

Preventing Violent Extremism the Lebanese Way: A Critical Analysis of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

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Abstract

The people of Lebanon have suffered from decades of religious violence and terrorism. However, strategies for countering terrorism and violent extremism in Lebanon have been significantly obstructed by political divisions due to an exclusive security-driven approach. The unanimous adoption by the Lebanese Government of a “National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism” in 2018 has been viewed by many as a manifestation of the desire of political leaders to finally address the root causes of violence in the Land of the Cedars. This article seeks to show that this might be a mistaken perception as there persists a profound resistance from the political establishment to make the changes necessary to prevent and combat terrorism and violent extremism more effectively.

Keywords: Lebanon, extremism, terrorism, PVE, United Nations Plan of Action (PoA)

Introduction - Lebanon: A Country Rife with Political Violence

Lebanon’s history is rife with violence. For almost two decades (1975–1990) the country experienced successive wars wrought by private militias and state-sponsored armed groups, costing the lives of around 120,000 Lebanese people and forcing a million others to flee their country.[1] The capital Beirut was the scene of numerous terrorist attacks, including the attack on the US embassy on 18 April 1983, which killed 63 people, and the attacks against the Multinational Force in Lebanon on 23 October 1983, which killed 307 people including 241 US and 58 French soldiers and several civilians.[2] After the end of the civil war in 1990, Lebanon remained under the political and military hegemony of its two powerful neighbors: Israel, which officially withdrew its troops in 2000, but conducted in 2006 a military operation against Hezbollah, killing thousands of civilians and leaving almost a million others displaced; and Syria, whose military was forced to leave the country following the popular uprising resulting from the assassination of former prime minister Rafic Hariri on 14 February 2005.[3]

In the aftermath of Hariri’s assassination and the subsequent “Cedar Revolution”, two major political coalitions, with opposing ideologies and foreign policy perspectives, emerged on the Lebanese political scene. The 8 March [4] alliance was formed of political parties united by their pro-Syrian posture, while the 14 March [5] alliance was united by its anti-Syrian stance.[6] The Syrian revolution in 2011, the armed conflict between the Syrian regime and its opposition, and the subsequent involvement of Hezbollah in the conflict Syrian civil war intensified political and sectarian divides within the Lebanese government as well.[7]

The Syrian civil war also reinvigorated radical Islamists in Lebanon. Palestinian camps in northern and southern Lebanon and in Tripoli, the country’s second-largest city, became hubs for jihadis keen to fight alongside extremist armed groups—including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Following Hezbollah’s armed intervention in the Syrian civil war, individuals closely affiliated with Sunni terrorist groups conducted a series of suicide and car bombings in Lebanon that further heightened sectarian tensions.[8]

While leaders on both blocs of the Lebanese political scene maintained their fundamental disagreements on almost every major political issue, they progressively agreed on the importance of addressing the threat posed by radicalized groups for Lebanon’s national security and on the need for developing a comprehensive, long-term national strategy to prevent violent extremism.

In this context, Lebanon, along with Tunisia and Morocco, was among the first countries in the Middle East and North Africa to respond to the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (“PoA”), first presented by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 24 December 2015. In 2017, the Lebanese government

launched a National Coordination Unit (NCU) in charge of drafting a national strategy to prevent violent extremism. The following year, the government unanimously adopted the “National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism” (“The Lebanese PVE Strategy”). Guided by the priority areas introduced by the UN’s PoA, the Lebanese PVE Strategy includes nine pillars to prevent violent extremism as well as its own definition of the PVE concept tailored to Lebanon’s social and political characteristics and trends.[9] This article seeks to provide a concise description of the Lebanese strategy to prevent violent extremism from its inception to its implementation. It also offers a detailed analysis of the strategy’s main achievements and shortcomings. It demonstrates that, despite the rhetoric of the PVE strategy, there remains a profound resistance from the side of the political establishment to introduce the necessary reforms to prevent and combat violent extremism more effectively.

