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prevex
PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Preventing violent extremism, the Middle East

D7.1 Policy brief summarising the EU and other stakeholder's prevention strategy towards violent extremism in the region, Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

The EU-Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Preventive Violent Extremism (PvE) co-operation is wide-ranging, and has been since a formalized partnership between the EU and MENA countries was outlined in the 1995 Barcelona Declaration. It has nevertheless received added attention following numerous terrorist attacks within the EU during the last decade; and European foreign fighters have been linked to the attacks in Paris in 2015; in Brussels, Berlin, and Nice in 2016; and in Manchester, London, and Barcelona in 2017.

Although the Islamic State (IS) has lost its foothold in Syria and Iraq, it is far from defeated and its presence persists throughout the region. The same applies to other significant Salafi jihadi groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Hurras al-Din in Syria. Meanwhile, there are concerns over future spill-over effects to Jordan and Lebanon, which are both struggling with the influx of Syrian refugees and the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Iraqi Shiite militias have not just developed into powerbrokers in the Iraqi political system but into the government itself through their political alliances, members of parliament, and government officials.

Violent extremism is a real and serious threat in the Middle East, and any successful PvE approach relies on the right balance between soft and hard measures. The PvE strategies of the EU therefore matter – as do the PvE efforts of its key partners – not merely to avoid a resumption of prior conflict levels in the region and the resurgence of extremist actors such as IS, but also because PvE is a long-term struggle to eliminate the root causes of radicalization. The EU, as a non-military power, is thus facing the dilemma of having to rely on, and outsource hard PvE measures to, increasingly repressive and divisive MENA regimes whose approach may undermine the long-term prevention efforts of the EU. The EU is itself aware of this dilemma, and one of the aims of this policy brief is hence to assess this PvE balance – and whether the current EU-MENA PvE co-operation is effective, counterproductive, or simply superfluous.

This policy brief maps and analyses the PvE strategies of the EU, its funding programmes, and its collaborative projects with local states and actors in the region in order to prevent violent extremism in the Middle East. The policy brief also assesses the national PvE strategies of Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to see whether these are consistent with, or contradictory to, the measures taken by the EU. These six countries

were chosen as they illustrate how the EU's PvE approach in the region varies according to geography, how they are affected by the refugee crisis following the Syrian civil-war, and their different levels of authoritarianism.

The following analysis is the result of an international research collaboration with researchers from Sciences Po (Paris), the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (Oslo), the European University Institute (Florence), and the Middle East Research Institute (Erbil). It is based on interviews with EU representatives from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission, in addition to interviews with the EU's implementing partners on the ground in the Middle East. These interviews are combined with desk reviews and fieldwork in each of the MENA countries – either for this research project or for prior ones. Finally, this policy brief assesses the EU PvE funding projects, their point of focus, and their level of funding. All numbers presented in this policy brief are collected from the EU funded project CT-MORSE.[i]

This policy brief consists of four parts. It commences by briefly providing an overview of the EU's PvE approaches in the Middle East for the last decade. It then proceeds to analysing the PvE approaches of key partners of the EU before it compares their policies and approaches to preventing violent extremism. The last section provides several policy recommendations for the EU's future PvE strategy.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EU'S PvE APPROACHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

It is difficult to outline one method or one point of focus when analysing the EU's PvE approach in the Middle East, as it ranges from engaging youth leaders to securing airports and borders; from training Jordanian law enforcement and stifling the financing of terrorist organizations to rehabilitating children born in, or recruited to, IS in Iraq; and from producing counter narratives and improving strategic communication to the strengthening of Sunni religious institutions' capabilities. These are all organized while stressing the importance of human rights and democracy in dialogue with local authorities, and with regional experts dispatched from the EU to work on the ground providing more detailed council and policy recommendations.

The various approaches are to some extent determined by what is deemed possible, feasible, and most urgent in the eyes of EU policymakers and their key partners in the region. While the EU's PvE co-ordination with Lebanese and Jordanian partners is described as cordial, there is not much co-operation with Egypt because the two do not have the same view on violent extremism; the Egyptian regime's primary concern is stifling its domestic opposition, mainly

the Muslim Brotherhood.[ii] Another EEAS representative noted that the EU mainly co-operates with Saudi security apparatus in regards to PvE because Saudi civil society is weak due to the regime's repression.[iii] Finally, the EU's PvE funding projects in Syria mainly focus on rehabilitation, children and youth, education, and socio-economic aid in the absence of key partners to co-operate with on the ground; this is because the EU has implemented sanctions against the Syrian regime and does not co-operate with the Kurdish self-administration as they seek to divide Syrian territories.[iv] To summarize, the EU can only do what the main power players in the region allow it to do.

Similarly, the EU does not offer any specific working definition of terrorism or violent extremism in the Middle East in any of its counter-terrorism (CT) strategies or council conclusions from November 2005 to February 2020 – what violent extremism is and is not; or which groups it includes and excludes. Given the events and groups mentioned in its CT documents, it is nevertheless clear that the EU mainly refers to Sunni militancy in general and groups affiliated with al-Qaida and the IS in particular. There is presumably an avoidance of clearly defined terms as the EU member states themselves do not agree on a definition or a PvE approach, and because clarity may alienate key partners in the Middle East who have their own politicized definitions of violent extremism in order to delegitimize domestic opposition or to increase regional influence.

The seemingly multifaceted PvE approach of the EU is reflected in its emphasis on the range of conditions causing radicalization in the MENA region: from weak democracy and authoritarian rule; rapid and unhinged modernization; or the lack of social mobility, educational opportunities, or political prospects. As its Council Conclusion of June 2020 notes: 'Democracy, rule of law and good governance are essential in fostering positive narratives and effective and non-violent means for addressing various political, social and other grievances.'[v]

Despite the emphasis on democracy and human rights, critics of the EU's PvE approach in the Middle East nevertheless suggest that its normative promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law has been gradually replaced by a securitization-centred co-operation with key partners in the Middle East – a development accelerated by the terrorist attacks by the Islamic State in 2015. Allegedly, while EU representatives have traditionally emphasized 'European' values as a bulwark against terrorism, this is not reflected in its priorities on the ground; and while the European Neighbourhood Policy stresses a 'More for More' principle, through which democratic reforms equal more aid, this is seldom the case in practice.

