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Making PVE programmes work

Rethinking approaches to the prevention of violent extremism in Lebanon

SUMMARY

This policy brief aims to inform state institutions, practitioners and donors working on prevention of violent extremism with youth in Lebanon. Based on findings from research in Tripoli, it recommends that resilience building interventions are linked to other programmes addressing vulnerabilities to violent extremism in the same area, such as work to improve job creation, education and institutional accountability. Resilience building also needs to be complemented with tailored approaches to reduce exposure to and use of violence among youth. According to the study, in the context of everyday violence, even resilient youth continue to see violence as an expression of confidence and agency, and the only way to defend one's family and community.

In recent years, prevention of violent extremism (PVE) has become a central part of national policies, donor funding priorities and objectives pursued by civil society organisations working on a range of issues, from economic development to peacebuilding. In Lebanon, PVE projects were funded and implemented long before a national policy emerged, many of them targeting young men and women seen as vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.

This policy brief summarises the findings of the report 'More resilient, still vulnerable: Taking stock of prevention of violent extremism programming with youth in Tripoli, Lebanon',[1] which assesses the impact of PVE projects in Tripoli, aimed at building young people's resilience and reducing their vulnerabilities to recruitment by armed groups. Based on analysis of the findings from Tripoli, it offers recommendations to practitioners, state institutions and policy-makers related to youth-focused PVE efforts in Lebanon. Of particular note, it finds that strengthening individual resilience does not automatically lead to reduced vulnerability or support for violence.

Table 1: Identified resilience and vulnerability factors to violent extremism

Resilience factors	Vulnerability factors
• Psycho-social resilience (ability to take decisions, set goals and have dreams, problem solve, communicate in a positive way, trust oneself and others, work in a team)	• Sense of political marginalisation
	• Unequal treatment of security forces
• Tolerance, pluralism, understanding of diversity as an asset	• Sense of social and economic injustice
	• Lack of access to employment opportunities
• Understanding and respect for human rights	• Degradation of education infrastructure and opportunities to learn
• Sense of belonging	
• Ability to deal with conflict non-violently	• Lack of future prospects and sense of social and personal worth and purpose
• Community cohesion and positive networks	
• Trust in institutions	• Disruptive social context and experiences of violence

The research was conducted with over 170 young Lebanese and Syrian men and women living in Tripoli who have participated in PVE-related resilience-building projects, including sports, life skills training, peace education and psycho-social support (treatment group) and educational projects unrelated to PVE (acting as a control group for comparison). The full findings and methodology are available in the extended report.

1. Youth projects need to build a sense of purpose and belonging to be more effective in building individual resilience to violent extremism

Young people who participated in the research demonstrated high individual resilience, irrespective of their attendance at PVE project activities or other NGO-led activities. Between 78% and 85% of the surveyed youth from treatment and control groups consistently stated they were able to problem solve and achieve their objectives, enjoyed support from their parents and were generally satisfied with their lives. PVE programmes, however, had a more significant impact on **sense of belonging** and on individual **sense of purpose** and empowerment than traditional youth projects assessed. Sense of belonging, which was defined as "having a group of friends I can trust", was 23 percentage points higher for PVE project beneficiaries, and "feeling close to people who live in my neighbourhood" was 11 percentage points higher for PVE project participants than for participants in non-PVE interventions.

Stronger sense of belonging is likely to be a result of PVE resilience-building projects, as these projects tend to encourage self-expression, develop empathy and strengthen communication and social skills. Sense of purpose, which was also higher in the treatment group, is one of the two psycho-social resilience factors to violent extremism identified in programme theories of change and explored in the study that showed correlation with youth's perceived ability to fight injustice. This correlation is significant as it indicates that a higher sense of purpose enables young people to stand up against injustice and thus begin to address aspects of vulnerability, for instance by challenging marginalisation. Building a sense of purpose, for example by encouraging youth to discover their talents, interests and passions and facilitating sessions on self-awareness and goal setting, needs to be emphasised in all youth programmes, whether or not they have explicit PVE objectives, as it is key to increasing individual resilience and influencing the way young people perceive injustice and their agency to address it.