The Lebanese Response to the UN Call for the Implementation of National PVE Strategies

The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: An Alternative Paradigm for Counter-Terrorism Policies

The Origin of the UN Plan of Action

In the aftermath of Al Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks on the United States of America, countries around the globe rushed to implement counter-terrorism laws in an attempt to prevent terrorism. Over 140 states developed or revised laws related to countering-terrorism as a response to United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UN-SCR), such as resolution 1368 (2001) calling states to “redouble their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts,”[10] and resolution 1373 (2001) encouraging, among many other measures, intelligence sharing between states on terrorist groups to combat international terrorism.[11]

These policies heavily focused on “short-term” solutions taking, when nationally implemented, the form of coercive security measures which were often inconsistent with international standards.[12] In a number of countries, this resulted in grave violations of human rights and a substantial decrease in their protection.[13] Governments relied on law enforcement agencies, security and intelligence units and, in some cases, the military to execute and implement counter-terrorist strategies, excluding a wide range of key actors from civil society. New measures introduced also tended to decreased police accountability, established special courts in violation of established international law, and introduced severe punishments, such as the death penalty.[14]

While governments struggled to assess the efficacy of their domestic counter-terrorism strategies due to the lack of measurable variables and insufficient academic research on the matter,[15] most scholars tend to agree that the use of broad coercive measures failed to decrease violence caused by terrorism and caused a backlash in the long run.[16] Repressive counter-terrorism policies alone were gradually considered as insufficiently effective.

As a result, many states progressively departed from a predominantly reactive security perspective to a more holistic one. The new strategy included, *inter alia*, measures aimed at preventing violence and extremism conducive to terrorism, while focusing also on combatting new threats such as online recruitment and propaganda.[17]

In January 2016, in line with this new thinking and based on pillars 1 and 4 of the Global Counterterrorism Strategy from the year 2006,[18] and with the new American counter-terrorism doctrine of the Obama administration,[19] UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presented a new UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism (PoA) to the General Assembly, based on a more comprehensive and holistic perspective, urging member states to “consider developing a national plan of action to prevent violent extremism.”[20]

Guiding Principles and Key Recommendations of the UN Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism

At the outset, the UN secretary-general's Plan of Action recalled that, although "violent extremism" is not clearly and universally defined, it "encompasses a wider category of manifestations" than terrorist acts.[21] The PoA further highlights the diverse nature of violent extremism, not belonging to any particular belief system, nationality, or region.[22] While terrorism and violent extremism need a global response, the PoA underlines the importance for individual states to take action.

Therefore, the secretary-general invited member states to develop their "national counter-terrorism strategies" and addressing their local context guided by the recommendations of the UN PoA. He further called for an inclusive and multidisciplinary process, seeking input from governmental and nongovernmental actors (including members of civil society, women and youth) to pinpoint drivers of violent extremism present locally in each state.[23] The UN PoA also highlights the need for national plans to develop transparent and accountable institutions at all levels of the government and to ensure an inclusive and representative decision-making process.[24]

In recalling the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters, the PoA calls on UN member states to include provisions aimed at ensuring effective border controls and mechanisms preventing the financing of terrorism as directed by Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014).[25] The PoA further reminds states to abide by their obligations pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2199 (2015) including preventing terrorist groups and violent extremists from receiving donations, trading in antiquities and oil, and engaging in hostage-taking.[26]

In the Plan of Action, the secretary-general finally invited states to align their development policies with the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals,[27] and suggested that national plan allocate specific funding for their implementation in governmental and nongovernmental institutions.[28] He also stresses the importance for national plans to be regularly monitored and evaluated.[29]

A Road Map for National PVE Strategies

To assist state members in designing their own domestic strategies, the UN PoA offers general recommendations focused on a number of priority areas, namely: dialogue and conflict prevention; good governance, human rights and the rule of law; the engagement of communities; the empowerment of youth; gender equality and empowerment of women; education, skill development and employment facilitation; and strategic communications including the Internet and social media.[30] A brief description of these recommendations will be provided below.