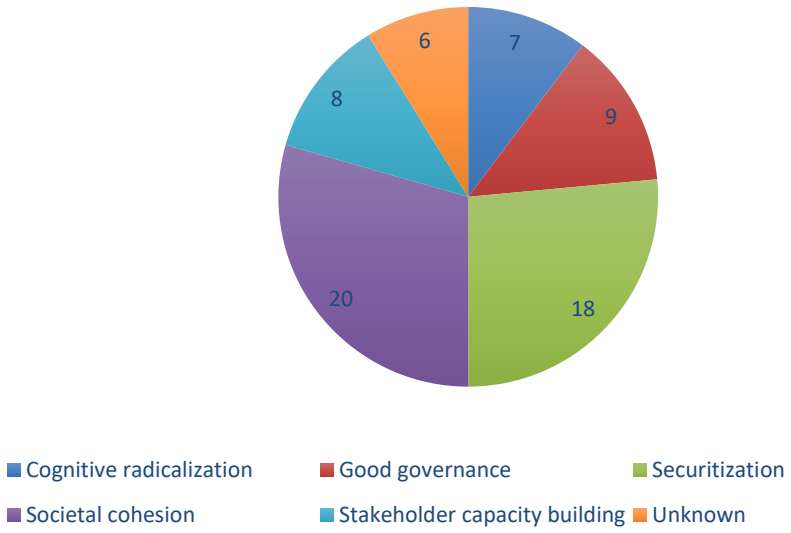
Feeling good or feeling safe? The securitization efforts of the EU

The focus on securitization is evident when analysing the EU's PvE funding projects in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia from 1 September 2014, until November 2023. We categorize these projects as either 'securitization' (law enforcement co-operation and data exchange, combating financing of terrorism, border control, etc.); 'cognitive radicalization' (promoting moderate voices, fighting hate speech, etc.); 'good governance' (instilling liberal values and institutions against violent extremism with a focus on democracy rather than stability); 'societal cohesion' (opportunities, conflict resolution, inter-religious dialogue, youth empowerment, etc.), or 'stakeholder capacity building' (PvE training workshops for EU or key partner stakeholders, information gathering, co-ordination enhancement etc.).

The majority of EU PvE funding projects focus on societal cohesion and securitization, as illustrated by Figure 1. PvE funding projects that stress democracy promotion, liberal values,

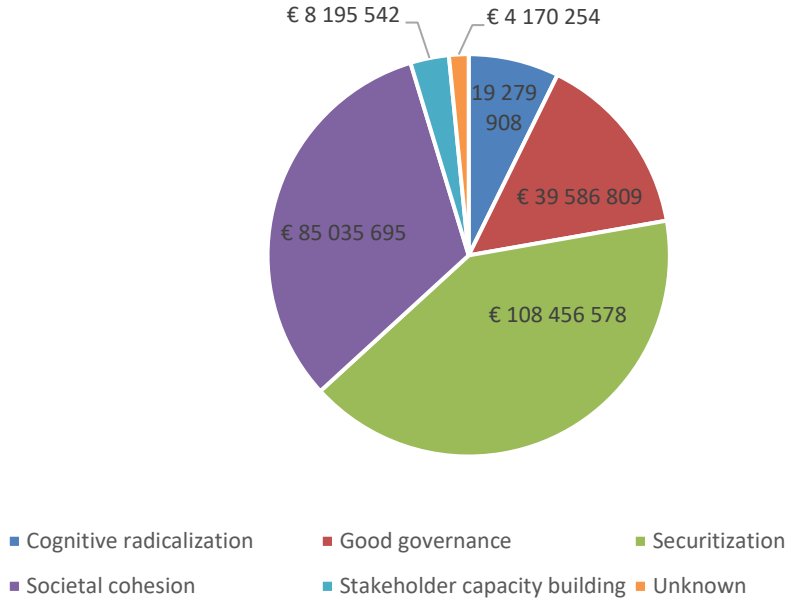
and human rights in the Middle East, on the other hand, constitute no more than approximately one tenth of overall projects, despite the insistence on its importance in CT documents of the EU.

Figure 1: Number of EU PvE funding projects in Middle East by focus category



The securitization focus of the EU's PvE approach is further accentuated when assessing the funding for each category, as illustrated by Figure 2. While a greater number of EU funding projects work with societal cohesion through youth empowerment and inter-religious dialogue, securitization efforts nevertheless receives the most funding – both in relative and absolute terms.

Figure 2: Funding to EU PvE projects in Middle East by focus category



The nature of these securitization efforts varies. The more conventional securitization funding programmes of the EU includes securing infrastructure such as the Rafic Hariri Airport in Beirut and enhance border management such as the Jordanian-Iraqi one. The EU also funds the training of local law enforcement and facilitates a knowledge transfer between MENA countries and EU member states. The implementing partner European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), for example, has overseen the training of Jordanian intelligence officers in the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), police officers, and gendarmerie on the ground, in addition to the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISAF), the Lebanese army (LAF), and the Lebanese General- and State Security Directorates.

Other securitization efforts are less orthodox, although constituting one cog in the overall EU PvE machine. The EU PvE funding project 'Regional Strategic Dialogue – Security Challenges and Solutions', for example, essentially aims to develop new ideas for – and increase and enhance – defence co-operation and dialogue between Israel, the Palestinian National Authority (PA), Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia – not just against groups affiliated with, or inspired by, al-Qaida and the Islamic State, but also against the regional influence of Iran and its proxies.[vi] In other words, the EU attempts to prevent violent extremism by, first, enhancing the internal security of, and co-operation between, authoritarian states in the region. Second, the EU is, in practice, funding one side in a regional cold war.

