

The Fluidity of Extremism: The Reshaping of Radicalization in MENA and the Balkans

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The war in Ukraine has had many spillover effects, ranging from higher energy prices to food insecurity. In Europe it has prompted a transformation of its security architecture and the geo-energy space. However, Russia's strong economic and military power in the Balkans has raised concerns about the peace and stability of the region. Indeed, the Russian invasion has been divisive in the Balkans, with some groups supporting Ukraine and seeing it as defending Europe against Russia and others backing the Russian position, bringing into play old allegiances of far-right groups and convergence on the notion of extreme ultranationalism (Morcos, 2022). The conflict entails the risk of exacerbating the existing political and ethnic divisions, which, coupled with the increased arms flows within Europe, could contribute to violent extremism (Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), 2022).

In the MENA region, with countries where more than 50% of wheat imports come from Russia and Ukraine, the interruption of the grain market is having negative repercussions on food security. Most Arab countries have adhered to neutrality, pragmatism and equidis-

tance. Detachment from a conflict that is seen as intra-European, the rejection of illegal occupation and the visibility of European double standards regarding international law, among other issues, have favoured such equidistance (Cherif, 2022). MENA governments have welcomed the emergence of a multipolar system that is seen as more balanced and opportunistic for the countries of the region.

However, the economic impacts will be paramount for the largest grain importing region in the world and for those countries dependent on energy imports. The inability to access basic food commodities and adequate standards of living can push people towards extremist narratives that provide them with avenues for channelling their discontent. The maintenance of social cohesion – bread riots have a long history in the region – will be based on the government's ability to protect citizens from price hikes. After a long season of droughts and loss of crops, the shortage of grain supplies and the price rise of heavily subsidized commodities such as bread or fuel will undoubtedly challenge the ability of governments to maintain social peace and prevent radicalization.

The H2020-funded project CONNEKT¹ (Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkans Societies), through its empirical research on the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism in both regions, has identified some emerging trends and patterns of the radicalization phenomenon in the light of current events in both regions. The understanding of the complexity and multi-faceted interactions among drivers in the two levels of analysis undertaken so far

¹ CONNEKT (Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies) is a research project that explores the drivers of radicalization and violent extremism among young people aged 12 to 30 in eight countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, Jordan, Kosovo, Morocco, North Macedonia and Tunisia. The project will map and establish interrelationships and specific significance of seven potential drivers within three different levels of analysis.

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(macro and meso) provides some key insights on the approach to violent extremism and its major trends. The relevance of the meso level, the context, is paramount in this research, understood not only as territorialized bordered spaces but as spaces of social interaction, where drivers acting at the macro, meso and micro levels converge. Drawing from the study of seven pre-identified drivers (religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, digital socialization, political claims and grievances, and educational, leisure and cultural opportunities) CONNEKT reveals the dominant role of state security actors and the disconnect between them and civil society actors dealing with mostly grassroots preventive strategies.

Mapping a Constellation of Drivers

Both the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) is a highly securitized domain in both regions, where hierarchization and lack of inter-institutional communication highlight the need for efficient coordination among state institutions and bodies dealing with the topic. Such an approach leaves little room for multidimensional strategies, particularly in the prevention field. In general, traditional approaches tend to be more focused on detection or identification rather than on preventive long-term measures. Therefore, prevention is sometimes addressed more as a firewall against potential violent actions than as a long-term social investment to building resilient communities. From a security viewpoint, prevention is often seen as a step towards impeding behavioural radicalization, and thus too often intersects with the aim of detecting potential violent extremists to be. Nevertheless, there is a growing acknowledgement of the fact that radicalization cannot be explained outside a given social context, where group dynamics favour these reshaped interactions between collective and individual root causes. Therefore, P/CVE requires a multidisciplinary engagement beyond security institutions to deal with the complex and evolving faces of radicalization processes (Torrekens and de le Vingne, 2020).

As for the type of actors involved, which is crucial for determining whether there is a “security monopoly” here, while in the Balkans greater involvement of CSOs has been identified, in the MENA region

P/CVE is mostly a matter of security-related state institutions. However, CSO involvement tends to be restricted to the field of prevention and social intervention and very much determined by the globally-set agenda. Rather than funding projects defined upon criteria identified by local grassroots organizations, it is the interests or agenda of the international donors that defines the approach and content of the programmes (Torrekens and de le Vingne, 2020).