- *Dialogue and Conflict Prevention*

Violent extremism has strong links with ongoing conflicts, as each one increases the risk of the other. The PoA highlights how inclusive and gender-sensitive dialogue between parties to a conflict offers a route for long-term solutions and recommends that member states should focus on engaging opposing parties, regional actors, and religious leaders early enough to prevent violent extremism. It further calls states to preserve diversity and cultural heritage to facilitate peace building and reconciliation through increasing people's knowledge of their own and other cultures, thereby strengthening a common sense of belonging. The PoA also suggests the development of programs providing citizens with educational and economic opportunities, as these are important in motivating people not to join violent extremist groups, and encourages resort to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Lastly, the PoA recommends the compliance with international laws and regulations when it comes to military action.[31]

- *Strengthening Good Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law*

Recalling that governments respecting human rights, fighting corruption and impunity, and promoting effective, inclusive and transparent governance are less at risk to suffer from violent extremism, the secretary-general recommends that member states establish a plan compliant with human rights and the rule of law, includ-

ing law reforms, access to justice, rehabilitation programs for prisoners and accountability for human-rights violations.[32]

- *Engaging Communities*

The PoA noted that the survival of violent extremists depends on their ability to find support within their community or from marginalized groups in society. In order to prevent violent extremists from gaining support from marginalized communities, the PoA recommends for governments to engage with communities by developing inclusive and community-based policies, as well as encouraging engagement with civil society on the local community level.[33]

- *Empowering Youth*

Recognizing how supporting youth plays a significant role in preventing violent extremism, the PoA invites UN member states to encourage the participation of young men and women in PVE activities, integrate them in decision-making processes, and ensure adequate funding for youth programs and initiatives dedicated to PVE.[34]

- *Gender Equality and Empowering Women*

Carrying out gender-sensitive initiatives that ensure the participation, integration and empowerment of women is pivotal for achieving effective plans to prevent violent extremism. In this respect, the secretary-general called for gender-sensitive national plans which acknowledge women's role in preventing violent extremism and support them both as actors and victims. The PoA further proposes to build women's capacities, ensure the appropriate funding of projects that adhere to their needs end empower them, and spread gender perspectives.[35]

- *Education, Skill Development and Employment Facilitation*

Through the provision of quality education and the facilitation of employment, youth are given the necessary tools to fight poverty and marginalization. Therefore, the PoA urges states to invest in high-quality and inclusive education, collaborate with local authorities to generate socioeconomic opportunities, and involve civil society and other private actors in efforts to create jobs and facilitate employment.[36]

- *Strategic Communications, the Internet and Social Media*

The PoA noted that social media are being used with a particular efficiency by violent extremists to recruit and promote their agenda. In response, PVE plans should build positive, tolerant and evidence-based counter-narratives and strategies in coordination with the private sector and social media companies. PVE plans should also identify and address the factors leading to violent extremism in order to develop appropriate strategic communications action plans. States should clearly define the legal basis related to online content, review laws related to surveillance and personal data collection, and make sure that they are in line with international human rights laws.[37]

Following General Assembly Resolution 70/291 of 16 July 2016, calling upon state members to implement the recommendations of the United Nations Plan of Action,[38] several member states (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Tanzania and Somalia) and regional organizations (including the African Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the European Union) developed their own Plan of Action.[39] In the MENA region—a region particularly affected by terrorism and violent extremism—Lebanon was one of the first countries to respond to Ban Ki-moon's call and to develop a PVE strategy of its own.

The Lebanese National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism

The Establishment of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

In early 2017, Saad Hariri, then prime minister of Lebanon, called for the establishment of an “interministerial working group” with a mandate to design a Lebanese strategy for preventing violent extremism. He appointed Rubina Abu Zeinab as the national coordinator of this working group.[40]

The formulation of the Lebanese Strategy was based on a consultative process between the NCU, Lebanese ministries and other stakeholders. On 17 July 2017, the first high-level Consultative Meeting for the PVE Strategy was held at the Grand Serail, the headquarters of the prime minister.[41] In addition to Hariri and Abu Zeinab, the high-level meeting was attended by several ministers, representatives of security and military forces, and by Sigrid Kaag, United Nations general coordinator in Lebanon at the time. At the meeting, Abu Zeinab presented her proposed approach and the starting points for the preparation of the PVE strategy. Between September and October 2017, 29 separate meetings were held, one with the representative of each ministry, to discuss the objectives set by each ministry to prevent violent extremism. On 20 December 2017, a second high-level Consultative Meeting was convened by the prime minister during which Abu Zeinab presented the key steps required to carry out the national PVE Strategy, insisting on the importance of “political will and access to international expertise” to achieve positive results.[42]

In March 2018, after a year of consultations, the NCU submitted its program of a Lebanese PVE Strategy, which was approved by the Lebanese Council of Ministers on 27 March 2018. In February 2019, the national PVE Strategy was made public.

