



Iraq Foundation
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Kingdom of the Netherlands

SEMINAR AGENDA and REPORT

6 YEARS ONWARD: HOW TO PREVENT HISTORY FROM REPEATING ITSELF?

The role of civil society and the media in protecting against violent extremism

Thursday, 3 December 2020

Seminar Agenda

Keynote Speakers

Mr. Saeed Al-Jayashi, Advisor representing H.E. Qasim Al-Araji, National Security Advisor, Iraq

H.E. Michel Rentenaar, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Iraq

Mr. Huib Mijnaerends, Special Representative CT, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Panel One: How to forge partnerships between governments and civil society. Moderator: Ms. Rend Al-Rahim – President, Iraq Foundation

Presentation 1: Mr. Ali Abdullah Abbas (Office of the National Security Advisor - Head of the Violent Extremism Strategy Implementation Team) - *The Iraqi strategy for partnership with civil society in protecting societies against violent extremism*

Presentation 2: Mr. Ibrahim Mohamed Taher (Director of Research, Guidance and Mosques, Ministry of Endowments, KRG) – *The Kurdish Regional Government experience*

Presentation 3: Ms. Rubina Abu Zeinab (National PVE Coordinator, Lebanon) - *Lessons learned from the region: The Lebanese case*

Q&A / discussion

Panel Two: The media, opportunities and risks. Moderator: Mr. John van der Zande - Regional CT & P/CVE Coordinator, Netherlands Embassy Amman

Presentation 1: Mr. Hussein Zamil (National Media and Communications Commission, Iraq) - *The role of the media in the Iraqi PVE strategy*

Presentation 2: Mr. Brandon Oelofse (RNTC Media Training Centre, Netherlands) - *Using media to promote alternative value systems*

Presentation 3: Ms. Francesca Ciriaci (IREX, Jordan) - *Building resilience to violent extremist narratives and online recruitment through critical thinking skills*

Q&A / discussion



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Report

1. Concept and Introduction

On Thursday, 3 December 2020 a seminar was organised by the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA), Iraq, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and Iraq Foundation (IF). The theme of the seminar was “*6 Years Onward: How to Prevent History from Repeating Itself? The role of civil society and the media in protecting against violent extremism*”. In light of the adoption by the government of Iraq in 2019 of a National Strategy to Counter and Prevent Violent Extremism, the goal of this virtual meeting was to inform about the Strategy, receive feedback, share views, and exchange experiences and lessons learned from countries, cities, and neighbourhoods around the world.

This seminar aimed to spotlight the indispensable role that civil society actors and communities can play in addressing radicalisation and extremism, and to examine the role of media platforms and the blessings and curses of social media. The first panel, on forging partnerships between government agencies and civil society in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), was moderated by Ms. Rend Al-Rahim, the president of Iraq Foundation. The second panel, on the risks and opportunities offered by the media in P/CVE, was moderated by Mr. John van der Zande, Regional CT and P/CVE Coordinator for the Netherlands, based in Amman.

The approximately. sixty-five participants in the seminar included Iraqi officials from ONSA and other Iraqi government agencies (incl. KRG), members of the diplomatic community, international practitioners in the field of PVE and CVE, and Iraqi, regional, and international CSOs.

2. Keynote Speakers

Mr. John van der Zande and Ms. Rend Al-Rahim welcomed the attendees and Mr. Van der Zande introduced the keynote speakers: Mr Saeed Al-Jayashi from ONSA; Ambassador Michel Rentenaar, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Iraq, and Mr. Huib Mijnaerends, head of CT and National Security at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Saeed Al-Al-Jayashi delivered a recorded message from the Iraq National Security Advisor, Mr. Qasim Al-Araji. In the recording Mr. Al-Araji thanked the organizers of the seminar, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ambassador of the Netherlands, adding that:

“the international community was instrumental in helping Iraq fight the terrorists and defeat the so-called Islamic State (Daesh) organization and we were able with international help to combat extremism that leads to violence. Unquestionably extremism is rejected in all its forms. We must live in peace and respect our common humanity.”



