

**MAJALAT - Webinar Series
OUTCOME DOCUMENT**

Security and Countering Violence in the context of COVID-19

Summary:

On 10 June 2020, the thematic webinar on Security and Countering Violence in the context of COVID-19 was held by the MAJALAT Consortium as part of a larger webinar series which will span from the end of May to the end of September. The series will also cover 5 other thematic areas, namely Economic Development and Social Dialogue, Migration and Mobility, Governance and the Rule of Law, Climate Justice, and the cross-cutting thematic of Youth. The objective of this specific webinar was to reflect on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the issues of Security and Countering Violence in the Euro-Mediterranean region and to follow-up on the recommendations that have been made during the 2019 MAJALAT activity cycle. The discussions particularly focused on the issues of the fight against violent extremism, digital security, violence against women, and conflicts and social cohesion.

Participants first discussed the various emergency laws imposed in many countries of the Neighbourhood South region. In this context, it is clearly visible how some governments systematically violate fundamental rights under the pretext of protecting their population against the pandemic. In Egypt, Algeria and Morocco public freedoms have been restricted while the freedom of expression is being violated. The authorities' general response to the health crisis was not based on respect of human rights. Furthermore, in Israel and Palestine the situation deteriorated in terms of rights and freedoms. Some States' response did not at all take into consideration the impact of the crisis on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It rather left a void which was filled by the civil society itself. The latter found itself in a situation where it had to replace State authorities since basic rights like right to food and housing had to be ensured. Many public health systems in the NS region have collapsed and have not been able to respond to the crisis. Individual security, including health security, was therefore at stake. It is important to note that State security is not the only dimension which is of importance when discussing security issues and aspects. The security approach which has been chosen so far should therefore shift to a concept of citizen and social security. States have an obligation to ensure social security for all of their citizens.

During the following session of the webinar, the discussion moved on to the topic of violent extremism. In this regard, it is important to note that not only the external but also the internal sources of violent extremisms have been exacerbated by the current pandemic. However, these sources are multidimensional and we should therefore not ignore the fact that authoritarian regime's repression under the pretext of the fight against terrorism can be considered one of them. One major problem with regards to violent extremism in the NS region is the fact that there are not serious attempts being undertaken to deal with the immediate reasons as well as the root causes of it. Terrorist organisations are portraying this crisis as a «divine punishment». The current uncertainty constitutes a fertile environment for violent extremism which can then operate very easily. Once the State did not respond in an adequate and timely manner, these organisations used the opportunity to fill the void. COVID-19 will without any doubt complicate even more the struggle against violent extremism. The health crisis constitutes a convenient opportunity to extremist organizations in the NS region since inequalities will increase and repression and corruption will continue. The pandemic will most likely worsen the structural roots of extremism and violence which are, among others, ongoing conflicts, bad governance, inequalities and socio-political injustices, repression, and corruption. These regional weaknesses could be transposed to European societies which are themselves highly fragile under the current circumstances. In order to counter radicalization, security policies are not enough. There has to be more than a security response in order to counter violent extremism.



As part of the third session, the topic of shrinking cyberspace has been discussed. The imperatives of social distancing may lead to an acceleration of the spread of digital forms of activism and participatory processes such as citizen assemblies or public hearings conducted online. While we have seen the people's use of technology rising during the pandemic, many surveillance measures and restrictions have been introduced by a number of governments in the MENA region. New forms of technology, particularly social media, have fundamentally changed the way in which information is being created and spread. There has been a rise of sophisticated disinformation campaigns around the world. Surveillance tools could help governments to pre-emptively threaten, intercept and terminate any attempts to mobilise protest against the abuse of power. The fear of being closely monitored may lead to self-censorship which will restrict the work of CSOs in the MENA region. Before the pandemic, 13 Arab countries had legislations on cybercrime. With the MENA region being one of the most underrepresented areas in terms of per capita internet connectivity, it is highly likely that governments are trying to slow down internet growth out of fear that the democratization of internet access will undermine state control over information.

When introducing emergency laws, it is crucial that governments comply with Article 4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. According to this article, a country which is declaring a public emergency can take measures that restrict particular fundamental rights, but only "to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation". However, it is clearly observable that some countries in the NS region do not comply with this article. Algeria, for example, blocked three independent media websites during the current crisis while a new law which restricts freedom of expression in media and social media has already been passed. Digital security therefore remains a major challenge in the NS region.

The topic of violence against women is another crucial issue linked to security which has been discussed during the webinar. In this regard, it is especially important to go back to international texts under the current circumstances. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 recognizes the impact of violence on women during conflicts and war. There is a clear link between violence against women, women's rights and the issue of security such as there is a general link between human rights and the security situation of a country. Many declarations and statements have clearly established this link. There has been a surge in domestic violence during the current crisis. Unfortunately, there is very often a lack of services for affected people in the NS region. In addition, many countries provide their affected citizens only with a very weak access to the justice system. Civil society therefore has to play a role in this matter to counter the current surge in domestic violence. Women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic since they had already suffered from unequal treatment and violations of their rights in various areas before the crisis.

During the final part of the webinar, the effects of the pandemic on conflicts and social cohesion have been debated. In this regard, it is important to note that violence is not only physical. There are many forms of violence which have manifested themselves and aggravated during the crisis. This is an opportunity to relaunch initiatives of mediation between conflict parties. The current crisis should also be an opportunity to disseminate the message that the virus does not know any borders and that this is the right time to launch mediation attempts. The importance of civil society in maintaining and protecting social cohesion cannot be emphasized enough.

