

Mapping the Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in MENA and the Balkans

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Since 2001 there has been growing concern in academia and policy-making to explain and counter the threats posed by violent extremist groups (Stephens et al., 2019). The attempts of scholars and experts to understand the nature, structure, modus operandi and funding of violent extremism, seen as the most powerful global threat (and thus setting patterns, trends and profiles), have evolved into a new structure where religion is the framework and communication and recruitment strategies are one of the biggest challenges. Meanwhile, the relevance of socio-economic and political drivers is either overlooked or played down.

However, recent research on radicalization and violent extremism – the former understood as “the process of developing extremist ideologies and beliefs” and the latter as “ideologies that oppose a society’s core values and principles” (Borum, 2012) – indicates the relevance of socio-economic and socio-political inequality. The H2020 DARE Project (Dialogue about Radicalization and Equality) reveals from its empirical research that socio-political inequality could be even more important for preventing radicalization than reducing socio-economic inequality. Indeed, DARE’s findings point at the need to target individuals and groups (communities) who are considered to be discriminated against, marginalized or targets of injustice, as well as ensure the social conditions that will facilitate a higher level of respect and fulfilment of citizens’ socio-political rights (Franc & Pavlovic, 2018). At a policy-making level, radicalization has been addressed reactively, due to the strong impact of terror-

ist attacks. Religion and identity have been at the core of the approach, and although other driving factors such as poverty, education and social marginalization have been added to the radicalization equation, socio-political grievances, transnational dynamics, social perceptions and expectations, among others, have been neglected or not sufficiently explored in-depth. In the last decade, the increased access and sophistication of communication channels has driven research to studying narratives and counter-narratives, religious leaderships and religious education. Besides this, there is wide consensus on radicalization processes affecting particularly young people, although the question of why most of them do not get radicalized remains to be answered. Violent extremism is still being explained as the result of individual trajectories that are always described *post-facto*, and youth is looked at as “potentially radicalizable” and susceptible to radical drifts.

How do young people generate arguments to counter that presumption? How do they respond to their “potential radicalization” being taken for granted? What alternative argumentative resources do they share with their friends? Trying to answer these questions means highlighting the prominence of young people themselves in the face of violent extremism, and abandoning all perspectives that see them as passive victims or “the problem” in the radicalization process.

Testing the Drivers

Aimed at establishing a multi-dimensional map of drivers of violent extremism among youth aged 12-30 in eight different countries from the MENA region and the Balkans and identifying the interplay between them, the EU-funded project CONNEKT (CONTEXTS of Extremism iN mEna and BalKAn SocieTies)

has selected seven variables as potential drivers: religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, digital consumerism, socio-political grievances, cultural, educational and leisure opportunities and transnational dynamics.

Acknowledged as a “contributing factor to the development of radical opinions” (Orav, 2015), religious fundamentalism has been at the core of multiple research projects during the last decade. Much emphasis has been placed on the role of religious leadership and religious education, particularly when referring to Islam and Muslims. Despite the fact that most targeted countries have Muslim-majority populations, this project will include other forms of radicalization and violent extremism, linked with other sets of beliefs or motivations, and religion will also be taken into account in those countries that don't have a Muslim-majority population.

CONNEKT will explore both the relevance of socializing religion and its process of individualization, and the overriding socio-religious context in which these different relational dynamics interact. The role of religious leaders will be assessed from the perspective of collective dynamics, but in terms of prevention, other often overlooked actors and relevant leaders from civil society will be placed under the spotlight.

Violent extremism motivated by economic and territorial inequalities will be analysed from different perspectives, enabling interactions to be identified between geographic, demographic and socio-economic collective and individual grievances. According to social determinism, living in marginal contexts favours youth extremism; however, other arguments are emerging that offer a more nuanced standpoint regarding these processes. Providing a context for the arguments is one of the premises of this project, since this allows us to understand the social meanings young people are referring to.

However, the political situation in MENA and Balkan countries must always be kept in mind, especially those undergoing political transitions from authoritarian regimes and the ensuing social scenarios, where young people project their social expectations. Human rights violations can give rise to grievances and the very conditions that are conducive to the spread of radicalization and terrorist recruitment (Council of the EU, 2014). In deficient social and political contexts, where deprivation is not only a matter of resources but also of opportunities, this distorting fac-

tor is not alien to the way in which radicalization processes are understood. And, in the same way, the prevalence that this factor may have in every national context under study is, by itself, a prominent element in national security policies and in the creation of situations subject to greater or lesser degrees of pressure regarding the behaviour of young people.