Two children looking over a football game from their house damaged by clashes, Tripoli, Lebanon © Ali Hamouch/International Alert

2. Youth projects need to foster acceptance of diversity and citizen–state engagement in order to build community resilience to violent extremism

Acceptance of people of diverse backgrounds is the second resilience factor, in addition to sense of purpose, that correlates with one's ability to fight injustice. Furthermore, surveyed youth who had difficulties making friends with peers from other nationalities were more likely to use violence ("hit someone who hits you first") or believe that "violence is the only way to defend one's community". These findings emphasise the need for PVE interventions to integrate confidence-building approaches (such as dialogue) and expand their programming from narrow targeting of specific areas, which in the Lebanese context tend to be confessionally homogenous (geographic 'hot-spot' targeting), to engaging youth from different nationalities and confessions from a wider geographic area. In the context of Tripoli, a number of youth-focused PVE and non-PVE programmes have started to bridge the divide between Bab

al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, and similar initiatives are needed across other physical lines of confrontation.

In addition to physical division lines, implementing organisations should seek to engage villages or neighbourhoods that are home to residents of diverse backgrounds. To facilitate such an approach in Tripoli, NGOs and CSOs can form a network to develop joint initiatives and exchanges as part of youth activities. At a national level, government support and NGO platforms can facilitate linkages between youth from different areas, to help build trust and relationships across confessions and nationalities.

In addition to strengthening inter-community trust (horizontal relationships), rebuilding **trust between society and the state** (vertical relationships) is one of the strategic priorities outlined in the National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism. Social trust, both among people and between communities and authorities, is seen as a means to countering "the polarising power of extremist rhetoric".[2] The research conducted in Tripoli showed that participants in PVE programmes displayed higher trust in the municipality than the control group did, possibly due to the involvement of the municipality in hosting or attending some of the activities of the PVE projects assessed. Young people's attitudes towards security institutions, however, were similar among beneficiaries of PVE and non-PVE projects. Perceptions of

the army and police tended to be contradictory: while some research participants felt neglected and expressed frustration that security forces were not present in their neighbourhoods, others did not trust the security forces and saw army checkpoints as stigmatising their areas.

Direct engagement with the institutions and a positive experience of being heard allows young people to develop positive views of local authorities and security actors that are near them, even if important institutional reforms are slow and services are insufficient. In this regard, PVE interventions targeting youth can strengthen trust in institutions and positively influence youth's 'ability to fight injustice', if they include citizen participation approaches in their work, and work with institutions to strengthen their community outreach and engagement, responsiveness, accountability and human rights record (on institutional engagement, see section 3 below). Organisations need to mitigate risks of not yielding results through youth-led advocacy, which is not uncommon in countries with a weak institutional set-up and insufficiently developed culture of public consultation and accountability. Therefore, implementers of youth programmes need a parallel engagement with institutions at the local level to encourage openness and responsiveness and facilitate relations between the institutions and youth groups. This could be done through integrating these institutional engagement approaches or linking with other initiatives. National policies, including those on PVE, should create conditions for such engagement, for example by creating a framework for municipal consultations and allocating budgets for youth-led community initiatives.

3. Strengthening individual resilience does not necessarily lead to reduced vulnerability

Positive changes in individual resilience do not automatically translate into reduced vulnerabilities or change perceptions of existing vulnerabilities, according to research findings. **Sense of marginalisation and injustice**, such as the belief that one's confession is the most vulnerable and victimised (69% of the Lebanese respondents agreed to such a statement), remained unchanged after participation in PVE projects. Findings highlight the need for linking resilience-building interventions with other programmes addressing vulnerabilities in the same geographic area – for example,

programmes that improve the job market, education and healthcare, and strengthen institutional accountability. While such interventions serve broader human development and good governance objectives, and do not need to be supported necessarily through PVE funding, they have the potential to produce PVE impact if interventions are well coordinated and sequenced.

Another vulnerability that remains unaddressed is the perceived unequal treatment of people from certain neighbourhoods by security institutions. Close to half of survey respondents (47%) thought that the army and police did not treat people of all parts of Tripoli equally. This perception was also reflected in youth's readiness to approach security institutions: 41% of Syrian respondents and 61% of Lebanese respondents felt comfortable or very comfortable going to the police. While international assistance to security institutions has increased,[3] and country-wide public support for all security institutions has improved in the past two years,[4] donor agencies and civil society need to emphasise the importance of external oversight to security agencies to ensure compliance with human rights and equal treatment of all individuals on the territory of Lebanon.

