



Contributing
Authors
Cemil Kilinc
Sara Zeiger

Risks, Challenges and Future Research in the Middle East

About Hedayah

Hedayah is the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, established in Abu Dhabi through the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Hedayah was established to serve as the premier international institution for training and capacity building, dialogue and collaboration, and research and analysis to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations, in support of long-term, global efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.

Introduction

The contents of this brief are based on the discussions that occurred from 3-4 November at an expert workshop on Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism hosted by Hedayah in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The purpose of this 2-day expert roundtable was to bring together 20-25 researchers, policymakers and practitioners in a closed discussion of the current trends in CVE research. The goals at the meeting were to 1) address

This Research Brief is a quick-reference guide for researchers, practitioners and policymakers interested in learning more about the current research and future needs and gaps in the field of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in the Middle East. This report reflects the discussions of the participants at the expert workshop, and does not represent the opinion of Hedayah.

the current research outcomes in countering violent extremism; 2) determine the critical gaps in research on CVE; 3) identify the new and emerging threats of violent extremism; and 4) establish a recommended research agenda for Hedayah and CVE researchers in the coming 2 years.

In preparation for the meeting, Hedayah worked with Curtin University to map the existing CVE literature and assess the CVE research landscape across four themes: 1) social media and CVE, 2) education and CVE, 3) narratives of victims, survivors and formers for CVE, and 4) Disengagement and De-radicalization.¹ Meeting attendees utilized this literature review as a baseline for the discussions. Participants were also invited to prepare short research proposals prior to the meeting for review and discussion by other participants.

In addition to the discussions that occurred at the expert workshop on *Research Trends in Countering Violent Extremism*, this brief also draws from findings of the literature review conducted by Hedayah and Curtin University, the research proposals that were submitted by the participants, and independent research conducted by the authors.

¹For an electronic version of the mapping activity, please visit www.hedayah.ae.

Current Risks in the Middle East

Participants noted that one of the major risks in the Middle East is ongoing instabilities due to a lack of resolution to specific conflicts and the emergence of new ones. Of course, there is a lot of attention and focus on the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham (ISIS). However, at the same time, participants noted that there are historical examples from different parts of the world that can be examined for lessons relevant to the modern challenges of violent extremism, and research should not ignore the lessons of history.

Another main risk in the region is the large number of refugees. According to the participants, this is applicable in the context of individuals fleeing Syria and Iraq into Turkey, where there are currently more than 2.5 million refugees. However, there are also a significant number of refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, some of which have been established in those countries for a number of years. Past migration patterns to both Eastern and Western Europe can also be examined in order to better understand the current context of migration and refugees the Middle East. It was also noted that refugee-hosting countries have exhausted their resources and time towards dealing with the refugee population, and often need international cooperation and assistance before the problem gets bigger as another threat for the region.

Gaps and Needs

The participants identified several gaps and needs for future research in the region for the purposes of preventing and countering violent extremism. The main gaps and needs are described in more detail below:

1. Evaluating the refugee population as a whole.

Some of the attendees suggested that before making the assumption that the refugee population is at-risk of radicalization and recruitment, the refugee population should first be assessed as a whole to develop and determine a baseline for comparison. More research is also needed on refugees that travel to another country and are successful, law-abiding members of society (success stories), and the process in different contexts that help to get them there.

2. Studying the role of traditional educational institutions.

Participants recommended that there should be further research on whether religious education plays a role in radicalization and recruitment into violent extremism. In addition, participants suggested that there should be more research into how religious education could be a strong tool in terms of building resilience for youth populations, drawing comparisons with for example, Indonesia, where religious education is sometimes a protective factor against radicalization and recruitment.

3. Investigating the appeal of ISIS.

While there is a large focus from many Western governments on the risk of foreign terrorist fighters joining the ranks of ISIS from outside the region, there is also a greater need to better understand the process of radicalization and recruitment of individuals joining ISIS from within the Middle East.

Challenges to Research in the Middle East

A number of challenges arise when conducting research in the region related to violent extremists and incarcerated violent extremists.

1. Access to data on conditions of radicalization and recruitment.

The main challenge to these regions in terms of research on CVE is related to a lack of access to datasets due to security risks in specific parts of the region where there is ongoing conflict. For this reason, it is important for researchers to develop relationships with local partners that have access to the populations without adding an unnecessary risk to their security situation. Participants also mentioned that there is a significant challenge in determining and identifying the populations that are most vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment, partially because of lack of access.

2. Collecting data and sharing results quickly.

In regions where the threats are changing quickly and new threats emerge, there is a greater need to collect and analyze data more efficiently and quickly. It was suggested that research studies in this region should focus not only on longitudinal and historical studies, but also identify short-term projects that can produce quick results and suggestions in a fast-paced environment to prevent violent extremism.

Ongoing and Future Programs and Projects

Participants at the Expert Workshop debated a number of research programs and projects that were both ongoing and proposed. One potential follow-up project is listed below. The below descriptions are paraphrased based on project proposals submitted to Hedayah, so please respect the intellectual property rights of those conducting the research. If you would like more information, or if you have a partnership or funding opportunity available, please contact info@hedayah.ae.

1. Why is ISIS More Brutal? (Proposed)

Research Question: Why do individuals join and then decide to leave violent extremist organizations like ISIS?

Description: Designing and implementing effective counter radicalization and de-radicalization programs necessitates a good understanding for why individuals not only join but also decide to leave violent extremist organizations like ISIS voluntarily. While several studies have improved our understanding for the key elements of, and how such programs work more broadly, the factors that lead individuals to join ISIS in the first place needs more research and better understanding. A study that focuses on the drivers that facilitate recruitment and determine membership in violent extremist organizations like ISIS will fill an important gap in the literature. It will also improve the ability and capacity of policy makers and practitioners in designing better targeted and more effectively implemented Counter radicalization and de-radicalization policies.