



# ENC ANALYSIS



One Decade After the 2011  
Uprisings:  
Islamist Militancy in MENA as an  
EU Security Threat

NOVEMBER 2021

---

**Author**  
Ebtisam Hussein

# Contents of the Report

Contents of the Report	2
Brief Summary	3
About the author	4
Introduction	5
EU Attacks with MENA ‘Hands’	6
MENA Militancy After the Uprisings	8
What Feeds the Violence?	11
Conclusion: What could be done?	14
References	16

# Brief Summary

## **Extreme poverty and undemocratic governance fuel radicalization**

Extreme poverty evidently increased in MENA between 2011-2015, more than doubling from 2.1% to 5% (Bittar, 2020). The overall MENA ranking in terms of poverty is relatively high, when compared globally. For instance, in 2015, the global multidimensional poverty index showed Arab countries came third, among world regions, in terms of incidence of poverty, but came second in terms of intensity of poverty (Alkire et al., 2015, 4). Strikingly, in 2017, 40.6% of Arab countries populations lived in poor households, with about 13% of them living in extreme poverty (Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report, 2017), let alone that vulnerability to poverty is high in the Arab region and increasing the poverty line from 1.9\$/day to above 4.0\$/day would actually show average poverty in Arab states is higher than the global average (Abu-Ismaïl & al-Kiswani, 2018).

## **COVID-19 has exacerbated the dangers of radicalization, due to the economic crisis.**

Most generally, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the pitfalls of MENA economies; MENA GDP losses, since the beginning of the pandemic crisis are estimated at about 227 billion dollars by the end of 2021 and government borrowing to deal with the crisis increased its debt from 46% in 2019 to 54% in 2021; both the global and regional repercussions of the pandemic threaten 192 million people (up from 176) going into extreme poverty (Middle East and North Africa, updated 2021).

## **Autocratic politics is still a challenge across the region, further exacerbating the problem.**

MENA is the region with the lowest score on democracy index (2010-2020) across world regions (Szmigiera, 2021). The 2018 Global Democracy Index (GDI) showed only Tunisia as a flawed democracy and very few hybrid regimes (including Iraq, Morocco and Lebanon) all other MENA countries were different grades of authoritarian regimes (Appendix E: Democracy Index Scores, 2018).

## About the author



**Dr. Ebtisam Hussein** is an ENC academic council member and Associate Professor of Political Science at Cairo University (on full secondment). Since February 2019, she serves as Associate Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Sun Yat-sen University in China. She earned her PhD in 2014 from the Free University of Berlin, where she studied as a scholar in a highly-specialized program titled the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies. Dr. Hussein's research focus comprises the Egyptian military, Islamism, repressive practices in

the public sphere and post-2011 MENA uprisings. She was awarded several international scholarships such as the cultural exchange program in Japan in 2005 and a Fulbright grant to study US politics and thought in 2006.

## Introduction

Terrorism is a global phenomenon and virtually all world countries are threatened by the prospect of undergoing an act of terrorism, with perpetrators from its citizens or from outsiders or both. For many years, the EU has been faced with multiple, and in many times fatal, terrorist attacks of different political motivations, constituting a serious security challenge to the EU. Among all sorts of terrorist acts, Jihadist militancy is posing the most imminent and deadliest menace to EU security. In 2020, Jihadist terrorism was responsible for more than half the deaths and almost all the injuries incurred in result of terrorist attacks; this is a huge source for concern, esp. that the number of deaths and injuries inflicted from these attacks on the EU doubled between 2019 and 2020 (Terrorism in the EU, 2021). In a globalized/strongly-connected world, Europe isn't immune against security threats in other parts of the globe.

Acknowledging the seriousness of the security threat and the ways hi-tech could be/are employed for Jihadists militancy to thrive, the EU has spent billions of Euros on its efforts to secure its member countries from the fatalities and destruction incurred. Although the responsibility for securing member states lies mainly within the member states themselves, EU efforts are both massive and comprehensive including: harmonizing definitions of terrorist attacks and their penalties, border protection, regulating firearms, information and data sharing, etc (Voronova, 2021). Most recently, out of a realization that the internet could be effectively employed by militants to plan, orchestrate and carry out their attacks, the EU has recently invested heavily in cybersecurity; the regulation on the dissemination of terrorist content online (Official Journal of the European Union, 2021) makes sure terrorist content is spotted and it is swiftly taken down (Terrorist Content Online, 2021).

Nonetheless, in order to enhance its own member states' security, the EU is compelled to seek updated knowledge and assessment of militancy in neighboring countries. During the last two decades, more than once, and in many ways, it suffered from the pitfalls of proliferating militancy in neighboring countries; terrorists either coming from or coordinating with peers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>1</sup> countries have posed a continuous cross-border challenge to EU security; with some attacks carried out by those inspired by

---

<sup>1</sup> In this analysis, the focus is on Arab MENA countries, so Turkey, Iran and Israel are excluded.

