 coup d'état and the renegotiation of international partnerships with entities like the European Union. Nevertheless, before the coup, Niger had become a trusted and crucial partner for the EU in the Sahel.

Trajectories of P/CVE Extraversion in Tunisia: Playing on Imaginaries of Exceptionalism

Tunisia can be considered an emblematic case of extraversion, considering its extensive integration into P/CVE global and regional cooperation programs and its strategic position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Middle East. If we suppose that action in the name of anti-terrorism has been a constant under both Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's regimes, and often correlated with modernization measures or state control of the religious sphere (Mabrouk 2012), it is only after September 11 and with the onset of the WoT that a veritable transnationally linked counterterrorist agenda took hold and was brought to the forefront of politics (Simoncini 2024).

For Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, the global emergence of a counterterrorist agenda represented an opportunity to tighten even more the state's grip on the religious milieu and political Islamism (Lahlou and Fahmi 2020). In 2002, the attack on the synagogue on the southern Tunisian island of

Djerba served as a plea for the adoption of the 2003 anti-terrorist law: “Relating to the Support of International Efforts to Combat Terrorism and the Repression of Money Laundering.” This law aligned the Tunisian regime’s action with international efforts in the framework of the WoT. However, the international community, and Western partners in particular, reacted to the attacks with underestimation and reassurance in order to preserve foreign direct investment flows and the image of Djerba, and of Tunisia in general, as a popular tourist destination.

In the meantime, the repressive machine was strengthened internally, as the vast evidence of abuses committed under the 2003 law demonstrates. This two-pronged strategy of extraversion consists, on the one hand, of riding the wave of discourses of stability and responsibility to secure external political support and foreign capital, especially since the *infitah* of the 1980s, and on the other, of crafting disproportionate responses to violent extremism at home. Such a stance has characterized Tunisian leadership and ruling elites at least since Ben Ali’s era and has capitalized on long-standing exceptionalist (and Orientalist) views of Tunisia—which in turn feeds on rhetoric of modernization—as the “good student” (*le bon élève*) well placed in the path of development and bulwark in the fight against transnational crime and terrorism (Hibou 2006; see also Camau 2018 and Geisser and Allal 2018). On the P/CVE front, this trend is exacerbated, especially in the way certain internationally fueled discourses of effectiveness and efficacy are mobilized to expand a P/CVE regulatory infrastructure while adapting it to international standards.

The aftermath of 2011 has meant, besides undeniable elements of change more broadly, the rapid intensification of funds, tools, and channels of cooperation in Tunisia on all fronts, particularly that of security.

If we were to suppose that the 2003 anti-terrorist law was ostensibly entrenched in stability measures and reactive state-led responses, the 2015 Organic Law No. 26 (as amended in 2019) “Dealing with Combating Terrorism and Preventing Money-Laundering” maintains this dimension while adding a more markedly preventive and preemptive one and expanding the incrimination potential over terrorist intents and related money-laundering activities (Bras 2016). The law comes after a period of intense political crisis caused by, among other things, the 2013 series of political assassinations, for which the radical Islamist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) has been accused of masterminding. It was immediately adopted after the Bardo Museum and Sousse attacks (perpetuated, respectively, in March and June 2015). Concurrently, the issue of Tunisian returning fighters (*al-‘ā'idūna*) emerged vigorously, especially after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the increase in return mobility.

In 2016, in the aftermath of the ISIS attacks on Ben Guerdane, the *Nidā' Tūnus*-led Tunisian government announced the adoption of a

“National Strategy for Countering Extremism and Terrorism,” which was the result of a top-down process directly supervised by the president-led Conseil de Sécurité Nationale in close collaboration with international partners and donors (Santini and Cimini 2019). The strategy claims to advance a multidimensional approach built around four main axes: prevention, protection, pursuit, and response. The same axes are to be found in the European counterterrorism strategy of 2005 and in some national strategies of member countries with a history of countering violent extremism, such as Spain. It is not merely a matter of legal and institutional isomorphism. Still, it calls into question the will of the Tunisian ruling elites to develop their national strategy while adapting it to transnational models, languages, and paradigms of action.