Key Features and Strategic Objectives of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

The Strategy features the Lebanese government’s definitions of “violent extremism” and “prevention” in the context of PVE. It highlights the importance of trust among different government institutions for the prevention of violent extremism, offers short-, medium- and long-term plans and policies to prevent violent extremism, defines evaluation and monitoring strategies, and discusses factors in different spheres (social, cultural, and economic) that could constitute drivers of violent extremism in Lebanon. It also acknowledges the complexity of violent extremism and the wide range of groups of people it can affect.

The Lebanese PVE Strategy identifies, in analogy to the UN Plan of Action, nine pillars and areas of activity that have been agreed upon by the ministries.[43]

The pillar of “Dialogue and Conflict Prevention” recalls the importance of dialogue as a means to promote acceptance and peaceful methods of conflict resolution. It mainly targets youth and focuses on the promotion of cultural diversity, the empowerment of civil society, citizenship and tolerance. It also features educational programs on violent extremism and trainings on conflict resolution methods. It contains 18 strategic objectives addressed to eight different ministries.[44]

The pillar on the “Promotion of Good Governance” contains 33 strategic objectives for 13 ministries. The objectives contained in this second pillar focus on policies related to the development of the institutional and coordination capacities of state agencies and their staff’s technical capacities. They also focus on the promotion of accountability and transparency of these agencies to fight corruption.[45]

The third pillar focusing on “Justice, Human Rights and the Rule of Law” sets out 46 strategic goals addressed to 15 different ministries. It contains objectives related to the impartial and equal enforcement of the law, Lebanon’s respect of its human-rights obligations as stipulated in international conventions, the adoption of sustainable public policies, the empowerment of marginalized people, and prison reforms.[46]

The fourth pillar contains 31 recommendations addressed to 12 ministries in the field “Urban/Rural Development and Engagement with Local Communities.” It offers recommendations on the development of national and local financial and economic policies, differences in development between regions, participation of local

communities in development programs, improvement of national industries, and urban transformations and their possible overall impact.[47]

Through its fifth pillar focusing on “Gender Equality and Empowering Women”, the Strategy presents 22 strategic objectives, directed at eight ministries, aiming at educating women about their legal and constitutional rights and the risks of violent extremism, amending discriminatory legislation against women, encouraging women’s participation in development, social and cultural activities, and boosting their involvement in policy and decision-making processes.[48]

The issues put forth in the sixth pillar, focusing on “Education, Training and Skills Development” present a total of 40 policies addressed to 17 different ministries, seeking to develop educational programs and learning skills related to PVE, and to facilitate youth employment through developing training programs that ensure young people’s skills are in line with the job market’s needs.[49]

The seventh pillar focuses on “Economic Development and Job Creation.” It contains 49 strategic objectives addressed to 21 ministries, aiming to develop policies that encourage sustainable economic development and generate more job opportunities, address economic inequality, encourage capacity building, and create an entrepreneurship-friendly economic environment.[50]

The eighth pillar related to “Strategic Communications, Informatics and Social Media” lists 55 recommendations for 22 ministries, encouraging the use of all communication methods and the Internet as a means to spread awareness of the risks of violent extremism, to spread messages of tolerance and acceptance, to show support toward the state and its institutions, and to prevent individuals from using social media to spread violent extremist ideologies.[51]

Finally, the last pillar focuses on “Empowering Youth.” It contains 22 recommendations for 13 ministries, aiming to ensue the youth’s involvement in decision-making processes, and building up young people’s capacities to ease their transition into the labor market.[52]

Thus, the Lebanese PVE Strategy sets out a total of 316 recommendations. However, a large number of strategic goals in a variety of areas does not *by itself mean* that the Strategy has incorporated the secretary-general’s recommendations to prevent violent extremism.

A Critical Assessment of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

A Positive Attempt to Adopt a Preventive Approach to Violent Extremism in Lebanon

A Willingness to Change the Paradigm of Addressing Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism Issues

As indicated before, for a long time, Lebanon’s response to terrorism and violent extremism has been affected by partisan and security-focused approaches. However, in 2017, Lebanon decided to shift toward a more holistic and comprehensive approach and initiated the process of drafting the Lebanese PVE Strategy.