Jihadist militancy (Terrorism, n.d.). MENA countries evidently incubated many culprits, even when their governments overtly denounced and severely prohibited militancy; often adopting controversially-broad laws that would permit human rights violations (Dunne & Wehrey, 2014). The infamous Islamic State ISIS (est. 2013), which is the legal heir of al-Qaeda militant group, attained strongholds in several MENA countries, including: Iraq, Yemen and Syria, and carried out operations in more countries across the region after the 2011 uprisings (Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State, 2019), defying state security establishments and killing hundreds of civilians and military personnel. In 2016, the number of people killed by ISIS or in coordination with it outside Syria and Iraq was estimated to be more than 1200 people (Yourish et al., 2016).

The aforementioned connection and evident mobility of the culprits, along with grave consequences of such attacks on EU security, necessitate profound understanding of Islamist militancy's prospect in MENA today for its potential negative impact on EU security. It's imperative for the EU to investigate the phenomenon of post-uprisings Islamist militancy in post-uprising MENA countries as well its contributing factors .

## EU Attacks with MENA 'Hands'

Europe has long been a target for terrorist attacks. As highlighted in the introduction, globalization, the increased connectedness of today's world posed a serious challenge for European security through the relative ease by which militants can communicate, plan and carry out their attacks. This connectedness was evident in several attacks, as evinced by the coordination element between those born or raised in the EU and those operationally based in MENA in some of the attacks (Terrorism, n.d.). Highlighting three stark instances might be useful in this context:

-In March 2004, Sports bags carrying bombs were used to destroy commuter trains in Madrid; the attack killed tens and injured hundreds (Barrett, 2007). At first, the Spanish government accused the separatist ETA movement and the attacks triggered massive demonstrations against violence in Spain, but then it became clear al-Qaeda was the real mastermind and culprit. In October 2007, several culprits with origins from North Africa and a few Spanish citizens were convicted for planning, assisting and/or carrying out these explosions (Ray, updated 2021).

-In November 2015, Paris witnessed one of its most brutal terrorist attacks in its modern history, when ISIS militants orchestrated and carried out several simultaneous attacks on the Bataclan Concert Hall, a stadium, bars and restaurants killing more than a hundred people (Paris Attacks in 2015, 2021). It turned out that they were planned in Syria by ISIS (Momtaz, 2021); in a recent trial hearing of the only militant surviving from the cell targeting the attacks and the chief suspect, Salah Abdel-Salam, he claimed he was retaliating French army combating ISIS Jihadists (Paris Attack Trial, 2021). Although some of the militants who carried out the attacks were European nationals, many of them had origins in MENA countries and received militant training in Syria (Paris Attacks: Who Were the Attackers?, 2016).

-In March 2016, Belgium was struck by a serious terrorist blow when its international airport and a metro station were simultaneously attacked (bombings) and ISIS claimed responsibility for both. At that time, Belgium was the highest in number of Islamist groups recruits per capita in Western Europe (Grounds for Concern, 2016). More than thirty people were killed and around 340 were injured in these two attacks (Brussels Explosions, 2016). The profiles of the culprits weren't so different from that of the 2015 Paris attacks, with a record of militant training in the Middle East (Ibrahim and Khalid el-Bakraoui, 2016).

One can think of at least three key logics which compete, inter alia, for elucidating the motives of terrorists to attack European countries. On one hand, there is the theory of the "atheist secular world" that doesn't follow rules of god, making it a society of sinners. On the other, there is the account on the west, including Europe, depicting Islam as the enemy, making it difficult for Muslims to live peacefully in European countries. And certainly there is the accusation that European countries are culprits to the political repression many third world countries suffer through their alliance to corrupt ruling regimes. From its citizens, the EU has been repetitively blamed for allowing immigrants, who are allegedly more prone to engage in crime and terrorism to live in its member states; its refugee policies have been central to this critique (Berry et al., 2015). Needless to say, the recent rise of the extreme right in national and local elections across Europe is largely capitalizing on the alleged pitfalls of the EU refugee policy (Al Yafai, 2019). But even without refugees pouring from MENA into the EU in massive numbers, the fear of Islamizing Europe through the Muslim minorities living in Europe has been part of Europe's intellectual debates for many years (Ayaan, 2005). Quite often, the EU finds itself sandwiched between two commitments: one for the security and safety

of its citizens and the other for its values and ideals of freedom, human rights and democracy.

## MENA Militancy After the Uprisings

The 2011 uprisings triggered strong shocks to ruling regimes and their long-established structures as well as instigated high expectations for political change (Dalacoura, 2012). The uprisings and their associated political upheaval reportedly gave some space to the flourishing of Islamist militancy across the region, partly due to the relative, temporary, though in cases prolonged, weakening of security controls in various MENA countries. In this section, highlights will be dedicated to Arab MENA countries, which went through significant political upheaval in 2011 and where Jihadi militants have been evidently active after the uprisings; namely: Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria.

After the historic uprising ousted long-time President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, several militant attacks signaled a security crisis in Egypt. In February 2012, a soccer game riot escalated violently leading to the death of around 70 people and resulted in Judicial death sentences (in 2013) for involvement in the incident to 21 soccer fans. This horrifying massacre and its subsequent trial triggered outrage at the lack of public security (Mohamed & Awad, 2013). In August 2012, militants attacked a security checkpoint and stole two military vehicles which were loaded with explosives and headed across the border when one exploded and the other was disabled by the Israeli military (Berti & Gold, 2012). Even worse, after the 2013 ouster of president Mohamed Morsi, the country reportedly suffered a surge in militant attacks across the country (Raghavan & Mahfouz, 2018); the culprits in some of the attacks had connections with or received training in neighboring Libya (Egypt hits Libya, 2017).

