

EU Countering Violent Extremism & Countering Terrorism

Training Programme

14 February 2023, in Baghdad, Royal Tulip Al Rasheed Hotel, 'Baghdad Hall'

EU CTC Intervention

please check against delivery

Thank you. Dear:

- Qasem al-Araji, National Security Advisor,
- Ville Varjola, Ambassador of the European Union,
- Anders Wiberg, Head of the European Union Advisory Mission,
- Ali Abdullah, Chair of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism,
- Sarmad Hekmat, Chair of the National Counterterrorism Committee,
- Members of the Committees,
- Participants in the Training programme.

I am pleased and honoured to be part of the opening of this National Training on Countering Violent Extremism & Terrorism. As EU's Counter Terrorism Coordinator I am in Baghdad to strengthen the bonds with the Iraqi Government. I was encouraged by a visit to my Office in Brussels late last year by representatives from the National Security Advisor's Office and the Ministry of Interior. Glad to see faces from this encounter today.

I have timed my visit to coincide with this training event, because it is a great example of a collaborative venture between Iraq and the European Union. I expect this cooperation to continue and deepen. This training is a strong message about our willingness to work closely together to counter terrorism and preventing violent extremism.

Violent extremism and terrorism are ever-evolving challenges for governments and civil society all over the world. It is destructive nationally, and it is undermining international peace and security. Iraq knows this all too well.

We congratulate your victory over Daesh occupation. We are aware of the immense suffering and costs this entailed. You saved Iraq, but you were also key to the final military defeat over Daesh. Iraq and EU are partners in the Global Coalition against Daesh.

Let me also congratulate Iraq's success late last year to have United Nations declare 12 of February the International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and when Conducive to Terrorism. This is to me an indication that you combine the fight against terrorism with the prevention of terrorism, and you place it in an international context. I strongly support this approach.

Moreover, I am glad to see that the Iraqi Government is committed to implementing the 2016 UN Secretary General's Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism.

We appreciate and value all the efforts made by the National Security Advisor and many of you present today to strengthen the country with the elaboration of strategies for both Countering and Preventing terrorism and violent extremism. You have found the means and strength to overcome the atrocities committed. You move forward to prevent terrorism from again gaining a foothold in the country, and to counter it, when and where it may try to reappear.

The training today and tomorrow should hopefully provide a fruitful exchange of experiences and best practices on implementing the strategies.

Terrorist threat in the EU

Let me turn to the main terrorist threats confronting the EU. Daesh and Al Qaeda continue to pose the biggest threat. The end of Daesh's territorial hold in Syria and Iraq has, for the time being, reduced the risk of large-scale coordinated attacks, as the EU experienced in 2015 and 2016.

However, both Daesh and Al Qaeda remain strong with many affiliates around the world. We have to avoid that new sanctuaries for terrorists arise, from which attacks can be planned or carried out worldwide. No country is safe from a terrorist attacks on its territory.

Today, attacks in the EU are typically committed by lone actors. They are often inspired and radicalized through the internet for example by propaganda from Daesh. Extremism in local communities, including in Europe, can also be strengthened by **radicalized prison leavers and returning foreign terrorist fighters.**

Today we are witnessing the rise of right-wing violent extremism and terrorism in the EU. They excel in spreading their propaganda online, and seek to recruit young males. Several plots have been foiled, others resulted in loss of life.

In addition, there is a growing concern in the EU about the potential for violence among radicalised individuals and groups harbouring strong anti-system views. Conspiracy beliefs and disinformation are common features. This can be *exploited by extremist and violent groups*.

EU approach to Countering and Preventing Terrorism and Violent Extremism

EU's Counter Terrorism Strategy aims to reduce terrorism, whilst respecting human rights. It is based on four pillars: **to respond, to protect, to pursue and to prevent.**

Allow me to elaborate on the last: to prevent. In the EU we have built a strong Radicalisation Awareness Network, RAN in which practitioners and policymakers can exchange best practices on prevention of radicalization, disengagement, reintegration and rehabilitation programs, as well as on assistance to victims.

The EU supports through this network's capacity building projects, with emphasis on promoting values such as human rights, gender equality, and democracy.

We are also engaged in preventing online radicalisation. One tool is the EU Internet Forum. It provides a collaborative environment for EU governments and major tech firms. The aim is to reduce accessibility to terrorist, violent extremist and illegal content and increase effective counter-narratives.

Another tool is a legislation from last year, which obliges tech firms to take down terrorist content on their servers within one hour after being made aware of this.

Soon, I hope that we will be able to look into the issue of the algorithms of the tech firms that boost the extremist online content with the purpose of keeping viewers online to gain advertising income.

The EU is also mobilizing 'soft' policies – education, sports, culture – to provide opportunities where disadvantaged and 'at risk' youth can find friendship and purpose in life without the influence of extremism.

Regarding our cooperation with external partners, unfortunately, many parts of the world cannot fully benefit from development assistance because of the insecurity caused by terrorists and violent extremists.

This is why, the EU has invested heavily in projects to build community resilience to terrorism and violent extremism around the world, in partnership with local organisations. The EU supported *Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund* – or in short ‘GCERF’ is a leader in this field.

We advocate for a 'whole of society' approach, linking up national governments, civil society and the private sector. Those are the principles behind the EU supported *'Strong Cities Network'* which promotes exchanges of experience worldwide between municipalities on preventing violent extremism.

EU engagement in Iraq

In Iraq, the EU has been pleased to cooperate over the past years with the Government to support a series of partnership aimed at countering terrorism and violent extremism.

Our colleagues at the EU Advisory Mission are working with their counterparts in the Office of the National Security Advisor and the Ministry of the Interior to support implementation of the national strategies on countering violent extremism and counterterrorism.

Through other EU partnership programmes, we are supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of juveniles with alleged association with ISIL: the STRIVE Juvenile programme - in cooperation with the Office of the National Security Advisor, the Ministry of Justice, and the High Judicial Council.

As I speak, a workshop on the treatment and conditions of juveniles in detention is taking place to strengthen the capacities of professionals from the Baghdad Rehabilitation Schools.

It is equally important to reflect on the roles of women - be it as victims, perpetrators, or as important participants in **the prevention and countering of** terrorism and violent extremism. Practical integration of women and girls is, in my view, critical to deliver sustainable results.

Soon, the EU will initiate a programme in Iraq with the 'Hedayah Center' on how to address this and other important issues in preventing and countering violent extremism.

Last year, the EU had the privilege to launch a specific training dedicated to female law-enforcement officers.

In my dialogue with the Iraqi Government, I shall seek to learn how EU can assist Iraq in the difficult but essential process the Government has initiated of repatriating its citizens from al Hol camp, and ensure a successful reintegration into local communities. EU funding has already been made available in support of the reintegration process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in close coordination with the Office of the National Security Advisor, we have designed this training in partnership with you, and we have carefully listened to your needs. The experts we have selected have between them decades of experience in countering violent extremism, their knowledge has been informed by research, and by the lessons learned from delivering programmes throughout the world.

They will be sharing their experience on what drives violent extremism, what has worked, and what did not work, and what are the challenges.

This, coupled with your first-hand experience from a very difficult context on the ground in Iraq, can only lead to fruitful and productive exchanges. I am convinced that this cross-fertilization will leave everybody wiser - both the experts and participants.

We consider this training to be the starting point of a longstanding engagement in mutual learning and knowledge sharing between Iraq and the EU.

Thank you for coming to this training, and we look forward to future engagement on the important topics of the workshop.

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