The EU has thus moved towards a 'security first' centred PvE approach in the Middle East in the last decade and is correspondingly declining as a 'normative' power focusing on spreading and strengthening human rights, good governance, and democracy. We are thus currently witnessing a gradual transition towards an increasingly realist-oriented security paradigm undermining other concerns in the region. This is not particularly controversial as we are witnessing the same EU policy development in the Sahel.[vii] This conclusion is not merely based on which projects the EU chooses to fund and prioritize, but also on the fact that the line between securitization and societal cohesion is being blurred, and social projects are now less premised on spreading human rights and democratic thinking as a goal in itself. That is, awareness of human rights or the strengthening of democratic practices are not facilitated in local communities because it creates better societies, but because it stops violent extremism. As one EEAS representative complained: 'Before, we used to build schools for the sake of building schools – because it was a humanitarian project. Now we do it to prevent violent extremism instead. Before, we used to train children for the sake of training children, because it was a humanitarian project, but now we do it to prevent violent extremism. The term violent extremism has been employed to securitize everything that we are doing.'[viii]

There are several conceivable causes for the securitization shift and acceleration of the EU in the Middle East. First, one should not underestimate the impact and trauma of the terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and 2016, and the urgency felt. Indeed, the EU's narrative seemingly shifted following the terrorist attacks in 2015 with a greater stress on securitization, as illustrated by its Global Strategy of 2016 and its Council Conclusions on EU External Action and PvE efforts published in 2020. Second, the EU must continually strike a balance between co-operating with authoritarian MENA partners and applying pressure for reforms to be implemented. Because the EU believes it has little or no leverage, securitization efforts are prioritized due to its key partners' lack of interest in democracy promotion, strengthening of civil society, or good governance. Securitization efforts, on the other hand, is perceived by key partners in the Middle East to be in their interests – both because it does not threaten the

positions of key stakeholders and because securitization can be used to stifle bothersome domestic opposition. Third, border management, securing airports, and training the intelligence services and law enforcement of local partners give immediate results, while it is far more difficult to measure the short- and mid-term effects of programmes aimed at good governance and societal cohesion. This is not to ignore the need for security sector reforms in certain countries. Lebanon, for example, has suffered from the unclear border demarcations between it and Syria, and the Lebanese army has been underequipped compared to Hezbollah.

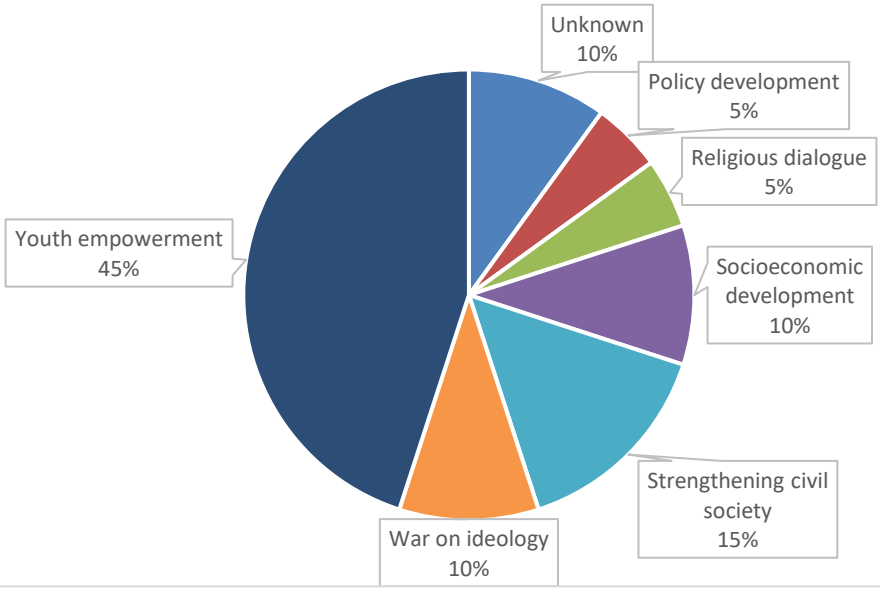
Essentially, spreading normative values such as human rights makes Europeans feel good, but securitization and instruments of control makes them feel *safe*.

Grooming future leaders of divided societies: The societal cohesion efforts of the EU.

A significant share of the EU's PvE programmes focus on societal cohesion (see Figure 1). The majority of these projects do so through youth empowerment in the Middle East. While some of these programmes work with vulnerable populations, others work on grooming future politicians, civil society leaders, activists, or entrepreneurs through debate clubs, leadership seminars, or facilitating networking opportunities.

Three EU funding projects illustrate the diversity of societal cohesion projects. 'Young Mediterranean Voices', for example, attempts to empower youth through debate hubs, through which youths and young adults in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt are trained to debate each other with representatives from local authorities present. While the debates aim to create a sense of achievement, the programme also attempts to build bridges between youth and policymakers. 'Empowering Youth for Positive Change', on the other hand, is elitist by nature as youths are recruited to the One Young World summit, also nicknamed the 'Davos for Youth'. There, youths present their ideas and build supporting networks to implement them, and the project aims to coach future politicians, leaders, and activists. By employing these youths as peace ambassadors, it is hoped they will prevent radicalization through their efforts in their local communities. Last, 'Engaging Youth for Human Rights and Societal Cohesion', implemented by Generations for Peace, does not focus so much on grooming future leaders and facilitating entrepreneurship, but rather creating an understanding of human rights in twenty vulnerable communities in Lebanon in which Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees, and Lebanese citizen live together.

Figure 3: Categories of societal cohesion programmes as part of the EU's PvE funding projects



While several of the societal cohesion efforts and youth empowerment projects have a personal impact for the youth participating in these programmes, it is uncertain to what degree the participants constitute a cross-section of their societies' youth populations. A number of the implementing organizations acknowledged that a certain level of social capital, education, and language skill was required to be recruited and participate in their funding programmes. The question is thus, first, if those most at risk of being radicalized are those actually being targeted by the EU's projects; and, second, whether some EU projects groom the future leaders of societies with persisting social, economic, and political division – divisions which may perpetuate waves of violence. Economic class should thus be given some attention. As described by one implementing partner: 'I cannot tell people to learn about religious tolerance and organize an awareness session, while they are hungry. It does not work! They should be fed … How can I ask them to come to an awareness session [when they are hungry]?'[ix]

Last, blurring the line between securitization and societal cohesion projects creates both cognitive dissonance and practical concerns on the ground. Several implementing partners, for example, stated that they did not perceive their work to be related to PvE at all – although the EU listed their projects as such. One implementing partner remarked: 'We do not see this as a PvE programme, we do not see it as that. There is no evidence that our approach has any impact on preventing violent extremism. I suppose if you believe promoting critical thinking among some groups of young people have an impact, then it has some *indirect* effect'.[x] Several implementing partners also noted that they avoided mentioning PvE at all when describing their projects to the target population because it created suspicion and alienation, and made it unnecessarily difficult to create trust on the ground.[xi] Moreover, the geographical focus of the EU's PvE funding projects implies a view on violent extremism as synonymous with Sunni terrorism. Most societal cohesion projects in Lebanon, for example, are organized in localities with a Sunni majority, with the associated possibility of stigma against specific religious groupings.