In other countries, where the post-uprising security situation was significantly worse due to prolonged political conflict and armed struggle, militants could strike more freely. For the last seven years, Yemen spiraled down a brutal civil war and the conflict instigated both security and humanitarian crisis, where regional players were involved and UN peace efforts stalled. Islamist militants like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its offshoot Ansar al-Sharia had already functioned before the 2011 uprising (Country Reports on Terrorism 2017, 2018); AQAP declared its support to the secessionist Southern Movement, as part of its aspiration to build an independent Islamist State in Southern Yemen in 2009 (Day,

2010). In 2015, AQAP, captured Mukalla city and freed around three hundred of its imprisoned inmates. Notably, it provided Yemenis in some areas with public services, which boosted its support (Robinson, updated 2021). In the same year, it captured the city of the oil terminal Ash Shihr and controlled it for over a year; and its financial resources were enormous at that time: it smuggled routes, looted banks and controlled the seaport imposing levies on imports. The Central Bank robbery alone poured around 100 million US dollars to its finances (Yemen's al-Qaeda, 2017, 17). Although Mukalla was liberated in April 2016 (Baron, 2018), and the group was evidently weakened through various factors including its fierce conflict with its main militant rival in Yemen the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) from July 2018 till February 2020 (Carboni & Sulz, 2020), it is well entrenched in the Yemeni society (Cigar, 2018). It's highly resilient, adaptable and has strong local networks in the country (Green, 2019; Ardemagni, 2020); most recently, it showed clear signs of resurgence with multiple attacks on military sites in March-April 2021 (Mahmoud, 2021).

Since Qaddafi's ouster and assassination in October 2011 (Libya Revolt of 2011, n.d.), Libya has been torn for almost a decade between the two key powers: the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Government of National Accord (GNA) with many regional powers involved to back either of the two parties (Husseini, 2021). Jihadist militants have also been part of the Libyan scene during this prolonged territorial and armed conflict. In 2014, according to some estimates, Libya had around 1,600 armed militia groups (Shelton, 2019) and Daesh has a long record of terrorist attacks in the country as well; sometimes using the country as a base to launch attacks on neighboring countries. Their attacks included the killing of a Dutch journalist (2016), an attack on a checkpoint in the Jufra region and a suicide bomb in the court building of Misrata (2017), people injured, kidnapped or killed in an attack on the city of Tazerbo, several attacks in Tripoli, one on the High National Election Commission in Tripoli, another on the Oil Corporation and another on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018) (Foreign Travel Advice, n.d.). In 2019, the group was also responsible for kidnapping the LNA security official and killing a former Libyan diplomat as well as burning many houses across the country (Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Libya, 2020). Most recently, in June 2021, it launched an attack in Sebha city, killing and injuring several military officers (United Nations in Libya, 2021).

Starting 2011, the Syrian society was trapped in the brutal war between Bashar's government and its armed opposition. Typically, the turbulent security situation, instigated by the prolonged civil war, gave space to militant groups to flourish and

carry out several attacks against civilian and military targets (Byman, 2018). Two key groups are central to the situation in Syria: the Kurdish PKK and the ISIS. The PKK has been engaged in militant attacks on the Syrian territory more than once and most recently (June 2021) was held responsible for an explosion that killed and injured civilians in the city of Afrin; its Syrian offshoot is the YPG (Several Killed, 2021). Turkey has been involved, on its own initiative, in the combat of PKK/YPG more than once; it launched three massive operations in Northern Syria in between 2016-2019, allegedly in an attempt to obstruct the creation of a terror corridor and allow residents to settle peacefully (Gencturk & Aydogan, 2021). ISIS is the other key group; ISIS entered Syria through the border with Iraq, and then used its presence in Syria in order to take over vast areas of western Iraq (Itani, 2016). It was responsible for numerous terrorist attacks since they entered Syria (Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State, 2019), and is evidently still active in the north eastern part of the country, launching tens of attacks that include bombings, kidnapping and beheadings, where civilians are visibly jeopardized.

Today, ISIS is believed to hold full control over some cities where they retaliate from those supporting either the Bashar regime or the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which collaborates with the regime in its fight against ISIS (Thomson, 2021). Although the SDF announced the end of the last stronghold of ISIS in Syria in March 2019, its militancy seems to be still very imminent on Syrian territory, using the Syrian desert with its sparse population as security jurisdictions connected to security cells across the country to facilitate its return (Khani, 2021). Yet, the Syrian case is peculiar: whereas Syria accuses Turkey of committing war crimes and exploiting resources in the territories it illegally occupies (Syria Committed to 'Combating, 2021), Syria is accused of sponsoring terrorism, extorting families of detainees, and making revenues from illegal narco export business conducted on its territory (Rosenblatt, 2021). Today, it is one of the very few countries (a total of four) who are on the US State Sponsoring Terrorism (SST) list (State Sponsors of Terrorism, 2021).