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Following the message from Iraq's National Security Advisor, the Netherlands Ambassador to Iraq Michel Rentenaar gave a brief overview of Dutch support to Iraq, including P/CVE & CT (preventing / countering violent extremism & counter-terrorism), and spelled out how that support serves both Iraqi and Dutch interests. Dutch Special CT Representative Huib Mijnaer delved more deeply into the Dutch approach to tackling radicalisation by stressing the need for preventative and localised plans of action. National roadmaps are important to provide a sense of direction but eventually it is individuals in local communities that either stay on the right track or derail. The localised and even individualised approach is reflected in the so-called Dutch Safety Houses: physical locations in which multidisciplinary teams of specialists – ranging from the municipality to the office of the public prosecutor and from the child protection agency to the local police officer and social worker – gather to discuss individual cases of people at-risk, i.e. those who have shown vulnerability toward extremist messages. This local and individual perspective has proved successful in the Netherlands. Even though the context in other countries may be very different, elements of this formula may be applied effectively elsewhere.

Panel One: Partnerships between government and civil society in PVE

The first presentation was delivered by Mr. **Ali Abdullah**, the head of ONSA executive team for implementing Iraq's PVE national strategy ("*Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism*"). Mr. Abdullah gave an overview of Iraq's PVE strategy, stating that its vision was "Towards a secure Iraqi society that rejects extremism and hatred and embraces peace and co-existence". The strategy rests on the constitution, on the National Security Strategy of 2016, and on UN documents relating to P/CVE. It identifies drivers of extremism and roadmaps and tools to address them. The tools the strategy proposes include school-based education, rehabilitation of communities in liberated areas, promoting youth leadership, handbooks on tolerance and moderation, protection of human rights, working with CSOs, security sector reform, working with religious institutions and supporting legislative initiatives. Mr. Abdullah asserted that this is an ongoing effort that will benefit from cooperation with and support from the international community.

Mr. **Ibrahim Mohammed Tahir**, Director of Research, Guidance and Mosques at the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Endowments, spoke about the importance and responsibility of the religious establishment in promoting moderation, religious tolerance, and co-existence. For example, to promote moderation, the Ministry suggests themes for Friday sermons to mosque preachers throughout the Kurdish Region (KRI). To reinforce its message the ministry has conducted awareness-raising workshops for clerics in cooperation with Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Mr. Tahir criticised the inaction on the part of the Sunni and Shia endowments at IDP camps, where radicalisation can occur. Mr. Tahir offered recommendations to ONSA, including engaging his department and people from KRI in developing Iraq's PVE



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strategy, establishing a national centre for promoting moderation and tolerance and conducting a media campaign to promote the national strategy.

Ms. **Rubina Abu Zainab**, the Lebanese National Coordinator for PVE, spoke about the Lebanese experience in PVE and the role of CSOs. Ms. Abu Zainab highlighted the participatory aspect of Lebanon's dual approach. The PVE strategy is divided into two phases, the first dealing with the development process of the national strategy based on needs assessments; the second phase engages in public consultation leading to the strategy's action plan. Lebanon's national strategy was developed in consultation with government agencies, academic institutions, and CSOs. It is implemented at the level of municipalities and aims to build a national consensus on PVE. The action plan formed "Local Prevention Networks (LPNs)" that include municipal authorities, civic groups, psycho-social support providers, teachers, religious leaders and youth activists. These networks have been implemented in several towns and cities in Lebanon. With support from the government of the Netherlands, Lebanon is also part of the so-called "*Strong Cities Network*", which was launched at the United Nations in September 2015.

In the ensuing discussion session participants offered their experiences and posed questions to the panellists. A CSO representative from Lebanon described their work in rehabilitating VE victims, especially women, and prepared them to take an active part in PVE in their communities and reach out to youth. The CSO provided psycho-social support to help victims re-integrate into their families and communities and taught them the use of social media in campaigns to counter hate speech and revenge impulses. A member of the Ministry of Religious Endowments in the KRI, active in PVE efforts in the region, warned that as physical violence by extremists has ebbed, there remains the danger of the "soft arm" of extremists, which uses ideological tools that target youth at mosques and in the media to lure them to violence. He added that the PVE initiative launched by the KRG Ministry had resulted in television programmes promoting religious tolerance and co-existence and had succeeded in spreading a moderate religious discourse by religious leaders.

Other speakers urged an emphasis on women as agents for PVE, since women can be focal points for early warning systems and a source of influence in their communities. A member of the National Media and Communications Commission (NCCMC) referred to a draft document for unifying religious speech that the NCCMC wishes to propose to Arab League states for adoption. A speaker from the EU Mission to Iraq noted that with the strategy on C/PVE in place Iraq has entered the crucial implementation phase in which all stakeholders must be included. He underlined the EU's commitment to provide continued support and advice for CVE implementation in Iraq. In response to a question about the adaptability of the Lebanese strategy Ms. Abu Zainab acknowledged that social transformation and public consultation are at the heart of the Lebanese strategy, while Mr. Al-Jayashi also affirmed the participatory nature of ONSA's strategy and the importance of coordination with the KRG, as well as other agencies and civil society.