Likewise, the constant mobilization of “gray literature” terminology in the security and defense domains (such as that of the Livres Blancs) points to the same trend of appropriating the technical jargon proper to keep cooperation channels open. These are not rhetorical efforts but have heavy practical and political implications. The imaginary and image projection of Tunisia transnationally has a central role in the production of politics and its relation to the practices of material culture (Schouten 2012 quoting Bayart). When we consider concrete extroverted practices, we see that pledged state-led efforts in preventing violent extremism (PVE) are completely focused on law-based, intelligence-led preemptive actions and freezing financial assets. They conform to transnational security cooperation agendas and do not engage with the more comprehensive civil-led actions that tackle the causes of radicalization. Civil-led prevention efforts that include provisions for education, awareness raising, enhancement of social cohesion, and mitigation in marginalized contexts or prisons are, in practice, thwarted by state-responsive or preemptive action.¹

Many across the spectrum of academia and practitioners believe that top-down counterterrorism and “securitarian” approaches should leave more room for civil society-led PVE action.² The point is that even bottom-up processes are subject in one way or another to the brokerage of state institutions and the Ministry of Interior (MoI) at the forefront. The most striking example are the community policing programs implemented by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) enjoying the support of a range of external donors. These programs are inspired by so-called human security and social cohesion paradigms and, as such, intersect with P/CVE scopes. They have benefited the MoI as a fruitful channel for upgrading and reequipping local police infrastructure, while their core objectives of comprehensive violence prevention, including both institutional and extremist violence as well as violence against women, are widely considered as failed ones—and yet boasted as successful by the Tunisian security institutions and the donors’ community alike.

Extraversion strategies depend on the fabrication of images for external consumption (Gallagher 2015), projections of something false that fits external racially biased and xenophobic preconceptions about the threats coming from Africa and Islam majoritarian contexts. The relative but palpable general decline of jihadi political violence across Tunisia and the wider North Africa and Sahel region has not, indeed, been followed by a scaling down of the security response action (ICG 2021). Neither has the alarm over returning fighters cooled down despite the lack of substantive recurrence of radicalization and extremist violence among them (Lounnas and Ayari 2023). Capitalizing on this “threat-based extraversion” (Pastore and Roman 2020) and increasingly stretching it to migration policies, successive Tunisia ruling elites have secured constant support for the state, particularly for coercive state institutions.

The MoI, in particular, has been successful in its bargaining over specific programs and policies, and has done so not even covertly. The EU-sponsored security sector reform (SSR) program (EU PARSS) is a case in point: Pillar 2 (border control enforcement) and especially Pillar 3 (improving intelligence on counterterrorism and “in the field of financing new forms of crime and money laundering”) have made some progress, according to their promoters, while more normative-driven components of the program (Pillar 1: reform and accountability) are primarily considered deadlocked. These types of interventions based on professionalization-as-reform logic seem purposely neglectful of the historically established intelligence system that became extremely professional under Ben Ali and that have since colonial times ensured the survival of the regimes that have followed (Safi 2020).

The stretch of P/CVE agendas to other crime domains (often called the crime-terror nexus) considerably expands this system’s pervasiveness. A trend made hypervisible by the opening of new cooperation channels, especially in the form of law enforcement cooperation (including with EU law enforcement agencies such as CEPOL and EUROPOL), is increasingly established as a precondition for obtaining funding and material support.³ The progressive entrenchment of the Tunisian security apparatus in transnational P/CVE agendas has been a constant in the governments of the post-2011 phase. So-called troika governments, including the then majoritarian political force Ennahda, tried to prove to their constituencies that they had the credentials to manage security challenges in a desperate quest to break away from allegations of “culpable benevolence towards radical Islamism” (Bras 2016, 14). The “technocratic” government of Mehdi Jomaa (2014–2015) and successive Nidā’ Tūnus-led ones (that of Habib Essid, 2015–2016, and Youssef Chahed, 2016–2020) placed an even higher priority on P/CVE cooperation. Beyond the extraversion effects visible in the negotiation of regulations and policies, therefore, and within a so-called legal

framework of action, concrete extralegal measures illustrate the link with transnational practices and rationales and their repressive abuse, for example, profiling measures (*fichage*), and in particular the extensive and indiscriminate use of the S17 fiche as a mobility ban for all suspected terrorists. Equally emblematic is the extensive recourse to attacking the *takfiri*, that is, those who allegedly use accusations of unbelief (*takfir*) to label and politically isolate entire environments that are depicted as inherently violent—a stance that has been praised as an effective prevention model in international cooperation settings (see, for instance, documents put out by EuroMed Justice in 2018 [Badar et al. 2018]).