Conclusion:

The pandemic and its effects exacerbated already existing phenomena. Emergency measures taken by States did not take into account the human rights approach. Security and Countering Violence remain a top priority during pandemics and social crises. There are many sources of insecurity in the NS region which need to be taken into consideration. These sources are internal and external but also related to social crises, like unemployment or economic grievances, and conflicts. All these aspects feed violence and extremism. On the other hand, there has not been any regional or national strategy to try to tackle



the root causes of violent extremism while, unfortunately, this rhetoric has sometimes been used by States to oppress or limit freedoms of their citizens.

Furthermore, the crisis constituted a big opportunity for violent extremism because of two reasons: Firstly, the sanitary crisis spread fear, uncertainty and despair which represented a very fertile environment for extremism. Secondly, the State somehow withdrew from the social sphere and this gave an opportunity to new social actors to fill it. The current crisis will complicate even more the already multi-faceted and multicomplex issue of violent extremism due to a potential increase of inequalities, corruption and conflict. The fight of violent extremism will not be easier, but the ongoing situation will provide civil society with the opportunity to step in and try to spread an alternative narrative around the topic of state security which is usually promoted via countering violence.

Cyber security is another very important and affected topic during the pandemic. The pandemic seems to lead to an even bigger lack of stable digital rights. A number of States used this opportunity to penetrate even more internet users' space. Measures which were supposed to be extra-ordinary to deal with the current situation have been used as justification to limit the space of civil society. The vagueness and lack of clarity of the terms used in legal texts (such as "fake news") might lead governments to interpret them in a way which is more convenient to them and to systematically violate human rights.

Another negative effect of the current crisis is the horrifying increase of gender-based violence. While it is clear that there is a link between gender-based violence and security, the issues of violence against women, gender equality and respect of human rights should be cross-cutting issues across all policies. This pandemic has shown that the concept of security entails more than just State security and should therefore include fields like social security and human security. By bringing up new concepts and ideas, civil society has a great role to play in these areas.

Finally, the aspect of social cohesion must not be left out. Different risks have come up as a consequence of the pandemic, such as the risk of stigmatization or the growing gap between social classes. Just as much as for the other mentioned areas, civil society has an important role to play in this field. It can come up with alternative models of what security is and how it should be dealt with in light of the current crisis.

Recommendations:

One of the objectives of the mentioned webinar was to draft new recommendations for the European Union on the issue of Security and Countering Violence based on those which had already been agreed on during the Brussels Civil Society Forum 2019.

The following recommendations were agreed on by participants during the webinar:

Countering violent extremism

- The EU should support governments in reinforcing their efforts to fight the root causes of violent extremism, such as ongoing conflicts, bad governance, inequalities and socio-political injustices, repression, and corruption in order to prevent people from joining organisations aiming at combatting state structures and de-stabilizing societies.
- In light of the current pandemic, the EU should assist governments in stepping up their efforts to relieve their economies in order to provide the most vulnerable groups of the population with an economic perspective and prevent them from turning to violent extremism.



- The EU should advise governments to renew their security narrative and chose an approach which is more based on social and human security than on countering violence.

Digital security

- The EU should encourage governments to provide detailed definitions as well as a time-bound framework when it comes to the use of monitoring and surveillance measures during the health crisis.
- In this context, the EU should urge governments to create reporting avenues and allow activists and whistle-blowers to report violations without being prosecuted or monitored.
- Moreover, the EU should advise governments to ensure the participation of civil society in fighting this pandemic through new technological solutions allowing the protection of personal data and privacy. This should include the empowerment of responsible media and civil society organisations by providing them with access to accurate, timely and up-to-date information.

Gender-based violence

- Under the circumstances created by the current health crisis, the EU should support governments in increasing their expenditures in the field of women's rights protection as women are disproportionately affected by the pandemic due to pre-existing unequal treatment and violations of their rights.
- In this regard, the EU should highlight the need for concerned governments to collaborate with civil society on the issues of women's rights and gender-based violence in order to raise awareness among the population and prevent women from being disproportionately affected by economic and health crises.

Recommendations following the Brussels Civil Society Forum 2019:

2019 debates about security within the framework of Majalat revealed that defining the scope of this theme is a contested matter. Therefore, the idea to use the Brussels Civil Society Forum to define points that could lead to a mutually beneficial dialogue for civil society and EU representatives. For the Brussels Civil Society Forum, the following three entry points have been presented to guide the discussions:

1. How human rights are dealt with in the association agreements and in bi-lateral partnerships: the role of civil society in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in the programs of the EU and the respect for human rights in that regard.
2. Attacks on human security in the form of discrimination and violations of the rights to freedom of conscience as the situation in the South and North of the Mediterranean in this regard mirror one another
3. Addressing the role of women and youth in security policies

Moreover, in order to stimulate debates based on a broader understanding of what security entails the following recommendations for the Brussels Civil Society Forum debates had been prepared:



- Promoting and developing cultural exchanges between all the actors of civil society and by extension favouring freedom of movement,
- The need to include qualitative measures for assessing quantitative support;
- The necessity to link any security collaboration with a requirement of respect for fundamental rights
- Putting in place a policy and programmes to fight against racism and discrimination and for freedom of conscience
- Including youth in decision-making related to security, and the fight against all forms of violence, when it comes to revise the EU Neighbourhood Policy.
- Increasing political and financial support to youth-led initiatives for the promotion of peace and the prevention of violent extremism.