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Second Panel

The first presentation was given by Mr. Hussein Zamil from the Iraqi National Communications and Media Commission (NCCMC), which is responsible for issuing licences to traditional media outlets, both Iraqi and foreign. Mr. Zamil described the role of media in the Iraqi strategy as one of confronting and countering hate speech and terrorist narratives in conformity with Iraqi and international law. Given the efficient use of media by terrorist organisations the CMC plays an important role in applying Iraq's PVE strategy through monitoring and overseeing the work of media outlets to ensure that they conform to Iraqi laws and international standards while at the same time respecting freedom of speech. The CMC maintains working relations with counterpart agencies in the Arab region in the broader effort to forge media policies for PVE.

The second presentation was delivered by Brandon Oelofse from the Radio Netherlands Media Training Centre (RNMC). Mr. Oelofse spoke about using media to promote an alternative value system. He underlined the importance of examining and tracking how the use of media by extremist groups has evolved from the early stages of their emergence. ISIS uses media in a structured way: for example, in 2015-16 ISIS used over 50 platforms delivering 800 messages per week. Extremist groups use media to spread messages of terror and fear and create an atmosphere of crisis and to ensure that the messages are amplified and repeated. Myths and disinformation spread, resulting in information disorder. In the KRI for example, it was noticed that information disorder combined misinformation, disinformation and some "mal-information". Media can provide three types of solutions: 1) informed balanced media; 2) alternate narratives that provide an alternative message, 3) coordination through strategic communications. In the KRI, RNMC partnered with SPARK, a Dutch NGO, to launch (within the framework of the Dutch funded PVE initiative "Networks of Change") #LoNa, a social media campaign working with youth "influencers" and credible local voices to develop alternative narratives. The campaign used social media and partnerships with youth platforms across Instagram and Facebook. The project uses ground interventions, roundtable discussions at universities and partnerships with media to develop alternative narratives. The campaign drove engagement with civil society by facilitating discussion of drivers of extremism, issues of integration, choice, unemployment and youth participation.

The final panellist, Ms. Francesca Ciriaci-Sawalha, Country Director of IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board) in Jordan, described a critical thinking approach to PVE that contributes to building resilience to violent extremist propaganda and effecting change in behaviour with the aim of boosting a sense of agency, defined as confidence that change is possible and one's effort can bring about change. The critical thinking approach rests on three stages: determining needs, identifying narratives and building networks. The narrative stage addresses propaganda through a media literacy model, which encourages critical thinking about content. Building positive networks includes peer-to-peer learning and positive reinforcement. This model leads to decision-making and transformative action. Ms. Ciriaci-Sawalha applies this



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critical thinking model in Jordan through an initiative named “*Tafakkar*”, meaning “Think”. The initiative engages 46 local institutions, 220 community leaders, 6 media projects which reach an audience of 107,000 and 5 community initiatives that engage 2,257 community members.

In the discussion period a member of the diplomatic community asked how to ensure the protection of journalists in an environment of countering extremist violence. Another participant requested more information about the nature and scope of alternative narratives. A CSO member asked about the role of NCMC in controlling channels owned by political parties. Mr. Hussein Zamil clarified NCMC policies and actions in the event of a breach on the part of media channels and spoke about the role of NCMC in protecting journalists. As an example, NCMC learned from the Netherlands about a platform that journalists can use to file their grievances. A hotline was established that journalists can call to report violations. A booklet was also published educating security forces about the rights of journalists and how to protect them.

Mr. Oelofse explained that alternative narrative was a narrative that spreads positive feedback to youth rather than countering the terrorist narrative by saying a piece of information is false or fake. Alternative narrative means that we have an approach and we follow that approach. We do not follow the approach of a terror organisation and challenge it, he added.

Conclusions

Participants agreed that this initial seminar had laid the foundations for further talks. The organisers will facilitate bilateral contacts between attendees and will explore opportunities for a follow-up symposium in 2021. Mr. John van der Zande, Mr. Al-Al-Jayashi, and Ms. Rend Al-Rahim thanked ONSA, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs the Ambassador of the Netherlands and (other international) presenters for their cooperation in realising the seminar.