The current political conjuncture, which started with President Kais Saied's July 25, 2021, self-coup, has further made hypervisible the distortions of anti-terrorist discourses and regulations. Their tendency to extraversion and political (ab)use to target opponents designated as “saboteurs of the national security order” is evidenced by the wave of arrests ordered by the anti-terrorist security pole.⁴

State Violence (Un)disguised: The Syrian Regime's Appropriation of Counterterrorism and P/CVE Discourses

Syria is a peculiar case study that illustrates the web of contradictions inherent in the weaponization of countering extremism and counterterrorism. Ruled by the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad, the country has suffered from a lack of civil liberties and suppression of genuine political opposition. Like Tunisia, it witnessed a wave of mobilizations in 2011, albeit with a different trajectory: heavy repression on behalf of the state apparatus ensued, which gave way to an escalation of violence and full-fledged armed conflict—with the intervention of external actors.

Historically speaking, Syria's relations with Western countries have been strained. As early as 1979, the United States designated Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism (US Department of State 2019). Relations between Syria and the EU have ebbed and flowed, with attempts to enhance political dialogue (EEAS 2014). Still, after 2011, following massive use of violence and human rights violations, Assad's Syria became a pariah in the international community—at least until recently. In contrast, the Syrian regime has typically relied on its alliance with Russia, which in September 2015 militarily intervened to support Assad.

In this case, a state that has characteristically projected an “anti-Western” image has reappropriated West-driven WoT frames in its image-building domestically and vis-à-vis external powers (Lee 2024). As noted by Calculli (2016, 230), the WoT embodies a “disfigured form of just war the-

ory,” whereby in the name of (competing) “wars on terror” different states pursue even opposite agendas. Another paradoxical effect of the WoT logic is that—despite nominal declarations—Western countries, including EU countries, became captive of a “terror-centered understanding of Syria” that has skewed their policies (Orsini 2016). Analysis of selected state-linked media releases shows that, after 2011, the Syrian regime has increasingly sought to portray itself as a bulwark against terrorism, domestically and externally—while it is part and parcel of the cycle of political violence and has instrumentally deployed the labels of “terrorism” and “extremism.”⁵

The “centrality of violence” has been a hallmark of the Assad family’s rule in Syria (Ismail 2018, 131), with both Hafez al-Assad (who came to power in 1971) and his son, Bashar (president since 2000). The Syrian regime has always had a convoluted relationship with religious movement(s), with oscillations and changes over time (cf. Khatib 2011). It had frequently agitated the specters of Islamism, Wahhabism, and external plots, even long before the WoT was launched—most notably, when it brutally crushed an Islamist insurgency in the late 1970s and early 1980s that culminated in the massacre of Hama. The 2011 popular uprising affected how Assad manipulated the country’s image externally and domestically. After the rebellion, the regime capitalized on the rise of the self-styled Islamic State to cast itself as a guarantor of stability in the face of terrorism and to delegitimize the widespread opposition. The label of “extremism” was weaponized domestically as well: by equating dissent with supposed extremism and terrorism, the Assad regime sought to justify the state’s use of brutal force.

Most notably, a counterterrorism law was approved in June 2012, de facto replacing the state of emergency lifted in 2011. In the same year, a law establishing a Counterterrorism Court and a further decree on terrorism were introduced. The June 2012 law’s definition of terrorism was so broad that peaceful dissent and activism related to human rights could be very easily framed as terrorism (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2019). Egregious violations of human rights, such as arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and death sentences, took place in this framework. As the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (2015) noted, the Counterterrorism Court served as “a tool for war crimes.” In parallel, after 2011, the regime increasingly resorted to religious discourse to legitimize its authority and chastise political dissent (Aldoughli 2020). It sought to exert complete and direct control over the religious sphere (Pierret and Alrefaai 2021). Its novel discourse “strongly blurred the distinction between the state and religion” (Aldoughli 2021, 17), conflating patriotism and supposedly correct religious belief (Aldoughli 2020) and framing dissidents as an existential threat to the nation—also in religious terms, as bearers of a “wrong” form of Islam.