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Furthermore, in both regions legislation suffers from the absence of consensual global definitions regarding radicalization and terrorism, which, in certain countries, permits their instrumentalization for political purposes. In such situations, there tend to be human rights violations. In the context of CONNEKT’s research it is notorious in the MENA region. Finally, political instability, coupled with the general absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, has also been identified as a hindering factor for the continuity and maintenance of P/CVE programmes (Ibid). Regarding the drivers of radicalization and VE, the data collected by CONNEKT reveals a prominent role given to religion as a driver of radicalization at the macro (state) level. The control of the religious field by the state in order to promote a moderate version of Islam and the promotion of religious institutions stand out as one of the main priorities, particularly in the MENA region. The Moroccan model

is regarded in this context as a success story. In the Balkans, tensions emerge among official and non-official religious institutions, strongly linked to a general mistrust of government-related organizations (Chirchi and Jrad, 2021). Contrary to the MENA region, the strategy of state supervision over religious affairs here is more a matter of discussion. In the Balkans, religion as a driver is considered when intersecting with other factors, such as economic deprivation and marginalization. Muslim Roma communities in Bulgaria stand out as a combination of such drivers with the religious dimension. In the Balkans, besides reluctance on the spreading of foreign ultraconservative narratives and the issue of foreign fighters, religion is also revealing an additional feature of certain far-right extremist groups, which emphasize Orthodox Christianity and white supremacy in their narratives (Demjaha and Peci, 2021).

Research at the meso (community) level links religion with poverty, political ideas and marginalization as the combination of drivers leading to radicalization. In the MENA region, religion is seen as an instrumentalized channelling medium and often claimed as a potential factor for resilience. In the Balkans, though, ethnonational identities seem to play a more relevant role than religion. In many case studies, religion appears strongly intertwined with digital socialization and transnational dynamics. Indeed, while in the Balkans digital socialization is considered a major driver at community level, in the MENA region, it is religious socialization that is seen as a factor to be taken into account.

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The economic driver is mostly considered as a matter of perception and intersects with other territorial inequalities, lack of education, culture or leisure opportunities and particularly with unemployment. In combination with other drivers, economic

deprivation can operate as an indirect trigger. According to CONNEKT's results, territorial inequalities is a driver that is almost ignored by state actors, while at the community level it stands out as a multiple player. The case of the (lack of) education, culture and leisure opportunities driver is similar to the previous one, also particularly linked to education access. In fact, such neglect might justify a greater investment of CSO activities in this field. Education is generally considered a key instrument to build community resilience, and when it functions as a driver it often intersects with religion and economic deprivation.

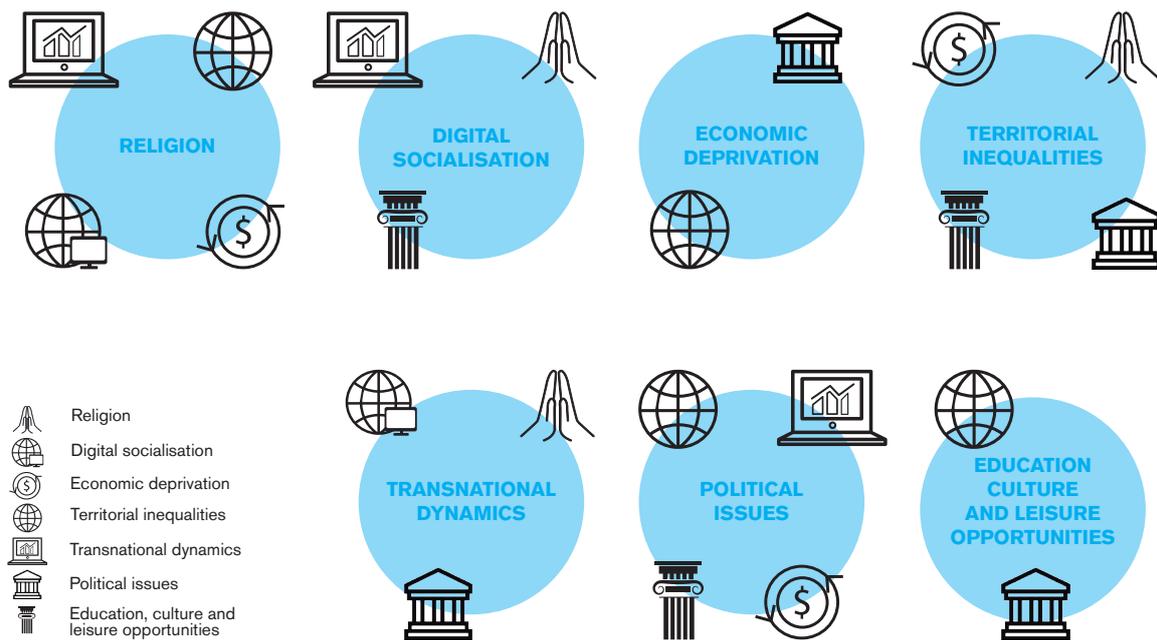
Culture, understood as social norms, has also been identified, particularly in the Balkans, where toxic masculinity or cultural racism appear to be embedded in extremist narratives. Indeed, meso level research carried out among football supporters in clubs in both regions demonstrates the intersection of political dissatisfaction, territorial rivalries, transnational networks and digital socialization with the leisure factor.