Justice institutions are also perceived as discriminating against specific groups. Of the youth surveyed, 45% believed that individuals from their neighbourhoods were more often sent to prison. While the research did not focus on the issue of detainees held without trial due to suspected involvement with extremist groups, it established that male youth felt they had no older youth to look up to for guidance and support, after many young adults were either detained on terrorism charges (many not convicted) or killed in Syria. The sense of unequal treatment of detainees and the sense of injustice this engenders is an aspect of vulnerability that warrants further research. In addition, the return of young men after detention can create new vulnerabilities to recruitment, if not comprehensively addressed.

In parallel to long-term interventions to address structural causes of violent extremism, interventions with youth need to address individual vulnerabilities, i.e. the way individuals see injustice. In this regard, youth projects need to strengthen young people's understanding of society and the existing opportunities to fight injustice. Dialogue sessions on social topics, presentations by local figures, film screenings and theatre plays followed by discussions on social justice, as well as awareness of legal rights and provision of legal aid and representation to vulnerable youth are all approaches that can be included in projects with youth who perceive themselves as marginalised.

One of the city's narrow and overcrowded neighbourhoods, Tripoli, Lebanon © Ali Hamouch/International Alert

4. Strengthening individual resilience alone does not necessarily reduce support for violence

A further limitation of PVE programmes using a resilience-building approach is that high individual resilience does not correlate with weak support for violence. Respondents from PVE projects were more likely than respondents from non-PVE projects to accept violence as a means to defend oneself or one's community. This finding, which appears surprising at first, can be explained with the empowering effect of resilience-building programmes: the choice of young people to fight instead of 'do nothing' when someone makes them angry is a sign of confidence and agency in a context of everyday violence. According to young males, young people fight primarily "to defend friends and family" (21%), "to defend themselves" (15%) or "seek revenge" (15%), while female youth explained fighting with self-defence (21%) and willingness to "gain other people's respect" (19%).

To reduce the support for and use of violence, and to enable young people to become aware of alternatives, youth programmes could use various methods such as personal narratives, storytelling of former fighters and use of theatre and film to showcase alternatives. Structural interventions such as enhancement of education infrastructure and quality should also integrate the elimination of violence into their objectives, for example by using the model of 'violence-free schools' promoted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Lebanon,[5] which includes development of codes of conduct by students, teachers and parents. As an alternative to the normalisation of violence in everyday life, projects should also support youth to find non-violent ways to resolve disputes, by providing counselling and mediation support in schools and youth centres, and opportunities for youth to learn and practise mediation, negotiation and reconciliation skills.

5. Academic and action research and rigorous monitoring and evaluation need to inform PVE programme

Further research is needed both to inform the design of adequate PVE programmes responding to the context-specific drivers of violent extremism and to generate evidence of the impact of PVE interventions. Academic research, including ethnographic studies, needs to be supported to enhance understanding of the interplay between different vulnerabilities and the ways men and women cope with them. Urban environments such as Tripoli where a range of political and religious actors compete for influence, and a range of social, economic, cultural (and sub-cultural) factors play out constitute complex systems, in which youth may become vulnerable or resilient to violent extremism. Similarly, in communities such as Tripoli, where, as the research confirmed, violence is widely used in daily life, additional research is needed to understand the sources of distinct types of violence (i.e. youth violence, family violence, political violence, etc.), and design strategies for reducing it.

Action research, i.e. research built into PVE programmes and conducted parallel to the implementation of activities, offers another opportunity to deepen understanding of how different approaches work individually or in combination. Evidence of the impact of resilience building is growing, though the strengths and limitations of applied approaches and methodologies are still insufficiently explored. The PVE impact of interventions on education, healthcare and security sector reform also needs to be researched and measured, in order to assess how an improvement in one area may influence perceptions of marginalisation and injustice.

Recommendations

Recommendations to practitioners

Include initiatives and approaches that strengthen young people's sense of purpose and belonging in youth programmes to help strengthen youth resilience to violent extremism. Verbal and creative self-expression, group discussion, development of social skills and sensitivity to others can be built into various youth programmes, particularly those that already include a life skills component.

Create opportunities for young people of different backgrounds to participate in regular joint activities allowing meaningful interaction (as opposed to one-off activities or events where members of the audience have minimal communication) in order to strengthen acceptance of diversity. To achieve this, move away from targeting narrow geographic 'hot spots' and broaden targeting to locations with different and more diverse confessional or socio-economic profiles. Smaller NGOs and community-based organisations that are embedded in the community should consider partnerships and coalitions that will help them enlarge their target groups and create opportunities for learning together and organising joint initiatives.