Although in the literature, P/CVE practices and discourses are occasionally presented as an alternative to violent and military practices, according to some authors, they may often go hand in hand (Heydemann 2014, 2), as the very P/CVE practices are deeply embedded in the WoT logic. In the case of Assad's Syria, proximity and continuity exist between state violence, what the state labels as "counterterrorism," and initiatives adopting typical P/CVE language. As for the latter, three examples are worth mentioning. First, the religious establishment developed what is known as "jurisprudence of the crisis" (*fiqh al-azma*)—an encyclopedia published by the Ministry of Awqaf ("religious endowments") in 2014 and aimed at correcting "false interpretations of Islam" (Aldoughli 2020, 17). Second, a "youth religious team" was created in 2016 under the auspices of the Minister of Awqaf (Pierret and Alrefaai 2021). This regime-sponsored voluntary team, headed by 'Abdallah al-Sayyed (son of the minister of Awqaf), was expected to mobilize a new generation of religious scholars—that, according to al-Sayyed, are trained and tasked with developing a "moderate religious discourse" in relation to extremism and fanaticism (Syrian Ministry of Awqaf, YouTube 2016). Third, the International Islamic Sham Center to Confront Terrorism and Extremism was launched in 2019. Affiliated with the Ministry of Awqaf and composed of different departments (including a national institute for the qualification of imams and preachers), it is described by state media as promoting "the method of the moderate Levant's religious scholars" (Syrian Arab News Agency 2019).

Despite the ostensibly polished rhetoric deployed to characterize such initiatives, there is more to it than meets the eye. For instance, the youth religious team served as a "patronage network that members join in search of political and security benefits," in a way similar to Assad's Baath Party (Pierret and Alrefaai 2021). The emphasis of such initiatives on concepts such as "moderation" (Kundnani 2009) or efforts to "reform religion" (Hafez 2021, 53–54) phrases that are very typically associated with P/CVE—is instrumental. Indeed, in the Syrian context and in authoritarian settings more generally, concepts such as religious moderation easily become synonymous with political subservience to incumbent authorities; P/CVE practices can become a cloak for different enterprises and formulas to mobilize support and seek internal legitimacy.

The instrumentalization of the counterterrorism narrative is also evident at the international level, as shown by interviews that Assad gave to Russian and Western media. Assad's discourse easily resonates with the Kremlin, its main sponsor at the international level, because it advocates prioritization of stability over chaos (Takvorian 2022). Assad's discourse depicts Putin's Russia as a protector of "stability in this region" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2013a). Assad's interview with Russian media in September 2015 (at the time of Moscow's intervention) embraces

a heavily security-centered discourse that calls for fighting and defeating terrorism beyond the so-called Islamic State and prioritizing security and military aspects at that stage of the war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2015b). In a mirrorlike fashion, the Russian chief of staff at the time (misleadingly) framed the military intervention in Syria as a form of support to Assad's forces facing the Islamic State (IS). Yet, the intervention was (and still is) aimed at propping up the Assad regime in the face of rebel forces—whom the Kremlin's narrative conflated with “terrorists,” reproducing Assad's discourse (Williams and Souza 2016, 23). In an international interview a few years later, at a time when some regional countries (e.g., Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates) started normalizing with the Syrian regime, Assad once again deployed the WoT narrative, praising the role of Russia and describing its military intervention as a “defense of the Russian people, because terrorism and its ideology do not know borders” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2019).

In contrast, the messages the regime addresses to countries outside its traditional fold of allies—especially Western countries—are more complex and ambivalent; nonetheless, the WoT rhetoric is still dominant. The interviews include ubiquitous mentions of the September 11 World Trade Center attacks (and references to attacks perpetrated by IS supporters in general, cf. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2015a) in an attempt to link them with the 2011 uprising. In an interview given in 2013—at a time when the regime used chemical weapons against civilians in Eastern Ghouta, and the United States was considering military action—Assad contended that a US strike “would constitute a support to al-Qa’ida and the same people who killed Americans on 9/11.” Exploiting fear of jihadism, Assad frequently makes use of the “authoritarian stability” trope, stating that US military action would have entailed “instability” and “spread of terrorism” in the region in a way that “would directly affect the West” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2013b). His narrative casts the stability of Syria as a prerequisite for the stability of the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2013a) and the stability of the region as essential for the stability of the entire world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2013b). Assad also tends to externalize the threat: he portrays internal dissent as the result of an externally directed plot backed by Western governments and their allies; nonetheless, he still urges the formation of an “international coalition to fight terrorism” and claims that he is open to collaboration with any country, provided that those countries “change their policies” and show genuine “willingness to fight terrorism” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates 2015b). On their side, Western governments have displayed plenty of ambiguities, too. Although they claim to oppose the Assad regime and call for political transition, they often seem to have fallen for this very terrorism-driven understanding of events

in Syria. As Martini (2020, 732) observes, international actors have struggled to respond adequately to Assad's weaponization of the WoT discourse precisely because it closely resonates with the "international conceptualization of terrorism."