To highlight these four MENA countries above is not to imply, other MENA countries were either safe or immune from the Jihadist militancy threat; they were hit by terrorism in differing intensities: Morocco (2011) (Ben Abboudi, 2019), Algeria (2013) (Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Algeria, 2014), Lebanon (2015) (Barnard, 2015) and Tunisia (2019) (Serrano, 2020) suffered from Jihadist militancy and its destruction. Finally, although Iraq is a key regional stronghold for ISIS, it's not highlighted here because, as stated above, the focus is on countries which went

through significant political upheaval in 2011, and experienced strong Jihadist activity.

## What Feeds the Violence?

What one can easily learn from Jihadist attacks across the world is that militarily combating it, though quite necessary, is never a guarantee that they would be eradicated or that more attacks won't be carried out in the future. The EU exerts insurmountable efforts to enhance its domestic security and combat terrorist organizations (Voronova, 2021), but the threat is not yet over: innocent people are still killed, injured and horrified across Europe... This terrorist menace yielded an emphasis on the leading factors in relevant research on terrorism and ways to combat it, making it more difficult for terrorist groups to exist, proliferate and function, under the big motto "draining or drying up the swamps" (Lai, 2007).

Nonetheless, aside from combating terrorist groups and severely penalizing their activities, there is a set of factors that are likely to create a fertile environment for Jihadist militant groups to promote their doctrines and recruit their members who represent both potential and actual culprits of militant attacks. These include economic hardships, such as poverty and unemployment (Fighting Poverty to Build a Safer World, 2005) on one hand and political repression, as autocratic practices and violating human rights on the other. Although there is some scholarly controversy regarding the "soundness" of using regime type (democratic versus autocratic) as a key variable towards explaining the presence of militant groups and terrorist activities (see Chenoweth, 2006; Wilson & Piazza, 2013; Magen, 2018), and empirical evidence for a linear correlation is still largely missing (see Testas, 2004; Lutz & Lutz, 2010), one can safely assume that if democracies allow citizens the freedom to express their opinions and elect their government, making it difficult for terrorists to thrive (Shahrouri, 2010), then regimes which use repression/coercion to "manage state affairs" and maintain their political power offer terrorist groups a ready-made *raison d'être*, by promoting their grievances and blocking channels for political expression. In fact it was one key explanation to the inhumane 9/11 attacks on the United States, under the banner of "Why Do They Hate Us?", depicting the attacks, *inter alia*, as retaliating the US as a sponsor for autocratic regimes in many parts of the world including MENA (Wallechinsky, 2021).

One key challenge to EU security today is the prolonged and protracted presence, with varying degrees, of these leading factors boosting the chances for Jihadist militancy to thrive in MENA countries. Extreme poverty evidently increased in the region between 2011-2015, more than doubling from 2.1% to 5% (Bittar, 2020). The overall MENA ranking in terms of poverty is relatively high, when compared globally. For instance, in 2015, the global multidimensional poverty index showed Arab countries came third, among world regions, in terms of the incidence of poverty, but came second in terms of intensity of poverty (Alkire et al., 2015, 4). Strikingly, in 2017, 40.6% of Arab countries populations lived in poor households, with about 13% of them living in extreme poverty<sup>2</sup> (Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report, 2017), let alone that vulnerability to poverty is high in the Arab region and increasing the poverty line from 1.9\$/day to above 4.0\$/day would actually show average poverty in Arab states is higher than the global average<sup>3</sup> (Abu-Ismaïl & al-Kiswani, 2018).

Unemployment in MENA is not less oblique than the poverty indicator; youth unemployment has been (15-24) the highest in the world for more than two decades in 2018 (Kabbani, 2019), In 2019, more than a quarter (25.7%) of MENA youth were unemployed (Unemployment, Youth Total, retrieved 2021). Youth unemployment is profound partly because its share doubles overall unemployment rate (Ahmed, 2012). In an area already plagued with lack of jobs and opportunities for youth, COVID-19 exacerbated this MENA economic challenge; estimates show that about 300 million people will enter the job market in less than thirty years (by 2050) (Belhaj, 2021).

Most generally, the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the pitfalls of MENA economies; MENA GDP losses, since the beginning of the pandemic crisis are estimated at about 227 billion dollars by the end of 2021 and government borrowing to deal with the crisis increased its debt from 46% in 2019 to 54% in 2021; both the global and regional repercussions of the pandemic threaten 192 million people (up from 176m) going into extreme poverty (Middle East and North Africa, updated 2021). Moreover, the MENA oil exporters, mainly the GCC countries, fell under the pressure of the declined oil prices in 2014-2016, going down from 112\$

---

<sup>2</sup> The countries covered in this 2017 report were Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen.

<sup>3</sup> The countries in the World Bank Poverty Index update (2013-2015) under the “Arab region” were Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen.

(June 2014) to 31\$ (January 2016) which is about 70% reduction (Prest, 2018), with the combined effects of the pandemic and the associated oil price decline of 2020 (Engebretsen, 2020), which have resulted in shocks to commodity markets in GCC countries, with largest fiscal deficits-likely to persist till 2023- in three of them, namely, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain (GCC Countries Back on Path, 2021). Across the region, armed conflict and political instability are making it more challenging for MENA governments to provide public services and reduce the consequences of the pandemic with available resources (Middle East and North Africa, updated 2021).