To summarize, first, all implementing partners believed their projects benefitted local communities and created new opportunities for those involved in their activities. However, few of them believed their work could be categorized as a PvE project; some felt it was counterproductive to their efforts as it could alienate those they attempted to target. Second, the EU is currently employing a gradually security-centred approach in the Middle East with an additional focus on youth empowerment and societal cohesion. Only one tenth of its PvE funding projects focus on good governance, human rights, and democratic development and sustainability. This is an approach suitable for the regimes in the Middle East – Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – as we will see in the next section on their respective PvE approaches. Because these local key partners of the EU have little interest in giving up their privileges, most of them focus on repression and religious reform instead.

THE PvE STRATEGIES OF LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS

This section addresses the domestic PvE approaches of local stakeholders and key partners of the EU in the Middle East. It commences with Lebanon and Egypt, then proceeds to Iraq and Jordan, and ends with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Lebanon: Pinpointing a threat or stigmatizing a community?

Defining violent extremism in Lebanon's polarized security landscape is a daunting task. First, the country has eighteen different sects, and the main eight of them have their own political narratives and parties. Lebanon's conflicting political-sectarian parties hence propose contending definitions of terrorism, and do not hesitate to discredit their political enemies by throwing accusations of terrorism against them.[xii] Second, Lebanon's foremost Shiite political party and militia, Hezbollah, was behind several car bomb attacks targeting international forces in Lebanon in the 1980s. It is still defined as a terrorist group by the US, while its military wing was put on the EU's list of terrorist organizations in 2013. Yet, Hezbollah refuses to acknowledge Western definitions of terrorism, and relates jihadi violent extremism to regional states, Saudi Arabia in particular, while Lebanese Sunni secular politicians, on the other hand, point to the military history of Hezbollah, its extraconstitutional arsenal, and its repressive history in Syria.[xiii]

Given the politicization of the Lebanese terrorism and violent extremism debate, the adoption of a national PvE strategy in 2018 was an achievement. The policy document was the outcome of an eighteen-month national consultation process supported by the United Nations (UN). Although nothing in the document indicates that it focuses on Sunni jihadism, there are reasons to believe that the UN staff who worked on the file found it particularly challenging to outline a strategy without stigmatizing one community,[xiv] and the document consequently offers a wide definition of violent extremism.[xv]

Further, one may question to what extent these processes are locally owned.[xvi] The flagging of universal slogans like 'promoting good governance' in Lebanon's PvE strategy feels

awkward against the backdrop of large nation-wide popular protests against political mismanagement and corruption since 2019. More often than not, Lebanese government discourses supported by the international community have functioned as a substitute rather than actual steps towards decisive policy implementations. Still, Lebanese national PvE strategy is a platform around which international NGOs may organize projects through local stakeholders such as municipalities and religious leaders.

Tellingly, the cities where most Lebanese PvE work is currently focused – Tripoli, Saida, and Majdal Anjar – are all Sunni-majority cities, where Sunni jihadi groups have found a foothold.[xvii] Similarly, Lebanese counter-terrorism efforts on the ground have an exclusive focus on the violence committed by Sunni jihadists, while essentially ignoring that by Hezbollah. In fact, the Lebanese army has formed an alliance with the latter since 2005 and recognizes Hezbollah as the strongest Lebanese military player, with an armoury eclipsing that of the national army. Still, the Lebanese army has received EU support, which sees the army as a potential counterweight to Hezbollah.[xviii]

There is thus, first, a real risk of stigma, which could further alienate some Sunni youths who already express resentment vis-à-vis the state. Indeed, some youths have voiced the concern that framing Sunnis as Lebanon's only potential terrorist threat has limited their freedom of speech.[xix] Moreover, while the Sunni political establishment in general, and former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri in particular, has given strong support to the Lebanese army, some Sunni populists expressed that Sunni extremism was 'understandable' given the acts of the army.[xx] That said, many Sunni men of religion consider it important to be part of the ideological struggle against the Islamic State;[xxi] they call on the young generation to accept the idea of citizenship and a multi-confessional Lebanon.[xxii] Speaking in terms of national unity,[xxiii] for example, such voices build on a long history of Muslim-Christian dialogue in Lebanon, while also condemning racism against Syrian refugees.

Second, the EU has funded a number of PvE projects to avoid a spillover from the Syrian civil war into Lebanon, and the Lebanese government officially opted for neutrality with the commencement of conflict. Yet, with Hezbollah's engagement in Syria, this position quickly proved difficult to maintain. A segment of Lebanese Sunnis, for example, were effectively alienated when perceiving the Lebanese army to only arrest Sunni groups, leaving Hezbollah's gunmen free to fight in Syria. The situation further deteriorated in 2013, when the army fought several battles against Sunni jihadis *alongside* Hezbollah, first in the southern city of Saida and then along the Syrian-Lebanese border in the north and north-east.[xxiv]

Egypt: Violent repression and religious co-optation

Although Egypt has witnessed past waves of Islamist insurgency, the violence that followed the ousting of Mohammad Morsi in July 2013 is considered the deadliest and most complex insurgency so far in the country's modern history. With an unprecedented level of violence and diversity of groups, approximately 391 personnel from the security forces lost their lives from 1986 to 1999, while 700 members of the police and armed forces have been killed between 2013 and 2015 alone.[xxv] The non-state armed groups ranged from Islamic State-affiliated groups in northern Sinai and in mainland Egypt to al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as Jund al-Islam in the Western Desert and Ansar al-Islam in northern Sinai. There are in addition groups that emerged from, or were somehow inspired by, the Muslim Brotherhood such as Hasm and Liwa' al-Thawra.

