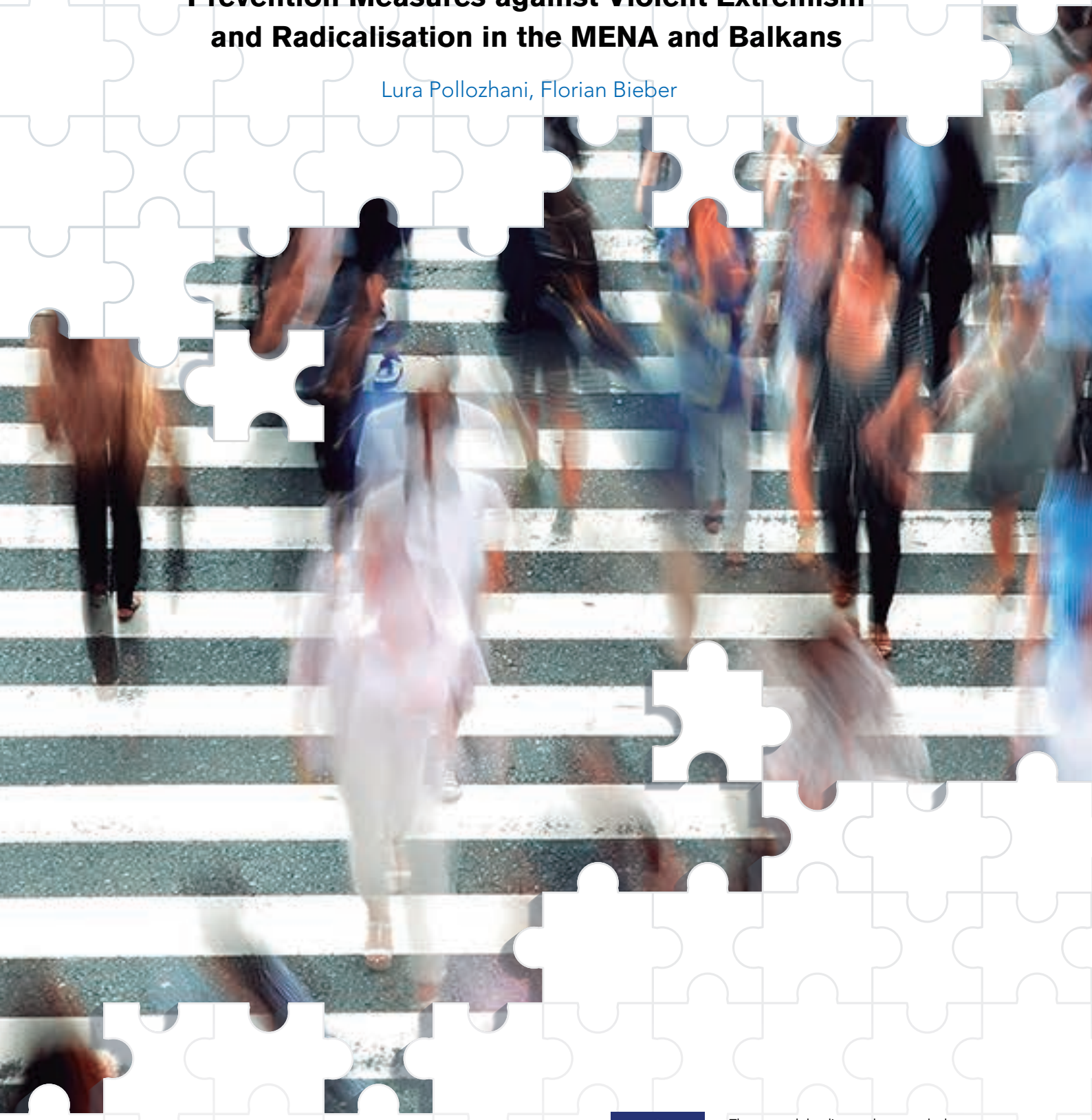
CONNEKT REGIONAL REPORT

Prevention Measures against Violent Extremism and Radicalisation in the MENA and Balkans

Lura Pollozhani, Florian Bieber



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REPORT ON PREVENTION MEASURES IN MENA AND BALKANS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3
Case study overview and methodology 3

DEFINITIONS 5

PREVENTION MEASURES 6
Protective factors 6
Resilience factors 7
Resistance factors 8

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION 10

REFERENCES 12

Introduction

The findings of this report on prevention measures are based on the case study reports on the prevention factors at the local level in the eight countries under study (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia). While the CONNEKT research thus far has been focused on discovering the contexts and drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE), the aim with this stage of the research was to uncover the factors within a community that foster resilience, resistance, and protection from these two phenomena.