With that goal in mind, the NCU sought guidance and advice from a number of international organizations and representatives,[53] such as the resident representative of the secretary-general of the United Nations and the European Union’s counter terrorism coordinator.[54] It further drew inspiration from other national strategies to prevent violent extremism, such as the Danish strategy (to be discussed below) and took into consideration practices relevant to the Lebanese context.[55] The NCU’s efforts in gathering international expertise during the development process of the Lebanese PVE Strategy should be recognized as an indicator of the Lebanese government’s willingness to embrace this knowledge, learn from it, and use it to draft a strategy fit for Lebanon that is based on best practices. As a result of this process, the Lebanese PVE Strategy introduced many relevant policies for each of its pillars, as suggested and encouraged by the UN secretary-general.

Furthermore, the appointment of Rubina Abu Zeinab as head of the NCU in drafting Lebanon’s PVE Strategy was also an encouraging sign. In the Middle East, where it is uncommon to see women in leadership positions,

this appointment should be seen as the Lebanese government's awareness and readiness to embrace the important role of women in shaping an effective national PVE framework. Although it is uncertain to what degree Abu Zeinab's leadership had a direct influence on the policy recommendations proposed, it is noteworthy that the Lebanese PVE Strategy contains an abundance of policies focusing on gender equality. It could also be the reason behind the fifth pillar of the Strategy which includes policies aiming at repealing discriminatory legislation against women in Lebanon,[56] while there is no mention of repealing other discriminatory legislation in the national PVE Strategy.

A Desire to Replicate a Successful PVE Program

In 2015, Denmark's Aarhus PVE model gained international attention following its success just a year prior, when the city of Aarhus managed to reduce the number of individuals traveling to fight in Syria from 30 in 2013 to one.[57] The Aarhus model involves a PVE approach established on a multiagency research-based initiative requiring cooperation and information sharing between schools, social services, and police, known as the "SSP initiative". This kind of cooperation has existed in Danish municipalities since the 1970s, depending on each city's needs. Therefore, the Aarhus model contains practices customized for Aarhus's local community needs,[58] and involves targeting persons at risk of radicalization as well as those who have already become radicalized and intend to commit crimes. In this sense it is an addition to preexisting crime prevention structures in Denmark.[59] Thus, its efficiency relies on many factors previously present in Denmark due to years of practical development.

Lebanese policy makers have been profoundly inspired by this approach and have tried to replicate the successful Danish approach.[60] However, while Danish municipalities have played a key role in crime prevention for almost half a century, Lebanese municipalities have never taken on that responsibility.[61] Furthermore, Lebanon does not have a multiagency cooperation system in place to implement the Aarhus model. Therefore, Lebanon lacks the proper development and infrastructure to transfer and sustain this approach. Taking this into consideration, the Danish-Lebanese Strong Cities Network Partnership, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, established prevention networks in three Lebanese municipalities to strengthen their PVE abilities in a first attempt to replicate the Aarhus model in the Middle East.[62]

Despite the challenges present in the Lebanese context that could hinder or maybe even render it impossible for Lebanon to implement this approach anytime soon, the NCU's optimism and steps it has taken to bring home a successful model are an extremely positive sign that Lebanese policy makers are moving in the right direction.

A Necessary—but Lacking—Definition of Violent Extremism

As mentioned earlier, violent extremism does not have a universally accepted definition. Therefore, it is extremely important for states to develop their own definition of violent extremism, geared to national context to ensure uniform and unambiguous implementation.[63] The absence of a definition, or a clear one for that matter, would render the problem of violent extremism unidentifiable, and put individuals at risk of abuse.

The Lebanese Strategy has tried to overcome this issue and proposed a definition of violent extremism composed of three independent elements. According to the Lebanese PVE Strategy, violent extremism is "(1) the spread of individual and collective hatred that may lead to structural violence; (2) the rejection of diversity and nonacceptance of others, and the use of violence as a means of expression and influence; and (3) a behavior that threatens values that ensure social stability." [64]

While the NCU abided by the recommendation in this regard, the definition it put forth has some identifiable flaws. On one hand, it is too vague. For instance, it is unclear what constitutes a "rejection of diversity and nonacceptance of others." It is also not known which values in particular "ensure social stability" and how these values can be threatened. As a result, the ambiguity of the definition can put citizens at serious risk of being targeted by Lebanese authorities. On the other hand, it is unclear how this definition fits into the specificities

of the Lebanese context. In other words, it does not show how any of the drivers of violent extremism present in Lebanon are taken into consideration.