In light of this wave, Egyptian authorities have prioritized security-centred interventions at the expense of preventive measures and passed a new terrorism law in 2014, which employed a wide definition of terrorism. In fact, the definition includes any group the authorities perceive to disrupt public order; threaten the safety, security, or interests of society; harm, frighten, or threaten individuals and their freedoms, rights, or security; or harms national unity. Human rights groups, such as The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, have criticized this definition, noting that it also encompasses peaceful political expressions, which are effectively criminalized.

Egyptian authorities blame current radicalization on deviant religious ideas that justify violence, while they downplay socio-economic and political factors. Indeed, pro-regime media quickly blame Egyptian religious institutions, and particularly al-Azhar, following each case of violence. Al-Azhar and its Grand Imam, for example, are often accused of doing little to confront extremist religious ideas, and the Egyptian regime has on different occasions stressed the importance of formulating a more public response against radical interpretations by religious bodies. In January 2015, the Egyptian president himself leaned on Al-Azhar to undertake what he called a 'religious revolution' to reform the institution's Islamic thought and correct the concepts it teaches.

Egyptian religious institutions have responded to the regime's accusation by engaging in different initiatives aimed at preventing violent extremism. The aforementioned al-Azhar, for example, created the Al-Azhar Observatory in 2015 to respond to what it perceived as erroneous and extremist religious interpretations, especially those promoting violence. The Observatory tracks and answers online statements by extremist groups, produces content in ten languages (including English, Arabic, Urdu, Swahili, Chinese, and Farsi), and its staff has expanded to approximately 100 employees since its foundation. The initiative has often been praised by international actors, including the UN and the EU. Gilles de Kerchove, the EU's counter-terrorism co-ordinator, for example, visited the Observatory in September 2019 and praised its role in confronting extremist ideologies while stressing the necessity of intensifying co-operation between the Observatory and relevant European authorities.

The Islamic advisory and justiciary body Dar al-Ifta, on the other hand, has launched the project 'Anatomy of the Extremist Mind', which included religious scholars from Dar al-Ifta, researchers specializing in Islamic movements, psychologist, sociologists, as well as former members of violent groups. Preparing a 'rehabilitation' guide for imprisoned militants, it clarifies what it perceives as terrorist types, the various stages of radicalization, and their turn to violence. The guide correspondingly identifies the associated social, economic, and political conditions for radicalization. The programme is thus similar to those targeting the militants of al-Jamaʿa al-Islamiyya in the 1990s, which contributed to de-escalating the violence at the time.

Another initiative is that of the Presidential Advisor for Religious Affairs, Sheikh Osama al-Azhari. Al-Azhari has organized preaching sessions for imprisoned Islamists (most of whom are members of the Muslim Brotherhood) with hopes that the prisoners would repent and reconsider their ideas. Although hundreds of Brotherhood members and sympathizers have signed so-called 'repentance acknowledgements', in which they denounce the doctrine of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is questionable whether these come in response to religious dialogue and genuine transformation, or if the acknowledgments are merely attempts to leave prison. These initiatives come in addition to the unofficial ones, which include prisoners from al-Jamaʿa al-Islamiyya entering into dialogue with Islamic State prisoners in order to refute their

deviating ideas. Although ostensibly similar to the official programmes in Egypt, these personal initiatives differ as they are less ambitious and do not aim to make prisoners denounce violent ideas themselves. Rather, they attempt to shake the violent convictions of Islamic State members or sympathizers, and to plant seeds of doubt about the correct path forward.

Because they have little interest in social, economic, or political conditions for radicalization and violence, Egyptian authorities prioritize a securitization-oriented policy combined with religious reform and co-optation. Consequently, while independent civil society voices, as well as those from the research community, have tried raising attention to the political and socio-economic factors contributing to violence in post-2013 Egypt, they have enjoyed little success and influence.

Iraq: Iraqi central securitization and Kurdish religious reform

Iraq has been plagued by numerous forms of violent extremism since 2003. This has undoubtedly complicated Iraqi domestic security and socio-political dynamics, as dozens of groups have emerged to violently resist the US occupation of Iraq, while others prioritize armed action against the perceived sectarian Shiite majority rule in Baghdad.[xxvi]

Successive Iraqi governments have nonetheless failed to develop a national policy that clearly defines violent extremism, its drivers, and how to prevent and counter it – and government officials and state institutions have reacted differently to the threat for the last seventeen years. From 2003 until the rise of the Islamic State in 2014, for example, Iraqi governments and political leaders frequently framed violent extremism as a purely religious or sectarian issue. From 2014, on the other hand, the successive Iraqi governments commenced addressing the root causes of violent extremism in speeches and public documents with the assistance and aid of the international community, such as the UN's Counter-Terrorism Committee offered assistance to develop a national PvE policy.[xxvii] Further, following the re-conquest of Islamic State territories in 2017, the Iraqi government seemingly acknowledged the vagueness of its PvE policies, and recognized the importance of respecting human rights and countering the narratives of extremist groups.

Yet, such PvE policies are yet to materialize fully on the ground, and instead of addressing Iraqi internal violence as structural socio-economic and political issues, Iraqi governments have instead adopted a narrow securitization-oriented definition of violent extremism while mainly viewing these groups through the lens of 'terrorism'.[xxviii] Consequently, while the vagueness with which violent extremism has been defined has caused deep internal divisions, Sunni Iraqis largely view the counter-terrorism laws and PvE efforts of the Shiite majority government as targeting their community.[xxix] Moreover, the Iraqi central government is currently overwhelmed by fiscal issues, popular protests, and domestic instability, and its priorities has correspondingly shifted away from preventing violent extremism and from key initiatives such as facilitating reconciliation reconstruction, youth employment, and the integration of families formerly affiliated with the Islamic State.