Political factors are not in a much better condition...In MENA, political repression and human rights violations were already attributed key roles in the triggering of the 2011 uprisings (Dunne, 2021). Today, the autocratic character of MENA regimes is still an undeniable fact and several international powers evidently promote political repression out of a belief that it works best for their own security (Bubalo, 2020); a logic which coincides with the aforementioned “Why they hate us?” scheme.

To be sure that repression and human rights violations are still part of MENA political realities today, one needs to skim through recent global democracy index and human rights reports. MENA is the region with the lowest score on democracy index (2010-2020) across world regions (Szmigiera, 2021). The 2018 Global Democracy Index (GDI) showed only Tunisia as a flawed democracy and very few hybrid regimes (including Iraq, Morocco and Lebanon<sup>4</sup>) and all other MENA countries were different grades of authoritarian regimes (Appendix E: Democracy Index scores, 2018). Similarly, in 2019, the global map of regime types shows the bulk of MENA regimes are authoritarian with very few exceptions of hybrid regimes or flawed democracy, not a single democracy. None of MENA countries achieved a score of 7 or higher (on a scale from 0-10); the highest was Tunisia with 6.72 (flawed democracy), followed by Morocco with 5.10 and the rest was below a score of 5 (Democracy Index 2019, 2020, 5). Human Rights shows similar patterns, swept by a wave of popular protests in different parts of MENA in 2019 (Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria), repressive measures resulted in blatant human rights violations included mass arrests, the use of excessive force and the death of hundreds of protesters (MENA: Renewed Wave of Mass Uprisings, 2020). In 2020, violence and armed conflicts led to serious violations of human rights, including casualties among civilians and damaging the infrastructure; malpractices of arbitrary arrests,

---

<sup>4</sup> Palestine is also a hybrid regime according to the Appendix, but the Economic Intelligence Unit uses “Palestine” while Pew uses “Palestinian Territories”.

tortures, enforced disappearances and lack of fair trials continued to be reported (United Nations Human Rights Report 2020, 2021).

Meanwhile, MENA human rights challenges are further complicated by the EU reportedly being mainly concerned about the security MENA threat, that resulted in a discard in EU policy for democracy and human rights in MENA (Middle East and North Africa: Regional Issues, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic is also believed to have contributed negatively to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms with some MENA countries using the crisis to extend periods of emergency law and state inability to prevent the spread of the virus in detention units and prisons (Annual Report 2020, 2021). Furthermore, in response to the pandemic, some MENA governments imposed excessive restrictions on freedom of expression; those who criticized their governments' pandemic-control policies and measures were also persecuted (Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa-Review in 2020, n.d.). Other malpractices included the frequently-reported use of broad definitions of terrorism in order to keep people detained, denying committing human rights violations, and abductions of peaceful demonstrators (Annual Report 2020, 2021). More generally, the pandemic impacted on countries with armed conflicts, weak economies and political instability as well as aggravating the suffering of vulnerable groups and overloaded MENA health systems (United Nations Human Rights Report 2020, 2021).

## Conclusion: What could be done?

Today, the menace of militancy to EU security is a high priority on the EU agenda. With all the policies, spending and preemptive measures, Europe is still challenged by casualties incurred by different terrorist groups but Jihadist militancy stays a big concern for objective reasons. The amount of damage and death brought about by these militants and the relative sophistication they could sometimes exhibit renders EU efforts to combat them and their activities a top priority for security decision-making. Although there is hope that recent EU measures for countering the use of the internet by militant groups can result in some reduction of terrorist incidents, as long as there are militant groups, the EU will have to seek new ways to preempt its countries from their violence and its consequences.

Based on the culprit profiles in Jihadist militant attacks, highlighted in this analysis, one key challenge to EU security is the persistent existence of these militants in neighboring MENA. News about the fall of ISIS doesn't mean its members are decidedly dismantled; there is strong evidence they can still plan and strike, causing harm to innocent civilians. Moreover, the factors helping Jihadist groups to thrive are still intact in MENA: poverty is high, unemployment is a long-term challenge and political repression is the norm in most MENA regimes, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic crisis reportedly exacerbating the economic and political challenges of the troubled region. Working to mitigate these challenges is a good strategy for the EU to enhance its own security.

Still, the real dilemma for EU neighborhood policy is to strike a balance between this concern for its own security and using its lever against MENA autocracies to adopt reform. It's a task certainly easier said than done but the EU should think of its long-term interests. Supporting or turning a blind eye on autocracies might be practical in the short-term but it gives fertile soil for extremists to function and recruit members in MENA on one hand and gives Jihadists one good reason to target European societies on the other. The ongoing political instability in a number of countries, like Syria, Iraq and Yemen already gave ISIS strongholds and MENA governments don't seem to be doing a great job in containing these militants and their threat. Spending on weaponry, intelligence and investing in cybersecurity are all very well-needed and justified but they are not necessarily enough; the equation is simple: the more the suffering in MENA countries, the better the chances for militants to find ground and expand. If militants can't cross the borders into EU societies to launch their deadly attacks, they will try to inspire those inside the EU, who feel marginalized/disenfranchised into carrying them out on their behalf. In short, the "wellbeing" of citizens in neighboring MENA countries should be given more attention and dedication on the part of the EU to better disrupt and eventually eradicate Jihadist militancy.