Support trust building between state institutions and young people by building capacities on both sides. Build young people's skills to communicate with state institutions, submit complaints and develop advocacy initiatives, while simultaneously supporting institutions to strengthen citizen engagement. Dialogues with municipalities and local representatives of relevant ministries, advocacy trainings for youth and support for advocacy initiatives can help address feelings of marginalisation and despair even if progress towards reducing vulnerabilities related to perceived political marginalisation, social and economic injustice and lack of access to employment opportunities is slow.

Create safe spaces and opportunities to discuss violence in all its forms and learn about alternatives, as renouncing violence does not result directly from increased individual resilience. Train facilitators and mentors working on youth programmes, particularly sports coaches, on non-violence and collaboration, and incorporate collaborative games in sports-based programmes. Provide counselling and mediation services for youth and encourage them to seek support to resolve disputes non-violently. Creative art forms and discussions with former fighters can help young men and women understand the consequences of political violence for both survivors and perpetrators.

Include academic and action research as part of PVE projects to deepen understanding of drivers of violent extremism and effective approaches to prevention. Share research, analyses and learning across a community of practice. Ensure that this data sharing is done safely and in such a way as to protect project and research participants.

Recommendations to state institutions and policy-makers

Support the improvement of education infrastructure, quality of education and a violence-free environment particularly in areas along lines of tensions. Support initiatives to eradicate violence in schools along with enhancing capacities of teachers and administrative staff to improve student performance. In line with the National Strategy for PVE, support pilot actions to strengthen capacities of teachers and social affairs officers in schools to "renounce marginalisation, disregard, stereotyping […] and respect diversity and difference".[6]

Encourage and support security institutions to collect and analyse data on how communities view them and develop approaches of engagement and confidence building, especially in areas where security measures are in place. Building trust in the institutions and their ability to provide security while respecting human rights is aligned with the objective of regaining social trust in the state, which underpins the National Strategy for PVE. International support for security sector institutions needs to be linked to measures that increase human rights compliance and accountability, including through external oversight.

Strengthen municipal capacities for citizen engagement, including consultations with youth and participation in youth-led initiatives. In partnership with civil society, schools and universities, respond to youth-led advocacy, particularly in areas that youth perceive as neglected and marginalised by the state.

Support interventions that use a paired approach of strengthening resilience to violent extremism and addressing core vulnerabilities in the same location. Evidence from the research conducted in Tripoli points to the limited impact of increased resilience on the way vulnerabilities are perceived. Therefore, working on both strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerabilities is likely to be more effective in preventing violent extremism.

Move away from narrow targeting of geographic 'hot spots' towards broader targeting of locations with different confessional or socio-economic profiles. This approach

will allow for strengthening acceptance of 'the other', which correlates with increased ability to fight injustice and with lower likelihood of using violence.

Engage young women and men of different social groups in the development of the National Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism, including youth from marginalised areas (for example, areas of political marginalisation, economic underdevelopment and poor service provision). This will ensure both that the perspectives of diverse groups are included and that actions are planned to address a range of vulnerabilities, which may differ across groups.

Design PVE projects based on analysis of resilience and vulnerability factors, conducted with the participation of young people and communities affected. Use rigorous monitoring and evaluation, which takes a participatory and learning-focused approach, and build action research into PVE programmes to test assumptions and generate evidence of what works in different contexts.

Buildings in the centre of the city, Tripoli, Lebanon © Ali Hamouch/International Alert

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1   M. Al Masri and I. Slavova, More resilient, still vulnerable: Taking stock of prevention of violent extremism programming with youth in Tripoli, Lebanon, International Alert, October 2018, https://www.international-alert.org/publications/prevention-of-violent-extremism-programming-youth-tripoli-lebanon

2   Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Republic of Lebanon, National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism, Beirut: Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2018, p. 16

3   R. Berthier and G. Haddad, The Lebanese Warfare State, Beirut: Synaps, November 2018, http://www.synaps.network/the-lebanese-warfare-state

4   ARK, Regular Survey on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon - Wave 4, Beirut: UNDP, September 2018, https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/social-stability-regular-surveys-social-tensions-throughout-lebanon-wave-iv-september

5   Spring arrives early in Tripoli this year, UNDP, 26 March 2018, http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/stories/Spring-Arrives-Early-in-Tripoli-This-Year.html

6   Presidency of the Council of Ministers, , 2018, Op. cit., p.50