Like the Iraqi government in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has not adopted a clear definition or a regional policy on violent extremism, but instead tends to view it from a strictly religious perspective, particularly so with the ensuing threat from the Islamic State and the hundreds of young Kurds who attempted to join the group.

KRG officials have recognized that preventing violent extremism is a long-term strategy that requires a comprehensive approach – one that goes beyond the orthodox short-term securitization efforts.[xxx] In this context, and contrary to the central government in Baghdad, KRG has embarked on a PvE approach that largely focuses on religious and educational reform. The KRG's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, for example, pursued an approach to regulate and reform the field of religious education, and decided to establish a special institute for the training and mobilizations of imams along principles of coexistence and tolerance. Moreover, the KRG's Ministry of Education commenced reforming school curricula and added a new one in 2019 for primary schools focusing on tolerance, respect, and coexistence of ethno-religious identities. The latter programme was piloted to 200 primary schools across the Kurdistan region.

Yet, these measures of religious reform were not merely a response to the Islamic State, but also an attempt to nationalize Islam – aligning religion with Kurdish nationalist aspirations.[xxxi] Several PvE approaches have thus been introduced by the KRG to strengthen state control over religious discourse in general and Islamic ones in particular. A high-level conference on religious rhetoric was convened by former Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, for example, while centralized measures were implemented against several Salafi outlets. Examples include banning what they perceived as radical Salafi books, closing television and radio channels spreading radical Salafi or extremist discourses, while the centralized Friday sermons are now controlled by the KRG government.

To summarize, as Iraq is one of the MENA countries suffering the most from violent extremism – mainly from groups affiliated with the Islamic State – Iraq's central government has focused heavily on securitization efforts. While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of radicalization and the impact of socio-economic factors, this is yet to be seen effectively on the ground. Further, KRG has an additional focus on religious reform as a PvE approach. Yet, as with so many other key partners in the region, this effort is not solely focused on PvE, but also serves additional interests. In this case, religious reform is aligned with Kurdish nationalist aspirations.

Jordan: Securitization in fear of Syrian and Iraqi spillover

The salafi jihadi challenge in Jordan is currently twofold. The first challenge is the threat posed by radical jihadi groups within Jordan, as one estimates between 6,000–7,000 salafi jihadis are living in Jordan; and, second, the possible return of Jordanian foreign fighters who have fought for IS or al-Qaida affiliated groups in Syria, as 3,000–4,000 Jordanians left the country to join these groups in the period 2011–2015.
While aloofness has characterized the relationship between the Jordanian regime and the salafi jihadi networks for several decades, the co-ordinated suicide bombings in 2005 by al-Qaida in Iraq, which targeted three luxury hotels in Amman, constituted a turning point in how the salafi jihadi threat was perceived. Tightening domestic control and arresting people affiliated with the movement, the Jordanian regime also introduced its Anti-Terror Law no. 55 in 2006, which adopted a broad definition of terrorism and violent extremism. Human rights groups have protested against the law as it functions as a de facto pretext to stifle non-violent forms for protests in the country. The regime strategy to counter violent radicalization has also been criticized by Jordanian civil society groups for lacking transparency. Indeed, following the rise of IS in 2014, the anti-terror law was further amended and broadened so to

include the use of media or other publications that facilitated the commission and promotion of terrorist acts (article 3e).[xxxii]

The Jordanian regime's official definition of violent extremism and terrorism further ignores any socio-economic driver – including the failure of development projects; lack of social justice; or poverty, unemployment, and corruption. Essentially, the Jordanian regime defines violent extremism as primarily a security problem, with religious elements to it.

The Jordanians have adopted both formal and informal strategies to prevent violent extremism in general and the Salafi jihadi threat in particular. First, the regime formal approach relies on implementing the national strategy of preventing violent extremism, which includes countering terrorist ideology, building societal cohesion, and assisting law enforcement. On the religious level, the regime has strengthened the Ministry of Endowments' capabilities by increasing the number of preachers and imams under its control to ensure control over the religious sphere. Further, the Ministry of Endowments initiated a programme called the 'collective mosque project', which picked certain mosques in different areas as the site for Friday prayers to 'ensure the quality of Friday prayers', and to make sure that they are given by trusted and qualified imams. The regime has also sponsored a number of interreligious initiatives such as the 'Amman Message' and 'One Common Word' to highlight the perceived true nature of Islam, emphasizing that violent extremism is an enemy of all faiths.

Second, the regime has successfully initiated informal strategies such as employing hard line Salafi jihadi ideologues, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, to undermine the growing popularity of IS among Jordanian youth. Abu Qatada, for example, was acquitted by a State Security Court in June 2014, while al-Maqdisi was released in February 2015 after years in prison. Indeed, al-Maqdisi in particular was instrumental in condemning IS ideology online and through his writings, and his views led to a widening rift between al-Qaida's Syria affiliate and IS.

Critics from the civil society and the research community have, however, accused the overall Jordanian strategy of offering little understanding of the various factors causing violent radicalization and their complexity, in particular the socio-economic ones. The strategy has allegedly failed to ensure co-operation among local stakeholders (including the Ministry of Endowments, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ifta' Department) engaged in preventing violent radicalization. The civil society groups, on the other hand, have been active across Jordan addressing the causes of violent extremism – such as in Irbid, Karak, and Zarqa – by increasing the resilience of local communities against radicalization. One example is the youth programme 'Countering Radicalization and Enhancing the Culture of Tolerance', which was implemented by the al-Hayat Centre for Civil Society Development and funded by the US Embassy and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It essentially aims to build the capacity of religious and community leaders in fighting against violent extremism.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates: Fighting deviancy with discourse (and repression)

While the struggle against terrorism in the Arab world traditionally centred on repression, Saudi Arabia added a then-uncommon feature in the second half of the 2000s: the idea of rehabilitation. Saudi stakeholders created several rehabilitation complexes where 'radicalized' individuals would spend weeks or months before being declared safe for society. There were two main elements to these rehabilitation programmes: (1) religious courses, through which Saudi religious scholars employed state-sanctioned Salafism to counter jihadi views (mostly

insisting that jihad was not permissible without the acceptance of the ruler); (2) material benefits, which graduates of these programmes would receive from the state to acquire a house or to marry. Yet, although these programmes received significant foreign attention, their results are nonetheless questionable. Indeed, a number of those re-established al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2009 after fleeing to Yemen were graduates of these programmes.