Transnational dynamics and communication technologies have also added new vectors in the equation of violent extremism, very much linked to each other and with a strong impact on the creation of narratives. Therefore, the degree of transnationalism and digitalization of targeted populations and communities must be assessed and weighted as drivers and/or vehicles of radicalization and violent extremism. In particular, the role of diasporas should be taken into account, not only as an intrinsic bond linking dynamics in Europe, MENA and the Balkans, so that individual or group processes, perceptions and framings transcend the boundaries of states, but also in shaping new transnational solidarities, identities and motivations.

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Finally, from an innovative approach, CONNEKT aims to explore cultural opportunities in a broad sense. Therefore, not only educational opportunities and accomplishments will be studied, but also opportunities in culture, leisure and non-formal education. There is no doubt that education plays a key role in preventing violent extremism (Nordbruch & Sieckelink, 2018), but other areas such as non-formal education (Prinzjakowitsch, 2018), civil engagement and leisure are much less explored as areas of prevention, both in the literature and in practice. Since this is one of the areas where local agents and civil society actors can more easily intervene, drivers stemming from these fields have a strong potential for intervention by civil society and local actors.

The goal is not only limited to confirming or refuting the validity or relevance of widely accepted drivers

(such as religion or economic deprivation, for example), but efforts are also made to identify new potential drivers that might have a relative weight in catalysing violent extremism. Nevertheless, can drivers of violent extremism be alienated from the social perceptions that people develop or communities construct around them? Factors that may be conducive to radicalization and recruitment to terrorism can include perceptions of diverse natures, among them inequality, marginalization, social exclusion and difficult access to quality education. Those factors do not necessarily lead to radicalization and recruitment to terrorism by themselves, but may make the extremist narrative which supports or is linked to terrorism more appealing or legitimate (Council of the EU, 2014).

Therefore, whereas a top-down approach will look at how the State (macro) frames individuals (micro) and communities (meso), a bottom-up approach will explore how perceptions and expectations impact the relation and creation of narratives from a grass-roots perspective, from the individual and the community towards the State or even towards supra-state actors and dynamics. The interplay between different drivers analysed from different levels – supra-state, state, community and individual – will provide very valuable information on environments that are conducive to radicalization processes taking place, and will therefore help with their prevention.

Community Engagement: Connecting Drivers for Prevention

Traditional approaches have been more focused on detection or identification than on preventive long-term measures *per se*. Therefore, prevention is sometimes addressed more as a firewall against potential violent actions than as a long-term social investment. From a security approach, prevention is often seen as a step towards impeding behavioural radicalization, and thus too often intersects with the aim of detecting those with a potential to be violent extremists. On the other hand, prevention in the sense of building resilient communities should be focused on stages previous to cognitive radicalization. Even though advances have been made, monitoring individual behaviours and beliefs, a strategy assumed mainly by security approaches, has been

primarily addressed through police services. Particular criticism has been directed towards the impact these approaches have had on stigmatizing Muslim communities and rendering them both a source of risk and a “vulnerable group” at risk of “radicalization.”

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The body of literature addressing prevention has grown rapidly and involves different disciplines, but “rather than one discussion on prevention, there are multiple conversations within and between different fields” (Stephens et al., 2019). On the other hand, while work on collective dynamics has been less explored, it offers a broader reach, as it involves the participation of many social actors involved in the development of life in society. It is argued that communities can play a unique role in protecting young people from radical influences and in tackling the grievances that may give rise to radicalization (Briggs, 2010). There are two main ideas within the literature on the role of communities: “community engagement” and “community resilience.” Resilience, associated with strengths rather than with deficits, becomes an alternative to explicitly security-driven approaches. “Calls for engaging young people in political action in response to their frustrations may be seen as a response to critiques of approaches that deny the political agency of young people.” (Stephens et al., 2019).

This project, therefore, takes a step forward, identifying measures, strategies and actions related to collective dynamics and from a social and policy-making perspective that can promote the transformation of contexts, making them resilient rather than conducive to radicalization and violent extremism (Wimelius et al., 2018). The cross-regional approach comparing the MENA region and the Balkans will provide valuable information for all stakeholders – in the EU, the targeted regions and beyond – in order to better understand and prevent the threat of radicalization and violent extremism in the long term. During these

three and a half years, CONNEKT will undertake different stages of empirical research to complement, enrich and advance our knowledge on drivers and engage in bottom-up approaches to prevention that place youth narratives at the forefront.

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