## References

Abu-Ismaïl, Khalid and Bilal al-Kiswani (2018), Extreme Poverty in the Arab States: A Growing Cause for Concern, Economic Research Forum, October 16, at: <https://theforum.erf.org.eg/2018/10/16/extreme-poverty-arab-states-growing-cause-concern/>

Ahmed, Masood (2012), Youth Unemployment in the MENA region: Determinants and Challenges, IMF, June, at: <https://www.imf.org/external/np/vc/2012/061312.htm?id=186569>

Al Yafai, Faisal (2019), The EU's New Migration Policy is a Gift to the Far Right, Euractiv, Oct. 4, at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/opinion/the-eus-new-migration-policy-is-a-gift-to-the-far-right/>

Alkire, Sabina et al. (2015), Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), at: [https://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Global-MPI-8-pager\\_10\\_15.pdf](https://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Global-MPI-8-pager_10_15.pdf)

Annual Report 2020 (2021), MENA Rights Group, March 3, at: <https://menarights.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/MRG%202020%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

Appendix E: Democracy Index Scores (2018), Pew Research Center, at: [https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/11/PF\\_20.10.28\\_Restrictions11\\_appendixE.pdf](https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/11/PF_20.10.28_Restrictions11_appendixE.pdf)

Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report (2017), United Nations Beirut, E/ESCWA/EDID/2017/2, at: <https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/multidimensional-arab-poverty-report-english.pdf>

Ardemagni, Eleonora (2020), Beyond Yemen's Militiads, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Brief, April 8, at: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Yemen.pdf>

Ayaan, Ali (2005), Islam and the EU's Identity Deficit, The Brown Journal of World Affairs, Vol. 12(1), pp. 51-64.

Barnard, Anne (2015), Beirut, Also the Site of Deadly Attacks, Feels Forgotten, New York Times, November 15, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/world/middleeast/beirut-lebanon-attacks-paris.html>

Baron, Adam (2018), The Gulf Country that will Shape the Future of Yemen, The Atlantic, September 23, at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/yemen-mukalla-uae-al-qaeda/570943/>

Barrett, Jane (2007), Court Finds 21 Guilty of Madrid Train Bombings, Reuters, Oct. 31, at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-spain-trial-idUSL308491320071031>

Belhaj, Ferid (2021), MENA Unbound: Ten Years after the Arab Spring, Avoiding Another Lost Decade, The World Bank, January 14, at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2021/01/14/mena-unbound-ten-years-after-the-arab-spring-avoiding-another-lost-decade>

Ben Abboudi (2019), The Ongoing Fight to Contain Terrorism in Morocco, Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, Vol. 17 (21), November 6, at: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-ongoing-fight-to-contain-terrorism-in-morocco/>

Berry, Mike et al. (2015), Press Coverage of the Refugee Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries, United National High Commission for Refugees, December at: <https://www.unhcr.org/56bb369c9.pdf>

Berti, Benedetta and Zac Gold (2012), Security Vacuum in Sinai, The National Interest, Aug. 10, at: <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-security-vacuum-the-sinai-7317>

Bittar, Angie (2020), 7 Things to Know About Poverty in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), The Borgen Project, August 17, at: <https://theforum.erf.org.eg/2018/10/16/extreme-poverty-arab-states-growing-cause-concern/>

Brussels Explosions: What we Know about Airport and Metro Attacks (2016), BBC, April 9, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35869985>

Bubalo, Anthony (2020), The Path of Least Resilience: Autocratic Rule and External Powers in the Middle East, Lowy Institute, March 11, at:  
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/path-least-resilience-autocratic-rule-and-external-powers-middle-east>

Byman, Daniel (2018), 6 Counterterrorism Lessons from the Syrian Civil War, Brookings, February 27, at:  
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/27/6-counterterrorism-lessons-from-the-syrian-civil-war/>

Carboni, Andrea & Matthias Sulz (2020), The Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), December 14, at:  
<https://acleddata.com/2020/12/14/the-wartime-transformation-of-aqap-in-yemen/>

Chenoweth, Erica (2006), The Inadvertent Effects of Democracy on Terrorist Group Emergence, BCSIA Discussion Paper 2006-06, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, November, at:  
[https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/chenoweth\\_2006\\_06.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/chenoweth_2006_06.pdf)

Cigar, Norman (2018), The Enemy is US: How Allied and U.S. Strategy in Yemen Contributes to AQAP's Survival, Joint Special Operations University, Report 18-04, at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=813049>

Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Algeria (2014), US Department of State, April 30, at:  
<https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/tehis/vtx/rwmain?page=printdoc&docid=53622a088>

Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Foreign Terrorist Organizations: al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (2018), US Department of State, September 19, at:  
<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bc1f5a13.html>

Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Libya (2020), US Department of State, at:  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/libya/>

Dalacoura, Katerina (2012), The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications, International Affairs 88(1), 63-79.