Despite the initial recognition that material solutions also mattered, these programmes undoubtedly demonstrated a Saudi insistence on portraying jihadi terrorism as above all a religious problem. Other efforts developed at the same time went in a similar direction. The al-Sakina campaign, for example, was meant to hire religious university graduates who would engage jihadis on Islamist forums and use Salafi arguments to deter them from continuing on the jihadi path. Further, Saudi universities started theorizing their approach to fighting jihadi terrorism in the early 2010s by coining the concept of 'ideological security', which they presented as a new type of security approach, and the fight against 'deviant religious ideas' was portrayed as a key element of PvE – if only in addition to orthodox repression and securitization.

Religious reform and fighting perceived religious deviancy are a persisting hallmark of Saudi Arabia's PvE strategy, which endured after King Abdallah's death and King Salman's takeover in 2015. In 2017, for example, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman called for a 'return to moderate Islam' and the need to fight 'extremist ideas'. The 2014 definition of 'religious deviants' has, however, kept expanding, and Saudi Arabia has added the Muslim Brotherhood and all 'affiliated groups' to its list of terrorist organizations. Soon, all of Saudi Arabia's politicized Salafi clerics – also religious moderates who used their religious authority to call for political reform and democratization – were rounded up because of their alleged 'deviant religious ideas'. 'Moderate Islam' was hence essentially redefined as an Islam that supported the Saudi government in general and Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 in particular. Thus, Saudi Arabia's PvE approach gradually transformed into a government strategy to demonize and silence domestic opposition. Whether this opposition was constituted by jihadi militants or civil society activists was less important.

The PvE approach of the United Arab Emirates is comparable to that of Saudi Arabia. The only exception is that the former commenced its approach earlier. Since the late 2000s, the United Arab Emirates reframed the fight against terrorism as a fight against deviant religious ideas, and a number of organizations have been established by the authorities to promote its definition of 'moderate Islam'. The most prominent one is 'The Council of Muslim Elders' established in 2014, which represents a network of prestigious pro-regime religious scholars from different Arab countries, including the sheikh of the Egyptian al-Azhar. However, just as in Saudi Arabia, it is no doubt that 'moderate Islam' has become a device to silence government critics (also peaceful ones) by accusing them of being members of terrorist organizations.

In short, there are two main issues with the PvE approaches of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. First, by understanding jihadi terrorism as merely a problem of religious deviance, which can be solved by promoting 'moderate Islam', the two countries are effectively denying the political, social, and economic roots of jihadism. The relative success of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates – judging by the domestic containment of jihadism – thus owes more to their heavy-handed securitization with extensive repression, surveillance, and

control, rather than to the effectiveness of their PvE efforts. If jihadism is contained, it is certainly not within the EU normative framework of respect for democracy, human rights, and good governance.

Preventing violent extremism or democratic transitions?

The PvE approaches of the EU's key partners in the Middle East largely rely on repression and religious reform. Yet, none of the approaches have a strict focus on preventing violent extremism as they ignore the social, economic, and political causes of radicalization, and instead attempt to secure the power of the regimes. The definition of religious deviancy and violent extremism, for example, is so wide that it encompasses domestic opposition and bothersome voices – whether the Muslim Brotherhood or civil society groups. The securitization efforts, on the other hand, have to some extent contained the Salafi-jihadi threat, such as in Saudi Arabia, but it is possible it merely postpones violence, such as in Lebanon or in Iraq. Though alienation and frustration does not inevitably cause violence, Sunni communities are nonetheless alienated by the Lebanese army's co-operation with the Shiite militia Hezbollah and the one-sided targeting of Sunni communities. In Iraq, Sunni communities are alienated by a Shiite central government that is perceived as highly sectarian and as a threat to Iraqi Sunni communities.

CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND KEY PARTNERS' PvE APPROACHES

While the EU stresses the numerous pathways to, and the multifaceted nature of, violent extremism, this is only partly reflected in its PvE approaches in the Middle East – to the extent that the EU has implemented PvE projects addressing all causes, but unevenly in terms of focus and amount of funding. The EU's main focus is on securitization and societal cohesion. This multifaceted approach is not shared by local stakeholders in the Middle East, which mainly focus on a combination of securitization efforts and cognitive radicalization (religious reform). Almost all aforementioned key partners employ repression and religious reform to varying degrees as their favoured method to prevent violent extremism, and it is presumably the former of these two approaches that has contained jihadist violence in Saudi Arabia and in Iraq, while possibly exacerbating tensions in Egypt and in Lebanon.

We do not suggest that religious reform in the Middle East is negative in itself, but rather that the nature of EU programmes focusing on facilitating (Sunni) religious reform are quite different from that of local stakeholders – although both are carried out in the name of promoting moderation and countering radicalism. Indeed, the struggle against 'deviant' religious ideas and narratives has shown itself to demand few concessions in terms of good governance, human rights, or socio-economic improvement. Religious reform does thus not touch root causes of radicalization in the Middle East, and instead serves national projects of local key partners. It does so, on the one hand, by broadening the definition of so-called deviant ideas to encompass domestic opposition or regional opponents, such as in Saudi Arabia and in the United Arab Emirates. On the other hand, religious reform is also employed as a part of national projects, such as in Egypt and Jordan, where reforming the religious sphere equals enhanced state control of the religious market, or in Iraqi Kurdistan, where increased state control over ideological-religious literary or media production is evident. This

is not merely relevant for national campaigns of religious reform in the region, but also for certain EU projects themselves. One example is the EU-funded Hedaya Centre in Abu Dhabi, which works on deradicalization and countering violent extremism. While EU representatives acknowledged the efforts of Hedaya, some also admitted that the centre worked within the framework of an Emirati 'narrative' of Islam, which, as shown, is employed opportunistically to serve the Emirati regime.[xxxiii]

Second, as recognized by EU representatives, working with key partners on implementing religious reform is risky because the EU is not equipped to deal with ideological issues or theological interpretations. As one noted: 'Ideologies are tricky issues because … it is a risk of doing more harm than good. You could be promoting a version of Islamic tradition that suits the interests of one country, but which does not represent anyone else in the Islamic world … the EU must be careful'.[xxxiv]

There are few practical contradictions in EU and local stakeholder PvE policies in terms of securitization, as both parties deem it in their interests. Border management; capacity building of local law enforcement, intelligence units, and national armies; intelligence co-operation; and securitization of vital infrastructure is perceived, on the one hand, to prevent terrorist threats within Europe by securing stability and control in a volatile region. Local key partners, on the other hand, equally perceive stability to be in their interests, although for different reasons than the EU.