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The political driver tests, at the macro level, show that states that do not offer political opportunity structures are more likely to experience violent episodes. Political exclusion of ethnic or religious groups is also seen in both regions as a potential grievance leading to radicalization. At the community level the issue of rulers/rules breach is observed, but in combination with other more prominent drivers. The general mistrust regarding political elites and state institutions observed in both regions can also be replicated in the case of the media. This leads young cohorts to resort to alternative sources of information which eventually might expose them to hate speech and violent and extremist content. In some cases, teenagers seem to

CHART 25

Macro-level Constellation of Drivers



Source: Author's own production.

replace offline leisure socialization with digital socialization.

The digital factor is undeniably linked to transnational dynamics, another driver tested in CONNEKT's empirical research. If the macro level analysis insisted on the penetration of external ideologies and the influence of diasporas as the main features of the transnational driver, coupled with the issue of terrorism funding and the return of foreign terrorist fighters coming from Iraq and Syria, at the meso level transnational dynamics stand out as a more complex driver. In both regions, foreign interference and influence are seen as negative dynamics, which intersect with perceptions regarding international conflicts. In this sense, the war in Ukraine has impacted on the results of the research. The issue of foreign fighters also relates to those joining the war in Ukraine, in 2014 and 2022. While not considered terrorists, the apparent rising numbers might pose a security challenge (Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), 2022). Exposure to violence, experience in combat, access to arms and transnational networking might turn them into threats when returning home (Kapidžić, 2021).

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It's Politics!... Or Is It the Extremist Flow?

The war in Ukraine has confirmed the centrality of transnational dynamics as a driver, coupled with political ideas and digital socialization. Some of the drivers that have been central in research and policymaking in recent decades, such as religion or economic deprivation, seem to diminish their relative weight in comparison to transnational dynamics, territorial inequalities and political issues. Digital socialization seems to fully deserve the attention it has been granted in recent years. There is a cross-cutting digital dimension that seems to feed on transnational dynamics, both as a channel for and creator of content. The constellation of drivers drawn by the research at the macro level is considerably reshaped at the meso level and will probably add several layers

of complexity when completed with CONNEKT's results from the upcoming micro research. Once the mapping of the drivers is complete, research will focus on the community level to design strategies for prevention that address enhancing community resilience.

The idea of cumulative extremism (Martínez Lorenzo, et al., 2020) contributes to the understanding of radicalization and extremist trends, particularly in the Balkans. Radical ethnonationalism, white supremacy, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-Muslim, far right, anti-feminism... Diverse strands of extremism circulate and converge in the same groups, which are sometimes apparently opposed (Clarke and Al Aqeedi, 2021). The crisis in institutional confidence just provides a fertile ground for conspiracy theories (present both in far-right and jihadi milieus), anti-status quo, anti-imperialist or more recently anti-vaccine narratives to take root. The fluidity of extremism is reflected in the narratives shared by very distant movements and in the relative ease with which certain individuals or groups circulate along the flow of extremism (Blackman & Gartenstein-Ross, 2019). As a recent example, the incel ("involuntary celibate") movement lexicon is replete with racist language, which attacks women and minority groups, like the 8chan platform, thereby proving the "seamless relationship between the incel movement's politicized misogyny and the far-right's hardline views on immigration and race" (Hoffman and Ware, 2019).

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As a matter of fact, connections among totally opposed extremist groups – such as far right anti-Muslim and jihadi groups – become existential. Both present the dichotomies Islam/West, white/non-white, male/female (or any other sexual identity for that matter) and status quo/anti-imperialism as un-

deniable clashes. They feed each other: the stronger one gets, the more recruitment the other obtains. This is how violent extremism and radicalization processes might be reshaping, amid the fluidity and cumulative complexity of the phenomenon. This is one of the main challenges in understanding trends and evolutions in radicalization and violent extremism: escaping the reactive tendency of policymakers in

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dealing with P/CVE, i.e. not falling into the trap of rapid – and often doomed to little success – reactions to violent events, and investing in a greater knowledge of the processes that entail radicalization and the embracing of violent extremism. Only such a multidimensional understanding of the drivers and trends in radicalization will allow the design of effective, tailor-made and context-sensitive prevention strategies, involving the appropriate actors in the relevant stages of the process. One of the virtues of CONNEKT is precisely its cross-regional approach, which permits the identification of cross-cutting dynamics that contribute to a better understanding of the multiplexity and fluidity of extremism and engage in more effective intervention in radicalization milieus.

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