It is noteworthy to mention, though, that violent extremism is a particularly difficult term to define, as it is a “relational concept”,[65] and countries around the world have struggled to present a clear, and sometimes, consistent definition for the term.[66] Therefore, although the NCU introduced an imperfect definition of violent extremism, the fact that it presented one at all is still commendable while taking into consideration the difficulty of this task. Through this act, the NCU showed its understanding of the importance of including a definition in the Strategy, even if it is flawed.

A Template Approach of the PVE Plan of Action?

If, at first sight, the Lebanese PVE strategy contains a large number of strategic objectives in line with the UN’s Plan of Action recommendations, a closer analysis of its content reveals that it fails to address some key elements of PVE’s conceptual foundations, in particular those related to the engagement of civil society. Furthermore, because of deficiencies in its methodology and the lack of provisions related to its implementation, it is almost impossible to measure its effectiveness.

A Non-inclusive and Government-centered Approach

As recalled by the UN secretary-general in the Plan of Action, to be effective, national PVE strategies should be developed in a multidisciplinary manner, and include input from a wide range of government actors, “as well as nongovernmental actors, including youth; families; women; religious, cultural and educational leaders; civil society organizations; the media; and the private sector.”[67] This principle has been recalled in the strategic key positions of the Lebanese PVE Strategy.[68]

Despite this clear guidance, and while it claims “to ensure the optimal utilization of Lebanese human capital and to make the most of the creative human wealth embodied in Lebanon’s social diversity,”[69] the NCU has adopted a top-bottom process of consultation focusing solely on governmental representatives, ignoring the entirety of civil society.

In a period where Lebanese society massively rejects the entire political class, its corruption and nepotism, the lack of inclusive consultation in the drafting process of the PVE Strategy is likely to provoke a profound distrust of local key actors in the government PVE Strategy and to deprive the Lebanese Strategy of the local support it critically needs to be effectively implemented.

Critical Omissions of the Lebanese PVE Strategy

While the Lebanese Strategy includes many of the PoA’s recommendations, it has also overlooked several key aspects ensuring the prevention of violent extremism within the Lebanese context.

For example, the first pillar, related to Dialogue and Conflict Prevention and the third pillar, focusing on Justice, Human Rights and the Rule of Law fail to address and ensure the compliance of the government responses to violent extremism with international law, especially international human rights law.[70] The absence of such guarantees raises a red flag in the light of reports alleging ill-treatment and torture practiced by Lebanese security forces, and the absence of a satisfactory legal framework to control the use of torture.[71] Probably due to a defective consultancy process, the first pillar also fails to highlight the important role that numerous members of the civil society, including religious leaders, play in the prevention of violent extremism and in the identification of radicalized individuals. While this aspect may be less relevant in other countries’ contexts, it constitutes a critical omission in a country with 18 different religious groups [72] and with ongoing sectarianism disputes.[73]

The sixth pillar [74] of the Strategy does not outline a policy aiming at ensuring the provision of compulsory education for all children in Lebanon. Compulsory childhood education is in principle provided for in the

amended Article 49 of Legislative Decree No. 134 of 1959.[75] However, the Council of Ministers has yet to adopt a decree determining the “regulations and conditions of this free and compulsory education.”[76] The absence of a policy dedicated to this subject poses a problem when it comes to the implementation of the rest of this pillar’s policy recommendations.

The Strategy’s eighth pillar [77] has also disregarded some key recommendations from the UN Plan of Action. It does not present a policy related to the protection of the freedom of expression and opinion, media diversity, and journalism, neither does it provide for a policy dedicated to the empowerment of victims of violent extremism.

The Strategy does not address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters as recommended to states by the UN’s Plan of Action, despite the presence of many terrorist groups operating in and from Lebanon.[78] This absence, which may well be the result of political pressure, reflects negatively on the purposes of the Lebanese National Strategy for Preventing Violent Extremism.