Conclusion

The cases under scrutiny are paradigmatic examples of the limitations and contradictions of current approaches to P/CVE and of how different ruling elites weaponize and opportunistically resort to security-centered discourses and practices to accrue material and symbolic resources. All three cases under consideration ended up weaponizing the trope of the "extremist threat" (whether real, exaggerated, or manufactured) to attract external support at the economic, military, and diplomatic levels and legitimize themselves internally and externally as bulwarks against "extremism."

The case of Niger demonstrates how the country's political elite adeptly balanced their response to internal needs while concurrently shaping external perceptions and controlling the flow of external resources to advance their agendas. Niger's partnership with the EU in development and security has aligned strategies and bolstered its image as a reliable partner. This alignment has made Niamey a key EU ally in the Sahel, central to counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts, which enables the country to enhance its position and gain benefits. Interestingly enough, these extroverted dynamics also contributed to the military coup d'état in July 2023, the subsequent banishment of the former colonial ally, France, and the souring of relations with the European Union.

As for Tunisia, local elites' practices of extraversion have traditionally consisted of a double-cross strategy aimed at enhancing the external image of Tunisia as a stable, reliable partner, on one hand, while, on the other, capitalizing on the co-constructed perceptions and imaginaries of Africa and the Middle East as sources of transnational security threats. Like Niger and Syria, politics of extraversion are primarily played at the symbolic and discursive level, but in the Tunisian case, they considerably materialized through the (re)centralization of the state's coercive power, well epitomized by the role of the MoI and its use of anti-terrorist legal and extralegal dispositions.

Finally, Syria is a *sui generis* case compared to Niger and Tunisia, diverging in many respects. Despite its strained relations with Western countries, the Syrian ruling elite has frequently redeployed WoT discursive frames to delegitimize popular dissent and opposition to its rule. In his interviews with foreign media, Assad resorts to a double-pronged discourse: while condemning Western countries and their allies for their purported "interferences," he also tries to appeal to them by agitating the

specter of extremism. Both domestically and externally, he has sought to present himself as a bulwark against extremism; however, beneath the cloak of what is instrumentally branded as extremism lie extensive war crimes, repression, and human rights abuses perpetrated by the regime.

The case studies under consideration are not exceptions but indicative of more general patterns in the broader Mediterranean region and beyond. In countries across the globe, P/CVE and counterterrorism discourses and practices are increasingly becoming political tools in the hands of ruling elites to be exploited to attract external support and legitimize their positions. The weaponization of the P/CVE discourse leads state authorities to overlook violence, which perpetuates cycles of political violence. More in general, P/CVE approaches tend to be blinded by their (over)emphasis on nonstate violence, yet “asserting the security agenda of wealthy nations ahead of local priorities is likely to end badly,” as noted by Attree (2017).

In line with previous PREVEX findings, our analysis also highlights how the promotion of EU values in Muslim countries clashes with the harsh realities of autocratic despotic regimes and has led the EU to adopt a “principled pragmatism” approach (Ben-Nun and Engel 2022b). Consequently, efforts to prevent violent extremism have focused more on security cooperation with authoritarian governments rather than on addressing the broader societal factors that contribute to extremism (Ben-Nun and Engel 2022b). The EU’s struggle to bridge the cultural gap has resulted in a lowest common denominator approach that translates into partial measures aligned with principled pragmatism on the EU side and an extroverted approach from Tunisian, Nigerian, and Syrian elites.

PREVEX findings show that more attention should be devoted to centering local contexts—shifting from security-centered top-down approaches to localized participatory engagements that foster community trust-building mechanisms. Second, efforts should be made to bridge the intention-implementation gap by providing practical tools, expertise, and resources to effectively translate political prioritization into action while also developing clear definitions and policy templates that guide the implementation of P/CVE strategies—and abandoning the WoT legacies. Third, critical assessment of external interventions should be improved: scrutinizing the impacts of external interventions, particularly in authoritarian contexts, can help avoid inadvertently supporting oppressive regimes. Finally, it is essential to ensure that P/CVE efforts prioritize human rights, the rule of law, and inclusive governance.

Notes

1. Interviews with P/CVE practitioners in Tunis, March 2022–December 2023.

2. Ibid.

3. Interview with international cooperation representatives from the Ministry of Interior, Tunis, October 2022.

4. Kais Saied speech, a video from the presidency's official Facebook page, published in February 2023: <https://www.facebook.com/KaisSaiedTN/>.

5. For an in-depth study of how Assad has gradually embraced the WoT rhetoric over the last two decades, see Lee 2024.