Day, Stephen (2010), The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Middle East Program, no.108, March, at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen\\_south\\_movement.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_south_movement.pdf)

Democracy Index 2019: a Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protests, Economic Intelligence Unit, at: <https://www.in.gr/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Democracy-Index-2019.pdf>

Dunne, Charles (2021), The Seven Habits of Highly-Effective Autocrats: Key Strategies that Beat Down the Arab Spring and Keep Regimes in Power, Arab Center Washington DC, March 31, at: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-seven-habits-of-highly-effective-autocrats-key-strategies-that-beat-down-the-arab-spring-and-keep-regimes-in-power/>

Dunne, Michele and Frederic Wehrey (2014), US-Arab Counterterrorism Cooperation in a Region Ripe for Extremism, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October, at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/DunneWehrey\\_USArabCounterterrorism\\_Oct2014.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/DunneWehrey_USArabCounterterrorism_Oct2014.pdf)

Egypt hits Libya training bases with airstrikes after attack on Christian Coptics. (2017), Deutsche Welle, May 26, at: <https://www.dw.com/en/egypt-hits-libya-training-bases-with-airstrikes-after-attack-on-christian-coptics/a-38991437>

Engelbrechtsen, Rebecca (2020), The Impact of Corona Virus (COVID-19) and the Global Oil Price Shock on the Fiscal Position of Oil-Exporting Developing Countries, OECD, September 30, at: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-impact-of-coronavirus-covid-19-and-the-global-oil-price-shock-on-the-fiscal-position-of-oil-exporting-developing-countries-8bafbd95/>

Fighting Poverty to Build a Safer World: A Strategy for Security and Development (2005), Department for International Development, at: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa+/http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/securityforall.pdf>

Foreign travel Advice: Libya (n.d.), Gov.UK, at: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/libya/terrorism>

GCC Countries Back on Path to Economic Growth after Contraction due to Pandemic (2021), The World Bank, August 4, at:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/08/03/gcc-countries-back-on-path-to-economic-growth-after-contraction-due-to-the-pandemic>

Gencturk, Ahmet and Merve Aydogan (2021), Turkey Neutralizes 17 PKK/YPG Terrorists in Northern Syria, Anadolu Agency, Sep. 8, at:

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-neutralizes-17-pkk-ypg-terrorists-in-northern-syria/2358768>

Green, Daniel (2019), Defeating al-Qaeda's Shadow Government in Yemen, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Paper 159, at:

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/950>

Grounds for Concern: Belgian's Counterterror Responses to the Paris and Brussels Attacks (2016), Human Rights Watch, November 3, at:

[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/DunneWehrey\\_USArabCounterterrorism\\_Oct2014.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/DunneWehrey_USArabCounterterrorism_Oct2014.pdf)

Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa- Review in 2020 (n.d.), Amnesty International, at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/report-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

Hussein, Ebtisam (2021), The Libyan Conflict: Turkey Flexing its Muscles, FNF MENAPOL Blog, January 5, at:

<https://www.freiheit.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/libyan-conflict-turkey-flexing-its-muscles>

Ibrahim and Kahlid el-Bakraoui: From Bank Robbers to Brussels Bombers (2016), New York Times, March 25, at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/world/europe/expanding-portraits-of-brussels-bombers-ibrahim-and-khalid-el-bakraoui.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>

Itani, Faysal (2016), Taking on ISIS -and Assad, Democracy Journal, Winter 2016, no.40, at:

<https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/40/taking-on-isis-and-assad/>

Kabbani, Nader (2019), Youth Unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa: Revisiting and Reframing the Challenge, Brookings Doha Center, Policy Briefing, February, at:

[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Youth\\_Unemployment\\_MENA\\_English\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Youth_Unemployment_MENA_English_Web.pdf)

Khani, Shoshana (2021), The Regrouping of ISIS in the Deserts of Syria, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 12, at:

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ regrouping-isis-deserts-syria>

Lai, Brian (2007), Draining Up the Swamps, Conflict Management and Peace Science, 24 (4), SPECIAL ISSUE: The Relationship Between State Policies and Characteristics and Terrorism, pp. 297-310.

Libya Revolt of 2011 (n.d.), Britannica, at:

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Libya-Revolt-of-2011>

Lutz, James and Brenda Lutz (2010), Democracy and Terrorism, Perspectives on Terrorism, 4 (1), pp. 63-74.

Magen, Amichai (2018), Fighting Terrorism: The Democracy Advantage. Journal of Democracy, 29 (1), pp. 111-25.

Mahmoud, Ali (2021), Al Qaeda Shows Signs of Resurgence in Yemen, The National, April 10, at:

<https://acleddata.com/2020/12/14/the-wartime-transformation-of-aqap-in-yemen/>

MENA: Renewed Wave of Mass Uprisings met with Brutality and Repression in 'Year of Defiance' (2020), Amnesty International, Feb. 18, at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/02/mena-renewed-wave-of-mass-uprisings-met-with-brutality-and-repression-during-year-of-defiance/>

Middle East and North Africa (updated 2021), The World Bank, July 1, at:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/overview>

Middle East and North Africa: Regional Issues (2016), European Council on Foreign Relations, at: <https://ecfr.eu/scorecard/2016/mena/40>

Mohamed, Yousri and Marwa Awad (2013) Egypt Protesters Torch Buildings, Target Suez Canal, Reuters, March 13, at:

<https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-security-vacuum-the-sinai-7317>

Momtaz, Rym (2021), Paris Terror Trial: France Relives 2015 Attacks, Politico, Sep. 8, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58568278>

Official Journal of the European Union (2021), Eur-lex, May 17, at:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/784/oj>

Paris Attacks in 2015: Accused Complains of Conditions (2021), BBC, Sep.8, at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58486391>

Paris Attacks Trial: Abdelislam Blames France for Bombing IS (2021), BBC, September 15, at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58568278>

Paris Attacks: Who Were the Attackers? (2016), BBC, April 27, at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34832512>

Prest, Brian C. (2018), Explanations for the 2014 oil price decline: Supply or demand?, Energy Economics, 74 (August), pp. 63-75.