It is thus not particularly surprising when the EU's PvE approaches are deemed mostly positive in the Middle East, such as its crisis response in Iraq.[xxxv] As the EU's overall PvE approach, its policies in Iraq can be categorized as either hard or soft – from development and economic growth, social inclusion, and youth empowerment, to supporting Iraqi security reform and the strengthening of the Iraqi monopoly of violence exerted by the Baghdad government. This comes in addition to the efforts of EU member states, which independently handle foreign fighters and Islamic State-affiliated families currently in Iraqi detainment. There is no reason to believe that other stakeholders in the region – such as Egypt, Lebanon, or Saudi Arabia – differ in their assessment of the EU, as EU policies do not challenge their positions while they depend on its funding.

There are nonetheless two clear limitations in the securitization efforts of the EU in the Middle East. First, a one-sided PvE approach that unilaterally targets one group could possibly cause the alienation and resentment of local communities instead of facilitating dialogue and peacebuilding. This may be the case if certain groups such as marginalized Sunni youths feel themselves to be unjustly targeted by the government, by international NGOs, or by local authorities. This may happen when PvE policies are employed by local stakeholders to circumscribe and limit the democratic rights of Sunni communities. It may be the case that Sunni communities feel that they are treated unjustly compared to other confessional or ethnic groups in countries where definitions of violent extremism are highly politicized – whether in Lebanon where the Lebanese army has co-operated with the Shiite militia movement Hezbollah to crush Sunni insurgencies, or in Iraq where Sunni militants are alienated by a perceived sectarian Shiite central government.

Second, and most important, securitization as a PvE approach is a contradiction in terms as long as it guarantees the security and stability for local stakeholders and regimes in the Middle East. Certain European policymakers may have concluded that the stability of repressive

MENA regimes serves Europe better than a fragile democratic transition in the region. Yet, the stability of these regimes will presumably prolong the growth of violent extremism with the absence of good governance, democracy, human rights, and socio-economic mobility, which may aggravate contemporary challenges. The criminalization of Muslim Brotherhood activists in Egypt, for example, has caused a number of its youths to follow a salafi-jihadi doctrine after serving time with members of the Islamic State. One Egyptian newspaper simply called one of these prisons a 'governmental center to recruit members for IS'.[xxxvi] Indeed, it is only in Syria – where the EU has suspended all co-operation with the Syrian regime – that mainstream projects are implemented (in the north) without key partner interference and with a focus on rehabilitation, children and youth, education, and socio-economic aid. These PvE efforts are thus mainly focused on mental health and rehabilitation at the community level and co-ordinated through international NGOs, local civil society, or through tribal or religious leaders and communities.

This critical assessment does not intend to deny the great variety of EU funding programmes, projects, and initiatives to prevent violent extremism in the Middle East. Indeed, the EU has implemented programmes that work with Syrian children, strengthen youth empowerment in Egypt, facilitate media literacy in Jordan, and develop deprived urban areas in northern Lebanon. We do thus not suggest that these programmes are not important or that they should be ignored. Rather, the preceding assessment of the fundamental contradictions in the EU's PvE approach in the Middle East should be read as an acknowledgement of the difficulties with which the EU must navigate when it co-operates and negotiates with local stakeholders, key partners, and governments that essentially do neither share its normative values nor interest in relinquishing any of its powers and privileges. The dilemma of the EU is essentially to determine to what extent its security can rely on regimes causing popular discontent when attempting to prevent violent extremism.

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

- *The EU should reassess the level, and nature, of its funding to authoritarian or sectarian regimes and authorities in the Middle East as a part of its PvE approach.*

A number of EU representatives stress that the EU has no, or little, leverage when stressing the need for democratic reform, protecting human rights, and following the rule of law.[xxxvii] As one EU representative noted: 'If you go too far and you are too demanding, then [the MENA regimes] will just turn to other countries desiring influence in the region – such as China, Russia, or Turkey. These countries are excited to replace the European Union, so we can push them [the regimes], but we cannot break off the relationship'.[xxxviii]
However, despite the threat of seeking support from competing structural powers such as Russia or China, MENA regimes do depend on the economic aid they receive from the EU and the prospect of joining the European market. Moreover, MENA regimes depend heavily on the international legitimacy and normalization they receive from co-operating, dealing, and trading with the EU. The EU thus has far more leverage than many of its representatives believe, and it should reassess the level of funding these regimes receive and its nature. This assessment should be based on the potential risk of these regimes undermining the PvE

approaches of the EU in the region through the discontent of a population marginalized politically, economically, and socially. Second, the risk assessment should be based on the extent to which support for MENA regimes impacts European security as long as the EU and its member states are viewed as a facilitating partners and guarantors for these regimes. Although the EU has pursued a realist-oriented paradigm in its PvE approach, it still has significant normative power to make other states and international organizations follow its example.

- *The EU should re-strengthen its normative funding projects with a focus on democracy, good governance, and human rights in order to avoid alienating key populations in the Middle East.*

The EU should assess to what extent the framing of its normative projects as a PvE effort causes the alienation of target populations and key demographics. Although partners noted that local participants of their implementing projects enjoyed and benefitted from the EU's PvE funding projects, they avoided saying anything about PvE because it could alienate those involved. It is thus possible that abandoning the normative approach in favour of a realist-oriented securitization paradigm may cause more harm than good if the target population feels targeted as vulnerable to radicalization – while other religious or ethnic groups are not.

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