The Lack of Instruments to Measure the Implementation of the PVE Strategy

In its concluding part, the Lebanese PVE Strategy provides that the national coordinator for PVE will coordinate, in collaboration with ministerial representatives, government actions to measure indicators of progress in preventing violent extremism from a sector-by-sector perspective. It calls for the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and clear indicators of the policies’ impact on their target groups, and for periodic research studies on the impact of the Strategy’s programs as a whole to prevent violent extremism.

An efficient implementation road map is key to the success of any good PVE strategy. In failing to include any clear and measurable objectives, outputs and timelines for each stakeholder, it is, in the current Lebanese political context, unlikely that any of the recommendations will be effectively implemented. Furthermore, the policy document does not contain precise indications about the financial resources needed for the implementation of these measures. In the current financial crisis in Lebanon, funds might be allocated to other priority areas, depriving the current Strategy of adequate funding and effective implementation.

However, it is notable to point out that after the issuance of the Lebanese PVE Strategy, the NCU began a process of organizing workshops to discuss an implementation action plan, involving individuals from both the private and public sectors, practitioners, academics and people from local communities to discuss how to use their expertise and experiences. This process constitutes “a series of nine consultative workshops to develop a national action plan to prevent violent extremism.”[79] It is, however, at the time of this writing, unclear whether the consultations for an implementation mechanism are continuing.

Conclusion: Challenging the Status Quo in Lebanon?

Due to its regional environment, history and political context, the necessity of preventing and combatting terrorism and violent extremism is of crucial importance to Lebanon’s national security.[80] However, for decades political responses to terrorism have been extremely polarized and addressed from a narrow security or military perspective.[81] This approach failed to address the structural causes of violent extremism and to stop the recurrence of terrorist attacks in the country.

As a result, and despite their disagreement on almost every single political issue, in particular related to internal security issues, political leaders from both coalition blocs gradually came to agree on the need for a comprehensive approach to countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, addressing political-, social- and economic-development aspects. The real efforts of the Lebanese government to quickly introduce on the national level a strategy based on the United Nations’ Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism must be acknowledged. Indeed, Lebanon can be seen as a pioneer amongst other countries in the Near and Middle East for its swift welcoming of this initiative, and its readiness to develop a national strategy.

This said, a close analysis of the Lebanese Strategy reveals major shortcomings which affect its potential for

success. Lebanon's lack of the necessary financial means and institutional capacity—something which only years of development can provide—will encumber the effective implementation of the policies introduced in the national PVE Strategy.

More importantly, no significant reforms, necessary to the effective implementation of the Strategy are likely to occur without a profound break with the political paradigm that emerged in the aftermath of the civil war, a situation marked by sectarianism, feudalism, clientelism, nepotism and corruption which is affecting almost every decision made at every level of government.[82]

Unfortunately, the Government's response to the Cedar revolution and, more recently, to the Beirut harbor explosion, have shown that the political apparatus is far from being ready to make such a change. In October 2019, when peaceful protestors took to the streets to complain against the financial mismanagement, the embezzlement of public funds, and, more generally, against the entire flawed political system, they were met with a great deal of violence and aggression on the government's part.[83] The political establishment has also demonstrated a lack of willingness to accept an impartial investigation of the massive explosion in Beirut's port on 4 August 2020, which took the lives of more than 200 people, injured over 6,500 others, and rendered close to 300,000 people homeless due to the unsafe storage of several tons of ammonium nitrate.[84]

Without abandoning the very system that has been the root cause of people's mistrust in the state—its poor governance, sectarianism and corruption among other shortcomings—Lebanon's government will fail to tackle the drivers of violent extremism conducive to terrorism in the country. Beyond the rhetoric of its PVE Strategy, the government's inaction to address the legitimate grievances of the people in recent crises has clearly shown that the political establishment is both unwilling and unable to make such a drastic change.

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N.B.: The statements contained herein reflect the personal view of the author only and do not necessarily reflect any views of the International Criminal Court.

Notes

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[3] ICTJ, *Lebanon's Legacy of Political Violence*, September 2013, p. 81; See also John Hudson, "Trying Again: Power-Sharing in Post-Civil War Lebanon," *International Negotiation*, 2 (1), pp. 103–122, 1997. URL: https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Lebanon-Mapping-2013-EN_0.pdf.

[4] The political parties in his bloc are: Hezbollah, Free Patriotic Movement, Amal Movement, Syrian Social Nationalist Party, Marada Movement, Lebanese Democratic Party, and Tashnag Party.

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