As part of the exploration of prevention measures, we have also worked on concrete Prevention Guidelines (Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming) that give a list of concrete activities and interventions for preventing violent extremism (PVE) and radicalisation, especially for local authorities, and this report gives a glimpse of the communities and how they react and calibrate the vulnerabilities to radicalisation and VE. By understanding the dynamics within communities in resisting and protecting against radicalisation and VE, policy-makers can develop institutional approaches that build on the strengths and needs of the community in order to create truly effective solutions.

CASE STUDY OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the preventive factors is done based on the selection of two case studies that were already explored at the meso-level research (Chirchi, 2022) in order to better understand the community level dynamics rather than adopting a macro institutional approach. The cases selected cover a range of communities struggling with various issues, including political and economic marginalisation, violence, lack of leisure opportunities, and so on. They also cover the range of seven drivers that are part of the CONNEKT research, namely: religion, political grievances, economic deprivation, transnational dynamics, digitalisation, and leisure and cultural opportunities. As will be seen, most of the cases are based on religiously diverse communities, which gives further nuance to the research.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in Egypt, the case studies are based on the communities of Al Warraq, focusing on the informal Coptic community, and in Bahtim, focusing on a community that lost a great deal of its support after the closure of religious foundations (Kassem, 2023). Morocco explores one case which is outside the meso-level research but presented the opportunity of researching a case free from violence and thriving in terms socioeconomic conditions in the region of Kenitra. The second Moroccan case focuses on the Amal Association in El Hajeb, which is marked by a more socioeconomically marginalised community (Errfitay and Mouna, 2022). In Jordan, the case focuses on two separate regions, Karak and Ma'an. The former has a history of political activism (Stikovac Clark, 2021, 2022) as well as a significant Christian population. Socially and economically, Karak offers scarcely any opportunities for young people, which is also the case in

Ma'an (Stikovac Clark, 2022). Lastly, the cases of Tunisia focus on the governorate of Ben Guerdene, which is characterised by high unemployment rates among youth as well as being susceptible to cross border trade and smuggling with Libya due to its geographic location and political instability in Libya. However, Ben Guerdene is evaluated by the researchers as no longer being a hub for radicalisation (Chirchi,forthcoming). The second case study focuses on the Hamam Lif suburb of Tunis, which is vulnerable to social and economic marginalisation. The suburb is also home to Christian and Jewish communities, noting the peaceful coexistence between the various groups.

The case studies of the Balkans are also marked by religious diversity as well as ethnic diversity. In Kosovo, the two case studies focus on cities that have both religious diversity in the case of Gjakova and also ethnic diversity in the case of Mitrovica South (Peci and Demjaha, 2022). However, another significant characteristic of the city of Mitrovica South is the geographic division of the post-conflict city. The cases of Bosnia and Herzegovina also deal with ethnic division, particularly in the case of "two schools under one roof", which is a very concrete division of schools and teaching based on ethnonational groups (Bakic et al., 2022). The second case focuses on football fan groups who are responsible for most urban violence in the city of Mostar (Bakic et al.,forthcoming). One of the cases in Bulgaria also focuses on football fans (Ralchev and Stoynova, 2022), while the second case focuses on school violence (Ralchev, forthcoming). Lastly, the cases of North Macedonia focus on the educational and correctional system in the country by doing research related to high school teaching and a prison in the city of Tetovo (Mujoska Trpevska, forthcoming).

The research in these different locations was conducted through focus group discussions and interviews. The focus group discussions were largely conducted with youth between the ages of 18-30, but, depending on the case study, high school students younger than 18 years old were also included. Research with youth was done by maintaining ethical standards taking particular care with minors. While most focus group discussions had a balance of genders, there were also cases where only men were present, as was the case of the football fans in Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to the nature of the topic (Bakic et al., 2024). The interviews were with experts or community members who were knowledgeable and engaged within the communities researched. While at the beginning of the research the researchers were given guidelines, including questions and common definitions of the shared concepts (explored in the next section), they could adapt the questions to their context.

The fieldwork presented challenges, particularly considering the sensitivity of the subject and the unwillingness of respondents to be identified with the phenomena of radicalisation and VE. Some groups were hard to access and include in the focus group discussions and interviews. Furthermore, in the MENA region the research was conducted through challenging times: in Jordan, the assault on Gaza was considered to pose additional challenges to the respondents and the researchers, whereas in Tunisia there were unfree elections after the dissolution of the democratically elected bodies following the coup d'etat by the president of the country (Ridge, 2022).

Definitions

To ensure a more unified approach towards investigating prevention, we developed methodology guidelines that included specific instructions on the fieldwork but also some guiding definitions. First, it must be noted that in investigating the prevention of radicalisation and VE the choice was consciously made to focus on the community in recognition of the ability of communities to resist these phenomena. This is not to say, however, that we believe communities should carry the sole burden of dealing with prevention, rather we aim to enhance the understanding of community dynamics in order to enable a more robust and multi-level, multi-actor approach to preventing VE and radicalisation. In terms of researching prevention, we focused on three factors: protective, resilience and resistance factors, which are clearly defined below. Protective factors can be understood as structural aspects that are slow to change. Resilience factors are focused at more medium-term challenges, whereas resistance factors can respond to immediate threats.

Protective factors
Protective factors are those factors that somehow "naturally" protect the community. They might be enhanced or promoted but they stem organically from the community and are often structural in nature (such as demography, geographical characteristics, and economic conditions).

Resilience factors
Resilience factors include community- or institutionally-developed tools (practices, habits, rituals, laws, policies, etc.) which help a community adapt to change and resist negative impulses that risk the safety or integrity of the community.

Resistance factors
Resistance factors are purposeful nonviolent actions against the root causes, push and pull factors, narratives and acts. Very relevant when targeting youth and civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists.

Prevention measures

In identifying prevention measures, this report will first outline the protective, resilience, and resistance factors that have been identified in the 16 different communities in the eight countries. Through laying out the different factors that enable a community to prevent radicalisation, we seek to offer a more complex understanding of how these communities operate and how best to engage with them. Then we will offer concrete advice for policy development on prevention.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

The most prominent, shared protective factor mentioned in different case studies including those in Egypt, Bulgaria and Tunisia, among others, is the family or the family unit. Several of the case studies remarked that the family unit is the space within which young people form their worldview and which helps them in navigating their environment, and as such it is the most effective protective factor. Outside the family lies the community itself. In Egypt, the self-reliance of the community of Bahtim, for instance, was a protective factor. However, it also opens an area that needs support. Namely, the reason why the community is self-reliant is because of the absence of the state in providing key services. This does not mean that we should encourage the self-reliance of communities but rather support communities that are self-reliant by providing services and easing their burden of taking over the responsibilities of state institutions. Indeed, as the cases of Tunisia highlight, there is a strong need to improve public services as a tool of prevention, as well as address territorial inequalities, which often means lack of access to public services and resources. The case of Kenitra in Morocco shows that the investments in the economic development and the wellbeing of the citizens of the region can go a long way towards creating more cohesive societies, even in cases where individual poverty may persist, because there is an availability of access to opportunities.

In terms of the environments that create protective factors, the aspect of the existence, or coexistence of different communities, was seen as a protective factor in the cases of Egypt and Kosovo most notably. This means that the local community is well adapted to differences of belief and opinion and less likely to fear the other. Indeed, the issue of "otherness", which was also mentioned in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has to be addressed by the community through the promotion of understanding of the other groups sharing in the community. In the case of Kosovo, the peaceful coexistence between religions was considered to be enabled by the protective factor created by a secular state. Lastly, the importance of social networks and peer groups is also notable, as highlighted specifically in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In brief, the protective factors, which are more embedded and structural, are subject to change and communities, preferably with support from state and other social structures, and can create environments to counteract radicalisation pressures.

RESILIENCE FACTORS

Resilience factors were more numerous and diverse, though three factors seem to be largely shared across the countries and cases: education (both formal and education on religion); volunteerism; and availability of leisure opportunities.

The availability of cultural and leisure opportunities is considered a key resilience factor as well as a need; namely, a lot of communities do not have access to such opportunities, increasing their vulnerability to VE. The different case studies highlight the positive aspect of engagement in sport and leisure activities, and using cultural potential of different regions. Particularly in Morocco, the cultural and historic potential of El Hajeb was seen as a resilience factor that needed to be tapped into.

The countries in the MENA region particularly highlight the positive impact of volunteerism as a resilience factor. The young people that were part of the research in different cases showed that volunteerism was instrumental in making them feel more empowered and engaged in the community. Morocco particularly highlights the positive influence of youth being made to feel responsible by being engaged in different activities and sharing in the ownership of these activities. Indeed, the aspect of including youth in different activities at the local level was highlighted by most of the case studies as a positive practice. In the case of the Balkan countries, the aspect of volunteerism can be best described as an aspirational resilience factor, as the authors recognised the positive impact that volunteering would have if youth were more engaged. At the same time, there is often a high level of resistance towards volunteering in the Balkans, the result of the tainted legacy of ideological volunteerism during socialist times and a civil society traditionally driven by external funding with little local roots and activism.

In the case of the Balkans, the governmental models were also highlighted as resilience factors. Namely, in Kosovo the constitutional set up that was built on secular and multi-ethnic principles was highlighted as a resilience factor, which enabled pluralism and an appreciation of difference. Indeed, the author of the case studies highlights that democratic systems and political pluralism are resilience factors (Peci, 2024). They particularly highlight the positive impact of youth political engagement at the local level in the town of Mitrovica South (Peci, 2024). Considering the lack of engagement and apathy among youth that was recognised throughout the levels of research and the two regions (Bieber and Pollozhani, 2021; Pollozhani and Bieber, forthcoming), encouraging young people to be more politically engaged is an urgent and relevant step towards prevention. The democratic pluralism in Kosovo also extends towards a free media and vibrant civil society, which are also considered resilience factors. The effect of the media was also highlighted in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, encouraging more mindful reporting when it comes to reporting on sensitive subjects in particular. As the authors note, media and information literacy are the most significant resilience factors against VE as through information literacy there can be a more critical reflection of information. Literacy extends to the digital realm in particular, as most young people obtain their media and information through online sources.

There were also some innovative approaches to resilience factors. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the interlocutors noted that protests are important (Bakic et al.,forthcoming). This implied an

engagement with the social and political life of the community in order to be able to respond to injustice. Such protests highlight both social and political engagement, as well as a sense of community and belonging, counteracting the prevailing trends of political fragmentation and polarisation and apathy. In Bulgaria, fan groups, although sometimes violent in several cases, can themselves push for positive change among their followers if they are engaged with more positively.

Education was highlighted from several aspects. Firstly, schools can themselves be spaces of resilience if they offer support to young people. Tunisia highlighted the role of education as a resilience factor, as did the case of North Macedonia, which also encouraged reforms in the education system. Another aspect of education is what happens outside schools, such as extracurricular activities more broadly and professional development at the local level in particular, which was considered a resilience factor in the case of Morocco. Lastly, several cases, including Jordan, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Tunisia, highlighted the importance of education on religion as a resilience factor. Considering that these communities also have different levels of diversity, the importance to teach and expand the understanding of different religions was also highlighted.

In conclusion, the resilience factors provide the opportunities for improving the conditions for young people to experience higher levels of inclusion and opportunity and thus constituting a medium-term intervention.

RESISTANCE FACTORS

Education on religion was also considered a resistance factor, particularly in terms of the activities that different religious communities conduct in their environments. For instance, in the case of Egypt, the religious communities were not only involved in teaching religion but also in caring for and supervising the activities of young people, as well as organising different activities for them. Indeed, organising activities for young people constitutes a concrete form of actions by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors, especially in the case of Egypt and Morocco, where these were considered as resistance factors, which helped in the mitigation of the marginalisation of young people. In the case of Bulgaria, the authors noted the unwillingness of pupils to participate in activities led by their schools as a potential gap in resistance to the vulnerability of the community to violence.

Furthermore, while referring to education as a resistance factor, in the case of Kosovo the author highlights the need for reform to include critical and social skills in order to address the needs of young people. They also identified the engagement of youth in socio-political processes as an important resistance factor, namely the need for youth to be included in civic initiatives. Thus, education can be a resistance factor, but the formal education system fails in several cases to live up to its potential.

Lastly, an important aspect that was an essential aspect of each of the prevention factors is economic wellbeing. The lack of economic wellbeing forms a significant vulnerability to VE and radicalisation in both regions. In the case of Jordan, economic entrepreneurship was considered a resistance factor, including self-created economic opportunities through the use of digitalisation. Indeed, the aspect of digitalisation was largely considered as a positive factor. While digital tools and the virtual space do amplify actors who propagate extreme ideologies, they were also seen as tools towards spreading

positive narratives as well as offering more opportunities to young people. Economic wellbeing is more comprehensive than just having a job, but includes a set of conditions that incorporate economic prospects, current opportunities and encouraging individual development and learning for improved economic opportunities.

Preventing violent extremism and radicalisation

Considering the protective, resilience and resistance factors that communities possess and have used in the two regions, we can offer several policy orientation and recommendations for state institutions, civil society and relevant stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and VE. Firstly, we have to emphasise the importance of the state offering quality and accessible public services throughout their territories, as the absence of state services as well as institutions has been identified as a considerable gap opening communities up to vulnerability to VE.

Policy orientations and recommendations include:

REFORMS OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND INSTITUTIONS

As the above discussion outlined, there is no golden bullet to resolve the challenges outlined in this paper and the larger project. Overall, the key focus of policy intervention should be to foster structural change in communities to promote protective dimensions, as improving the economic opportunities. In addition, strengthening education and social systems can build up the resilience of local communities. The justice system and religious institutions can help strengthen the resistance of communities and its members to radicalisation and its consequence. Successful transformation requires multiple actors at the different levels working in a cooperative environment. Essentially, they must create safe spaces and promote networks through which communities can be strengthened. These cannot thrive in repressive contexts in which political and social engagement is discouraged or even penalised. As the project and outcomes highlight, young people have to be subjects of communities of change and not just objects of policy intervention from above or outside.

Education

- Reform curricula to reflect the needs and interests of young people, particularly taking into account the developments in technology and youth exposure to digital tools and information. These included digital literacy courses and using digital tools in the curriculum.
- Develop educational programmes that encourage critical thinking and that engage youth in different ways, preparing them in developing both critical and social skills.
- Educate young people on religion and diversity with the aim of expanding the understanding of different religions, cultures and worldviews.
- Encourage spaces in the education system to include and empower vulnerable communities.

Justice system

- Reform the punitive system, particularly encouraging the development of rehabilitation programmes rather than punitive programmes to address issues such as drug consumption, drinking addiction, delinquency, and small crime.

Social services

- Develop policies that are particularly targeted to the improvement of the well-being of youth, including offering public counselling programmes to prepare youth in terms of their professional pursuits.
- Local institutions that deal with social services need to be present in the community and, if needed, implement trust-building measures in order for the communities to learn that they can rely on institutions.

Economic development

- Use digital tools in advancing new models of business and entrepreneurship.
- Offer economic programmes for small or medium-sized enterprises, as well as startups managed by young people in order to get their initiatives underway.
- Offer training programmes and promote educational programmes that provide skills needed.

Youth policies

- Use sports and extracurricular activities to encourage and engage youth to be active and involved in their communities.
- Support youth initiatives that seek to engage youth in the public space, including but not limited to offering spaces, financial support, and professional support for new associations, whether formal or informal.

Religious institutions

- Organise inter-religious conferences and activities together with congregations and local clerics.
- Organise trust-building activities with local congregations in order to build community resilience and trust.
- Work with public institutions in their educational programmes, being mindful in spreading knowledge and understanding of different religions.

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CONNEKT

What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being "the problem" into "the key" for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.

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