Raghavan, Sudarsan and Heba F. Mahfouz S. (2018), Gunmen in Egypt attack bus carrying Christians, Killing at least 8 and wounding 13, The Washington Post, Nov 2, at:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gunmen-in-egypt-attack-bus-carrying-christians-killing-at-least-7-and-wounding-14/2018/11/02/cadb679b-ab2f-4e28-98f0-47abd40f32fd\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gunmen-in-egypt-attack-bus-carrying-christians-killing-at-least-7-and-wounding-14/2018/11/02/cadb679b-ab2f-4e28-98f0-47abd40f32fd_story.html)

Ray, Michael (edit) (updated 2021), Madrid Train Bombings 2004, Britannica, at:

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Madrid-train-bombings-of-2004>

Robinson, Kali (updated 2021), Yemen's Tragedy: War, Stalemate and Suffering, Council on Foreign Relations, Sep. 2, at:

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/yemen-crisis>

Rosenblatt, Nate (2021), Does Treating Syria as a State Sponsor of Terrorism Advance or Hold Back US National Security Interests, The Atlantic Council, September 7, at:

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/does-treating-syria-as-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism-advance-or-hold-back-us-national-security-interests/>

Serrano, Francisco (2020), Putting up a Fight: Tunisia's Counterterrorism Successes and Failures, Middle East Institute, December 16, at:

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/putting-fight-tunisias-counterterrorism-successes-and-failures>

Several Killed, Injured in Northern Attack in Northern Syria (2021), TRT World, June 26, at:

<https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/several-killed-injured-in-terrorist-attack-in-northern-syria-47860>

Shahrouri, Nahla (2020), Does a Link Exist between Democracy and Terrorism?, International Journal on World Peace, DECEMBER 2010, Vol. 27, No. 4 (DECEMBER 2010), pp. 41-77.

Shelton, Tracey (2019), Moamar Gaddafi has been Dead Eight Years yet Libya is Still at War with Itself. What Went Wrong?, ABC.net, October 20, at:

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-10-20/libya-civil-war-gaddafi-eight-years-on/11210742>

Szmigiera, M. (2021), Level of Democracy according to the Democracy Index from 2010-2020, by Region, Statista, March 30, at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/681670/democracy-index-scores-by-region/>

State Sponsors of Terrorism (2021), US Department of State, at:

<https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/>

Syria Committed to 'Combating and Eradicating Terrorism', General Assembly Hears (2021), UN News, September 27, at:

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101442>

Terrorism (n.d.), EuroPol, at:

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-trends/crime-areas/terrorism>

Terrorism in the EU: Attacks, Deaths and Arrests in 2020 (2021), European Parliament, August 20, at:

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20210628STO07262/terrorism-in-the-eu-terror-attacks-deaths-and-arrests-in-2020>

Terrorist Content Online (2021), European Commission, at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/terrorist\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/terrorist_en)

Testas, Abdelaziz (2004), Determinants of Terrorism in the Muslim World, Terrorism and Political Violence, 16(2), pp. 253-273.

Thomson, Mike (2021), IS Brutality Returning to Syrian Towns, BBC, February 7, at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55887870>

Timeline: The Rise, Spread and Fall of the Islamic State (2019), Wilson Center, October 28, at:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>

Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate)- Middle East & North Africa (retrieved 2021), The World Bank, at:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ZQ>

Middle East & North Africa (2019), The World Bank, at:

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ZQ>

United Nations Human Rights Report 2020 (2021), United Nations: Office of the High Commissioner, at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/OHCHRreport2020.pdf>

United Nations in Libya statement on the ISIS-claimed attack in Sebha city (2021), Relief Web, June 7, at:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/united-nations-libya-statement-isis-claimed-attack-sebha-city>

Voronova, Sofija (2021), Understanding EU Counter-Terrorism Policy, European Parliamentary research Service, at:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/659446/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)659446\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/659446/EPRS_BRI(2021)659446_EN.pdf)

Wallechinsky, David (2021), Why the Hate Us? A 20-Year Update, All Gov, September 3, at:

<http://www.allgov.com/news/us-and-the-world/why-do-they-hate-us-a-20-year-update?news=860539>

Wilson, Mathew and James Piazza (2013), Autocracies and Terrorism: Conditioning Factors of Authoritarian Regime Type on terrorist Attacks, American Journal of Political Science, 57 (4), pp. 941-955.

Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base (2017), Crisis Group, Middle East Report N°174, February 2, at:

<https://d207landvip0wj.cloudfront.net/174-yemen-s-al-qaeda-expanding-the-base.pdf>

Yourish, Karen et al. (2016), How Many People Have been Killed in ISIS Attacks around the World, New York Times, July 16 at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/25/world/europe/expanding-portraits-of-brussels-bombers-ibrahim-and-khalid-el-bakraoui.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer>