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REGIONALREPORT

Compared perspectives on radicalisation and violent extremism in MENA, the Balkans and the European Union



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PERSPECTIVES ON RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN MENA, THE BALKANS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

Compared Perspectives on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA, the Balkans and the European Union

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION _____	3
STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE MENA REGION AND THE BALKANS _____	5
DIFFERENT AND SIMILAR PATTERNS OF RADICALISATION AND VE _____	10
STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES _____	15
CONCLUSION AND QUESTIONS EMERGING FROM THE COMPARISON _____	18
BIBLIOGRAPHY _____	20
ANNEX 1 _____	23



INTRODUCTION

Radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) have received considerable attention from governments, media and civil society in Europe and the Middle East in the past decade, albeit to varying degrees. The decision of thousands of citizens and residents from countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Europe to join and fight for Daesh (ISIS) in the mid-2010s has been an important catalyst for a transnational concern and reflection on the issue. Yet, the causes, dynamics, origins and responses vary greatly across the regions covered by the CONNEKT project. In some countries, radicalisation and government responses date back several decades. In others, incidents of VE were either previously limited or took a different direction and only became a subject of public debate in recent years. Furthermore, what is understood by radicalisation and VE differs and shifts both in terms of research and policy-making. While in recent years, radicalisation and VE have often been treated synonymously with radical and violent movements which base their claim on religion, in particular a militant understanding of political Islam, there are other radical and violent movements across the regions covered, both historically and currently. These include far-left and far-right movements, nationalist groups and other extremist groups that have committed acts of violence.

3 The background against which radicalisation and VE takes place also varies across the regions and countries. The nature of government differs with the range from authoritarian to liberal democracies, including a number of hybrid regimes that combine different authoritarian and democratic features. The socioeconomic background also differs, with disparate levels of social and economic inequality, overall prosperity and different dynamics of growth. Finally, the recruitment basis for radicalism differs greatly, depending on the types of radical movements and the countries. Radical nationalist movements have been recruiting from majorities and minorities. Minorities at times of minority marginalisation and repression, as in Kosovo and North Macedonia during the 1990s and early 2000s. Radical majority nationalist movements are closely linked to a rise of the far-right and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Islamist extremist groups and associated radicalisation are also shaped by the demographic picture. In some countries, minorities have been the main recruiting ground for radical and extremist groups, as is the case in the countries where Muslim communities constitute a minority, such as North Macedonia (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2020) or Bulgaria (Dzhekova, 2020). This mirrors the pattern of recruitment in the European Union (EU), even though the Muslim minority groups in the Balkans have not been a product of migration during the past decades. In both cases, the religious background mattered more than specific levels of religiosity within families or communities. In other cases, it is the majority population that has been the most vulnerable, particularly in reference to religion and also to age group, for instance in countries with a growing young population, where youths are particularly vulnerable to radicalisation, such as Egypt (Pinfari, 2020) and Kosovo (Peci and Demjaha, 2020).

A comparative and cross-national perspective also needs to consider the transnational dynamics of radicalisation and VE. While the context is also national, it is strongly shaped by influences that are international. These include the lure of Daesh, which was able to recruit fighters from all countries covered in the project, but also the war in Ukraine (Kapidžić et al., 2020; Peci and Demjaha, 2020; Balkan

Regional Report 2020) and other earlier conflicts (Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina [BiH]). It is not just conflicts acting as sites for recruitment; the reporting and narrative developed by the media which has contributed towards increased Islamophobia have also contributed to the radicalisation of individuals. Furthermore, transnational networks have been important in radicalisation and recruiting individuals for VE, facilitated by social media in recent years. Diasporas have also exposed communities to each other and acted as transmission belts of radicalisation.

In short, a comparative analysis across Europe and the Middle East, with a focus on the Balkans and the MENA region, helps to draw comparative lessons, but also to highlight transnational networks and to show that radicalisation and VE do not take place in a nationally contained environment. Responses are also transnational, as governments cooperate to fight VE and often engage in joint policies, as is the case with the Arab Convention for the Suppression of Terrorism (ACST) (see the MENA Regional Report). Civil society forms yet another angle as foreign governments, through embassies and funding schemes, are involved in funding civil societies in these regions with the aim of researching and advocating for certain responses towards VE and radicalisation.

STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE MENA REGION AND THE BALKANS

The comparison between the Balkan and MENA regions raises important questions about the types of radicalisation, VE and the recruitment methods. One of the weaknesses of the debate in the past decade has been the nearly exclusive focus on Islamist extremism. This bias is understandable in the light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe, as well as the recruitment of foreign fighters by Daesh. However, reducing VE to this one dimension is both methodologically flawed and ahistorical. There have been and are VE groups, individuals and networks that have committed acts of mass violence and terrorism that are motivated by other ideologies in Europe and the Middle East. These include far-right, white nationalist and racist ideology, radical nationalism, and, at least in the past, far-left ideology. While Islamist extremism might prevail in some contexts at the moment, it is not the only type of VE, as the case of Bulgaria particularly shows (Dzhekova, 2020), nor is it specific in terms of radicalisation patterns or the violence committed.

5 While the countries included in the project from the MENA region are overwhelmingly Muslim, with very small Christian and Jewish minorities and small numbers of agnostic and atheist citizens, the picture is very different in the Balkans. In the Balkans, two countries, BiH and Kosovo, have a Muslim majority. In BiH, this majority is slight, with a nearly equal number of Christians (Orthodox and Catholic). Kosovo, on the other hand, has a larger Muslim majority, comparable to the MENA case studies. However, a substantial section of the Muslim population is secular and non-practising, at a proportion greater than in the MENA region. The other two, Bulgaria and North Macedonia, have Muslim minorities, which are in turn constituted by different national minorities. Muslim communities in the Balkans are long established and predate the emergence of nation states in the 19th and 20th century, unlike in Western or Central Europe (Bieber, 2000).

Muslim communities in the Balkans identify strongly with particular nations, as there is an overlap of the national or ethnic identity and the religious identity (Öktem, 2011). In the case of BiH, the Bosniak nation largely coincides with the population with an Islamic background. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, the largest Muslim population group is Albanians. There are other smaller Muslim communities, including Roma (Egyptian and Ashkalia), as well as Turks, Gorani and Torbeshi (Slavic Muslims). Albanians, unlike most other nations in the Balkans, include adherents of different religions and there are both Orthodox and Catholic Albanians. In Bulgaria, the Muslim minority identifies as Turkish, Roma or Pomak (Slavic Muslims), thus again Muslim communities are associated with specific national, linguistic or ethnic markers (Öktem, 2010: 5).

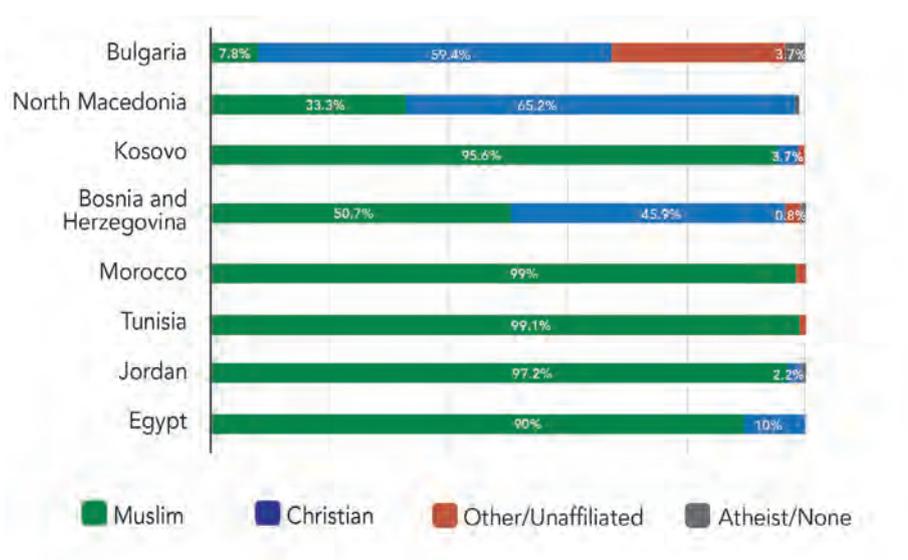
The main social and political identity in the Balkans is national rather than religious. While religious and national identity often, but not always, coincide, national identity generally prevails over religious affiliation. In BiH, being a Bosniak is closely linked to being Muslim and neither Croats nor

Serbs would be Muslims but rather Catholic and Orthodox, respectively. Thus, religious affiliation is linked to markers of difference from other nations in the same state, rather than as markers of larger transnational communities. Of course, all three religious groups are part of these larger networks, which are potential networks of identity and solidarity, although this matters mostly when they coincide with national demands. For example, some Serbs have fought with secessionist forces in Ukraine, just as Greek nationalists have fought during the Bosnian war on the Serbian side. Yet, this has been based on demands for nationalist solidarity, underpinned by religious affinity rather than religious ideology itself. In North Macedonia and Bulgaria, where Muslims are a minority, they are also associated with one or several national minorities: in the case of North Macedonia mostly with Albanians, and in Bulgaria mostly with Turks. This duality is by no means reconciled, and there is an ongoing debate on the influence that religious or national affinities have on phenomena such as radicalisation and VE, as also shown by the discordant outcomes of this report and the Balkan Regional Report. However, there is a consensus to the effect that these affinities are influential, the national and the religious identities are often used for the same purpose and serve as an “escape from the limits of individual morality” (Rasza, 2015: 63). Indeed as Malešević (2013: 181-182) maintains when referring to arguments on the prevalence of religious identification in the “Muslim world” more broadly “globalization has in fact strengthened most nation-states, fostering the proliferation of nationalist ideology [...] the apparent religious revival did not arise at the expense of nationalism: instead most religious rhetoric and practice tends to be highly syncretic not only in blending nationalist and religious discourse but also in articulating alternative visions of the desirable social and political orders.” The research on the MENA region and the Balkans must therefore be embedded within the historical, geographical and local contexts of identity formation and affinities.

In the context of the Balkans, there are substantial population groups that are not potential recruitment grounds for Islamist extremism but rather for other forms of radicalisation. As national and religious distinctions largely coincide, there is also less conversion-related radicalisation than in some countries in Western Europe. Other forms of radicalisation and VE are largely not based on religion but on nationalism, racism, homophobia and cultural or civilisational categories. The four MENA countries of the project, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan, all have an overwhelming Muslim majority and also a strong Sunni Arab tradition with few other Muslim communities, such as Shia, and some few relevant Christian communities, such as the Copts in Egypt. As a result, as reflected in Table 1, the cases include countries with relatively high levels of homogeneity in the MENA region and others with considerable religious diversity in the Balkans. Indeed, besides Amazigh in Morocco there are no large non-Arab communities in the MENA region. And we also have to note that some authoritarian states are highly reluctant to publicly acknowledge this internal diversity. However, the case study countries do not reflect the entire region and it is important to contextualise them in the larger regional context. There are several MENA countries that have a higher level of religious diversity, such as Lebanon, or at least in terms of intra-Muslim heterogeneity, such as Syria and Iraq. In the Balkans, other countries only have Muslim minorities, such as Montenegro, Greece, Serbia and Romania, whereas Albania has a Muslim majority but is characterised by a high level of secularisation.

In contrast to the MENA region and the Balkans, in Western and Central Europe, Muslim communities are based on migration, mostly over the past 50 years, from the Mediterranean region.

TABLE 1. Religions in MENA and Western Balkan countries



Source: CIA World Factbook. Own production.¹

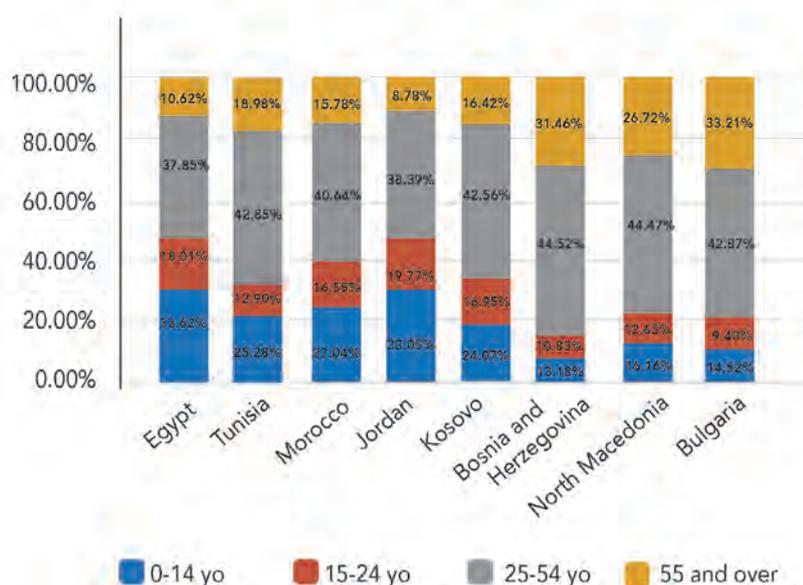
A crucial difference between the regions is the demographic picture. The Balkans is a region characterised by an overall aging population, low or decreasing birth rates, with the exception of Kosovo (see Table 2 below). On the other hand, several countries in the MENA region have a broad-based age pyramid. The differences are significant for a number of reasons. First, the population of MENA countries is mostly increasing, with Egypt and Morocco particularly having an increasing young population, whereas in the Balkans the population has been shrinking, often at a high pace due to the additional factor of migration, to which the paper will return later. Second, the share of young people varies as a consequence, with Balkan countries having a smaller proportion of the population in the younger age groups. This does not only result in lower levels of youth unemployment but also in a smaller basis for recruitment of radical and violent extremist groups.

Another important regional variant is the nature of political regimes. This variety matters in multiple dimensions. The nature of the regime in terms of the scale of authoritarianism vs. democracy shapes the nature of recruitment for VE, as well as the state response. Radicalisation and VE can draw on those citizens dissatisfied with the lack of political participation, and the line between political opposition and radicalisation is easily blurred. More authoritarian regimes are also more likely to

¹ CIA World Factbook is a resource developed by the CIA for US policy-makers, combining numerous resources in order to provide the same information on all countries.

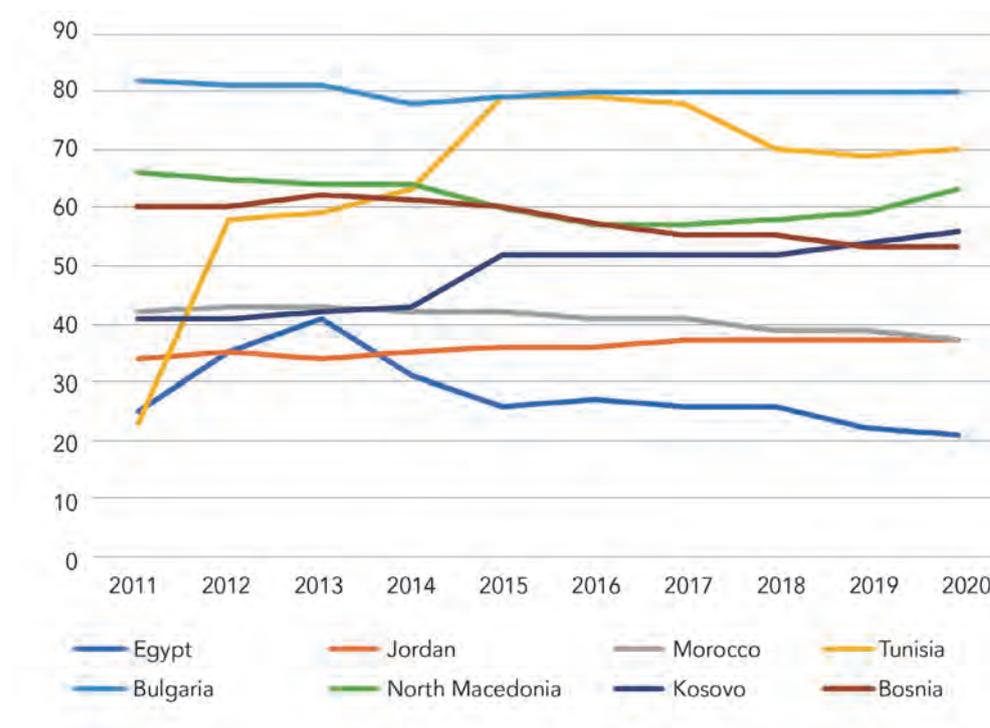
take a security-driven approach and are less able or willing to include civil society and human security approaches in confronting VE. Furthermore, there is a risk that authoritarian regimes obscure the distinction between legitimate political opposition and VE and characterise demands for rule of law, democracy and human rights as being signals of radicalisation. Violent state responses towards legitimate democratic demands can also further increase radicalisation and VE trends. Moreover, authoritarian regimes also lack a number of options to include political dissatisfaction in the political system and thus encouraging extra-institutional means that can more easily lead to the endorsement of violence. As for 2020, Freedom House ranks only Tunisia (since 2015) and Bulgaria as free countries, based on political rights and civil liberties. Egypt is the only country considered not free (since 2014), whereas all the others are in the intermediate category of partially-free countries. This describes hybrid regimes with elections and some civil liberties, but considerable restrictions. With the exception of Bulgaria, all countries included in this research are characterised by instability and uncertainty, including high levels of polarisation, and recent experience of violence. Finally, state capture, high levels of corruption and low trust in institutions are challenges confronted in both regions.

TABLE 2. Population by age groups in MENA and Western Balkan countries



Source: CIA World Factbook. Own production.

TABLE 3. Political rights and civil liberties score, Freedom House



² The data is extracted from the scores provided by the annual Freedom in the World report, combining the political rights score (0-40) and the civil liberties score (0-60), which are calculated with equal weight to score countries (0-100) in three different status categories: Free, Partly Free and Not Free. In 2020, Bulgaria and Tunisia were evaluated as Free, Jordan, North Macedonia, Morocco, Kosovo and BiH were evaluated as Partly Free and Egypt was evaluated as Not Free.

DIFFERENT AND SIMILAR PATTERNS OF RADICALISATION AND VE

Radicalisation and VE in the MENA region and the Balkans have taken very different paths but also share some experiences. Most countries in both regions experienced authoritarian regimes during the second half of the 20th century, which often rested on a narrow base of legitimacy. These regimes have lost power in recent decades in both regions: in the Balkans at the end of the Cold War in 1989 and in the MENA region several fell in 2011. However, differences are marked. Whereas both promoted nationalism and the communist regimes in the Balkans operated within nation-states or multinational states (like Yugoslavia) and could build on pre-existing strong national identities, the strength of national identities was weaker in many parts of the MENA region and state-centred nationalism had to compete with transnational ideologies, such as pan-Arabism and later political Islam or Islamism.

In the Balkans, the main line of polarisation was between anti-Communists and Communists. The anti-Communist forces often adopted nationalist rhetoric and claimed to advocate democracy. While the post-1989 period also brought about an end to enforced secularisation and a return of religion, religion and secularism had not been an important theme in the Balkans. Increased religiosity in fact mostly occurred where it reinforced national identity. As nations in the Balkans often coincide with a particular religion, and which is a marker of distinction from other nations, in particular minorities, it is religion that became another lens through which to emphasise national belonging rather than a challenge to the nation. In many countries in the MENA region, religion has been a source of legitimacy for the regimes in place, clearly for monarchies having a religious nature but also for more secular republics, where it has been historically instrumentalised to serve the interests of nation-states. The rise of political Islam has been undermining or challenging existing states and attempts to build political nations based on national affiliation. This challenge is based on the ideological claim to represent the larger transnational Muslim community (*ummah*) and the strategies of violence that often undermine states and fought secular nation-states (Roy, 2017; Ehteshami, Rasheed, and Beaujouan, 2020).

For the MENA region, the 2000s and in particular the aftermath of 9/11 were an important turning point for an increase in VE, but there had been a previous history of VE. In the Balkans, on the other hand, the highest levels of VE occurred during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. While some of the violence was perpetrated by paramilitary groups, they were mostly controlled and encouraged by states. This violence was primarily associated with nationalism rather than other ideologies. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, radicalisation occurred along nationalist lines, with Albanian movements opposing the Serbian and Macedonian states and their policies, starting in the 1980s. These groups did resort to violence, mostly in the period between 1998 and 2001 and attempted to create Albanian majority states or in the case of Macedonia change the nature of the state. While the conflict confronted Albanians against the Serb or Macedonian majority, the radical groups (the Kosovo Liberation Army in Kosovo and the National Liberation Army in Macedonia) were secular

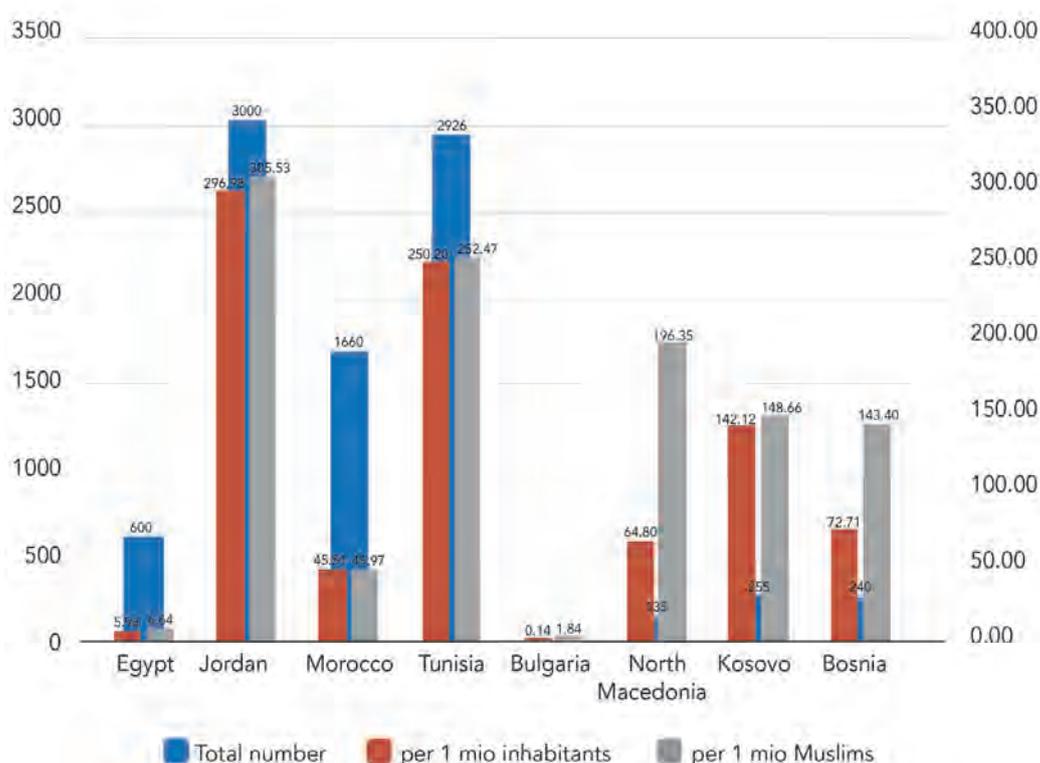
nationalist. In the case of Serbia, they also confronted an authoritarian and nationalist state that had marginalised and repressed Albanians. In BiH, the main case of VE occurred in the 1990s when the Serb party, with the support of Serbia, created a para-state with the assistance of the army and para-military groups and engaged in expulsions, murder and other war crimes, including genocide. This triggered the Bosnian war that encouraged radical and extremist groups, including Croat and Bosniak paramilitary groups, as well as foreign fighters on all sides, who were organised into different formal and informal army units. The foreign fighters were, in the case of the Bosnian Serb army, mostly Orthodox Christians from countries such as Greece and Russia; in the case of the Bosnian army, from Muslim majority countries in the MENA region. Thus, the motivation of foreign participants was religious or civilisational but the war was distinctly national, even if religious arguments and themes were instrumentalised.

Key differences between MENA and Balkan regions are the scale of Islamist radicalisation and participation in VE groups abroad or domestically. The main indicator for VE is the number of foreign fighters that went to Syria and Iraq to fight for Daesh or support it. Comparisons are difficult as neither absolute numbers nor numbers per capita are indicative. Namely, in regard to the foreign fighters from the Balkan region who have gone to fight for Daesh, a differing narrative presents itself. While the Balkan region has become notorious for the high number of foreign fighters per capita of the entire population, this number becomes less significant if the data is interpreted when considering the Muslim population within these countries as the main target group. With this interpretation, the number of foreign fighters proportional to the Muslim population in each of the Balkan countries under research becomes lower than the proportion in the EU (Balkan Regional Report 2020: 11; Hamidičević and Plevljak, 2018: 58). The regional and country reports further show that there are other forms of radicalisation, particularly in the Balkans, with foreign fighters to Ukraine (see Balkan Regional Report), and the far-right nationalist groups in Bulgaria (Dzhekova 2020).

Radicalisation and VE have a multi-dimensional transnational component in all countries of the MENA region and the Balkans. Throughout the regions, the main types of radicalisation are focused on one of four dimensions. The first, and most frequent, is based on a radical interpretation of religion, in particular Islam. There are also radical and sometimes violent extremist groups based on Christianity and Judaism in the two regions, not to mention other religions elsewhere. The second type of VE is based on “civilisationalism”; namely the idea that certain transnational groups of people are superior to others. This most commonly includes white supremacist movements and groups who claim some racial or civilisational category. While such VE is more common in the EU, North America and Australia, it exists in some of the countries under study, such as Bulgaria. Closely linked are nationalist movements that claim superiority of one nation and often seek to change existing borders to create nation-states based on new borders. Such movements exist in the regions covered by the project and have been more significant in the past, for instance in BiH. Finally, one can consider ideological movements as a basis for radicalisation and VE. These include far-left groups, such as Marxist movements, and far-right groups, which are commonly linked to civilisational or nationalist ideas. Often, the different categories serve merely as ideal types and, in reality, they overlap. Nationalist movements might also take on religious tones, especially when religion and nation coincide, and the main “other” differs in both

categories. For example, Serb nationalist groups emphasise both belonging to the nation and the importance of Orthodox Christianity. Furthermore, civilisational groups often have strong nationalist underpinnings. Groups patrolling the Bulgarian border, harassing and attacking refugees and migrants, framed their actions as both protecting the nation and protecting Europe from migrants.

TABLE 4. Foreign fighters for Daesh



Source: Soufan Group (2017). Own production.³

While all ideological categories might be restrained to state borders, they often occur in a transnational environment, often challenging existing state borders. Ideological movements often seek ideological kinship in other states, and civilisational groups base their understanding on transnational communities. Religious-based radicalisation and VE also commonly transcend borders and imagine themselves to belong to an international community of believers that is rarely bound by state borders. Radical ideas and groups based on an extreme interpretation of Islam have long rejected the boundaries of modern states, and Daesh has been particularly adamant in its effort to undermine and reject the existing state system. Even nationalist groups and ideas often reach beyond borders, as they commonly seek to change existing borders and unite national groups in multiple states, such as Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iran, Amazigh in North Africa, or Albanians and Serbs in the Balkans, to give a few examples.

³ Soufan Group Methodology, data gathered in study based on multiple data sources.

Beyond the level of ideas, radicalisation and VE occur in a transnational environment. The places of radicalisation, mobilisation, recruitment, communication and participation are often transnational. Radicalisation often occurs through large-scale international events that attract attention beyond state boundaries. These include the conflict between Israel and Palestine since the UN Partition Plan in 1947, the wars in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Bosnian war in the 1990s, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s and the war in Syria in the 2010s, to name just a few conflicts that have been particularly relevant in the regions under discussion. These wars galvanised public opinion and dominated headlines for years. The wars and media representation often clearly identify the conflict in one of the above-mentioned frameworks, which allows citizens in other countries to identify with a particular party, often victims of violence, and become radicalised on this basis. This does not yet translate into mobilisation, i.e., moving beyond passive observation. The mobilisation constitutes the next step in terms of getting individuals to consider acting on behalf of their positioning. This might take place less through conventional media and its interpretation of conflicts, and more through more biased and one-sided news. Often, this is available through social media and by-passes established institutional channels, whether conventional religious hierarchies, parties or other social actors. These dynamics are commonly transnational, allowing national restrictions and censorship to be by-passed. In post-conflict countries such as Kosovo and BiH, humanitarian and other charitable organisations from other Muslim-majority countries, in particular in the Gulf, had an important function in spreading more conservative and radical ideas in the post-war period. While Bulgaria did not experience conflict, charities and missionaries had a similar effect. This resulted not just in a transfer of ideas of a less moderate Islam but also in the establishment of personal ties.

13

The recruitment for VE movements often takes place in a transnational context. While there are sometimes interlocutors in the respective countries, either associated with informal groups or with established institutions, which is more exceptional, these are commonly linked across national borders. Recruitment can also occur entirely transnationally through social media and other online networks that reduce the risk of recruitment as they are not in the jurisdiction of the people targeted. Participating in acts of VE can take place in the state framework, such as in terrorist attacks, but also might be taking place in other countries, such as foreign fighters going to Daesh and secessionist forces in Eastern Ukraine. An important feature of these transnational networks are diasporas. All the countries of the project have substantial diaspora communities, most frequently in the EU. These diasporic communities have often resided in EU member states for several generations. Linguistic links, shared identity and solidarity, as well as mobility and remittances, have ensured that the connections between diaspora and the country of origin remain. This is also reflected in regard to radicalisation and VE. The causes and patterns of radicalisation are often very different between members of the diaspora and the homeland. This is the result of different political systems, divergent socioeconomic positions and changing identity of individuals in their context. Despite this divergence, the ties often do allow for communication and transmission of ideas. In terms of VE, be it violent nationalism or radical Islamic ideas, diasporas have often been important in communicating these messages.

Radicalisation is often linked with communities that are marginalised. These might be some Roma communities in Bulgaria that became adherents of Salafi Islam (Dzhekova, 2020: 44) or Amazigh youths in northern Moroccan cities such as Tangier and Tetouan, where they are often exposed to uncontrolled

urbanisation, youth unemployment, crime and marginalisation (Mouna, Lahmidani and Agudal, 2020). Other than minorities, individuals from ethnic, national or religious majorities can also be susceptible to radicalisation. While this is often explained with socioeconomic deprivation, inequality and lack of opportunities, it is not possible to ascribe radicalisation solely to socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Notably, while these markers form a key part of the research on radicalisation, they offer a broad spectrum of factors that contribute to radicalisation. A study in Tunisia found 33 diverse factors (Chirchi, Kherigi and Ghribi, 2020; Ayari, 2017), while research on other countries also offers numerous causes of radicalisation that often blur the analysis and show the necessity for further empirical and in-depth research.

Lastly, the scale of VE varies significantly across the case studies. In some countries, such as North Macedonia or Kosovo, there have been very few acts of terrorism or VE within their territories in the past decade (Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2020; Peci and Demjaha, 2020; Bieber, 2020).⁴ There have been sporadic acts of violence on national and ethnic grounds, although not to a scale that could be considered as significant levels of VE. VE elsewhere in the Balkans over the past decade has also been limited. In Bulgaria, the most important act of terrorism targeted Israeli travellers in the seaside resort of Burgas in 2012, but it appears that the attack was connected to Hezbollah and not to any domestic causes (Dzhekova, 2020). In BiH, the only significant attacks were two lone wolf attacks against a police station in 2010 and a shooting in front of the American embassy the following year. The few radical communities in the region are small and isolated, such as the hamlet Donja Maoca in BiH. They received considerable media attention, but do not present a central challenge to state authority. On the other hand, regions like the Sinai in Egypt and Tunisia's north-west have been areas of operation for VE groups. In terms of terrorist attacks, Morocco has experienced a few attacks in the past decade, most prominently the attack on the main square of Marrakech in 2011 (Mouna, Lahmidani and Agudal, 2020). Similarly, Jordan was only the site of one major terrorist attack in 2016 at Kerak Castle, an important tourist destination. Tunisia and Egypt have both faced more substantial terrorist attacks than the other countries over the past decades (Pinfari, 2020; Chirchi, Kherigi, and Ghribi, 2020). The number of incidents of VE offers only limited insight into the overall scale of radicalisation, as the incidents are also a reflection of divergent opportunity structures and the nature of state responses.

⁴ The Albanian group that was confronted in a shoot-out with government forces in 2015 is the only exception. While the government has alleged the group was planning acts of terrorism, the motivations and plans of the groups are unclear.

STATE AND CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSES

In examining the differences between state and societal responses, it is important to consider both the nature of state responses themselves, as well as the level of cooperation with other actors, including civil society, religious institutions and other international actors and governments. Furthermore, the level of coordination between different government responses and the relevant actors within government varies, as different agencies and ministries often pursue different, and at times contradictory, policies. State responses commonly include a conventional security-driven approach that relies on combating VE through force and criminal prosecution. This might be matched or preceded by human security approaches that focus on prevention and de-radicalisation. Overall, one can map out strategies of governments in three categories: 1. Prevention and moderation; 2. Repression of radicalisation and VE; and 3. De-radicalisation.

Prevention and moderation strategies can target developmental, economic and social policies to address vulnerable population groups, including policies on employment and educational programmes for youths and religious leaders in several of the case studies. However, due to a lack of monitoring and evaluation of such policies it is unclear whether such policies are being implemented and whether they are effective. Other examples focus on promoting moderation in terms of religion, such as the strategies pursued by the Moroccan authorities. Repression is usually enveloped under hard security approaches pursued through the repression of VE by security forces and the judicial prosecution of cases against those committing acts of violence or those involved in recruitment and training. Finally, de-radicalisation projects focus on dealing with individuals who have become radicalised. This might be an alternative to prosecution or engagement with individuals jailed for VE. These three steps are in line with broader policies that deal with prevention, conflict reduction and post-conflict measures. While most governments, such as Morocco, have policies and strategies for all three dimensions, some, such as Egypt, have been focused on repression more than on prevention or de-radicalisation. However, it must be noted that these approaches are mostly applicable to Islamists and extremism or radicalisation that leads to violence. Far-right and other forms of extremist ideologies are not regulated to the same extent, such as the case of Bulgaria, where most violent acts within the country are perpetrated by far-right and anti-LGBTQ groups, despite receiving less attention by the state and the media (Dzhekova, 2020). The case of foreign fighters going to fight in Ukraine from BiH and the north of Kosovo and the lack of adequate state responses further illustrates this point (Balkan Regional Report, 2020).

Confronting radicalisation and VE was on the agenda of all governments in the MENA region, the Balkans and the EU in the past decade, in particular during the peak of Daesh activity. However, the focus and centrality of the issue diverged. In most MENA countries, there has been a long-established pattern of mostly security-based responses to radicalisation and VE. There are also episodic attempts to either co-opt or instrumentalise radical Islamic movements to confront other political challenges, as had been the case of Morocco (Mouna, Lahmidani and Agudal, 2020). During the brief period of political pluralism (2011-13) Egypt was dominated by the Freedom and Justice Party, a party linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. The more radical Salafi El Nour Party also emerged as a strong political force,

but it continued its political activities after the 2013 coup. In the Balkans, parties representing Muslim voters are mostly secular and nationalist, rather than religious. Attempts at creating Islamist parties have either been absent or failed. The largest Bosniak party in BiH, the Party for Democratic Action (SDA), has close links to the Islamic community and a conservative Muslim outlook, but does not advocate an Islamist programme, such as the introduction of Sharia law. It is comparable to the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia for combining Islamic conservatism with endorsement of democracy. Thus, throughout the countries under study, radical and extremist political parties are marginal or inexistent.

An important role in both the causes of radicalisation and in regard to strategies of de-radicalisation is played by existing institutions, in particular religious ones. Especially regarding Islamic extremism, official Islamic communities are important actors. These official Islamic communities are not sources of radicalisation in any of the countries. Instead, they are either divided and weak or in some cases effective agents against radicalisation. Organised religious institutions have a variety of relations to the state. This diversity also matters for the larger ability to curtail radicalisation. The following patterns exist across the two regions, in particular in regards to Islamic communities. The state recognises one institutional expression of the dominant Sunni Muslim community. In some cases, as in Morocco, this is based on the leadership role of the monarchy over the Islamic community. In the MENA region, Islam is always recognised constitutionally as the religion of the state. Although in the case of republics they tend to formally present themselves as more secularised systems, they also control and regulate religious communities. The level of intrusion of the state matters in regards to the legitimacy of the religious institutions before the community of believers. Tunisia and Egypt are examples where historically authoritarian regimes have sought to control official religious institutions to secure their loyalty. This has undermined institutions' legitimacy and made them less effective in confronting extremism.

Radicalism and VE are often closely linked to religious illiteracy, both in the Balkan (Morina et al., 2019) and the MENA region (Baffa et al., 2019). Many young men and women who were radicalised and joined to either fight for Daesh or engage in domestic terrorism have very limited knowledge of Islam. This made them susceptible to radical and often very selective interpretations of religion. Religious illiteracy has different causes across the cases but is linked to limited training of imams in some, such as in Tunisia, or limited exposure to organised mainstream religion in others, including Roma communities in Bulgaria, or the low credibility of official religious institutions. In post-Communist countries, Islamic communities had been tightly controlled and had limited impact in everyday life. This created a vacuum that was filled at times by radical and conservative groups from the 1990s onwards. In a minority setting, Muslim communities have often been subject to discrimination, Islamophobia and nationalism. This discrimination, based on religion and national affiliation, often facilitated radicalisation.

With a moderate tradition of Islam in most countries under study, a common response has been to emphasise the moderate tradition and criticise radical Salafism and other Islamist groups as alien and imported. Indeed, throughout the two regions under study in regards to Islamist extremism, there is an emphasis in policy responses as far as the "right version" of Islam is concerned whereby state institutions invest in religious literacy. In Morocco, this involved the promotion of *wasati Islam* or the

“Islam of the golden mean” (Mouna, Lahmidani and Agudal, 2020). In this case, it included increased state control over mosques and imams, both within the country and in the diaspora. Furthermore, it also included strong state control over religious education. But the emphasis on moderation and control of mosques did not originate from the state everywhere. In the Balkan region, the respective Islamic communities have been heavily involved in educational programmes as well as in governing religious practices (Kapidžić, 2020; Kambovski, Georgieva and Trajanovski, 2020). In BiH, for example, where the state is weak and fragmented, the strong Islamic community has been re-asserting its control of *para-jamaats* and other parallel and informal Islamic activities. In other cases, such as Kosovo, the weakness of the Islamic community resulted in an internal power struggle that gave more radical and transnational clergy greater influence. Only after government intervention has the Islamic community there been able to curb the influence of radicals.

Throughout the MENA region and the Balkans, civil society is often supported and funded by external actors, including international donors and European and North American governments, party foundations and embassies. This is the result of a difficult working environment in many countries, often the result of hostile or at least sceptical governments and societies with limited resources or a tradition of funding non-profits. As radicalisation and VE became a global concern, in particular in the context of Daesh, external funding for research became available. As a result, a considerable share of attention by civil society in the regions has been driven by external funding. This means that the focus on radicalisation and VE in civil society is often less driven by domestic concern than by external donor priorities. Another challenge is the cooperation between state institutions and civil society. Relations vary greatly, with some countries that have little civic space, such as Egypt, to allow for the independence of civil society, and others that have close ties between civil society and government and a history of cooperation, such as Kosovo and North Macedonia. The Balkan countries seem to be more inclusive of external stakeholders, and have the policies, at least on paper, to address a wider target of groups of interest in P/CVE (see the Balkan Regional Report). The MENA countries, on the other hand, have a more exclusive strategy development, where civil society is often absent. Besides, responses are channelled through limited target groups which do not address women or alternative methods of P/CVE outside the security sector, with exceptions, such as the education of imams, which is largely a common policy with the exception of Tunisia (MENA Regional Report 2020).

CONCLUSION AND QUESTIONS EMERGING FROM THE COMPARISON

Radicalisation and VE have been on the agenda in all the regions covered by the project. This interest peaked in the mid-2010s with the foreign fighters joining Daesh. In particular in the EU and the Balkans, the attention has largely faded and, if at all, focused on the question of the return of foreign fighters and their potential reintegration into society. In the MENA region, this has also been a pressing issue, yet radicalisation and VE have found other directions. There continue to be regional conflicts and fragile states, such as Syria and Libya, which constitute a focal point for VE, even if the appeal is no longer as global as it was five years ago. In addition, domestic sources of radicalisation remain relevant, including socioeconomic inequalities and a sense of lack of perspective. Reduced attention in the EU, the MENA region and the Balkans to radicalisation has both advantages and dangers. The attention on radicalisation, in particular of Muslim communities, has contributed to Islamophobic sentiments in Europe and reinforced exclusion and populist and far-right politics against Muslim communities in Europe. Thus, public attention reinforced those conditions that facilitated radicalisation in the first place. However, reduced attention is also problematic, as it might result in less attention paid to confront the causes that led to the participation of mostly young Muslim men and women in Daesh from Europe, including the Balkans, particularly as they return home and seek to reintegrate into their societies. While the issue of foreign fighters is regulated by adapted Criminal and Penal Codes in the various countries, the issue of the women and children returning from the conflict zones remains unaddressed, and poses risks if the causes and influences, as well as their traumas, are not addressed.

18

The cross-regional comparison also raises questions regarding the focus of research and policy-making towards radicalisation and VE. The unifying type of radicalisation in the EU, the Western Balkans and the MENA region is based on radical Islam, although the extent varies considerably. However, this neglects other forms of radicalisation and VE, as outlined in this paper. In Europe, there have been different groups and networks that have promoted radicalisation and VE based on racism, far-right ideology, homophobia, civilisationalism and virulent nationalism. Including these groups and networks in the study of radicalisation, and VE is important not only to confronting possible biases towards Islam-based radicalisation but also in addressing the blind spots that such an approach and focus creates. A focus on religion, and in particular Islam as the main source of radicalisation ignores the fact that the mechanisms of radicalisation and recruitment of VE are often identical across different ideologies (Malešević, 2013: 114). From the use of social media and transnational networks to the creation of surrogate “families” and social ties, radicalisation patterns often operate similarly, despite the seemingly different ideological foundations.

The comparison raises a number of important cross-national and cross-regional questions. First, what are the micro, meso and macro drivers of radicalisation? The country studies do not offer a conclusive picture as to what motivated the participation in radical and violent movements. While individuals who are disadvantaged and lack perspectives might be susceptible, such observations are too imprecise to clearly identify individuals or groups that are most susceptible, with research on women and youths

being particularly lacking. As several country studies point out, such as the one on Tunisia, it is hard to draw clear causal links between deprivation and marginalisation, on the one hand, and between radicalisation and VE, on the other. Furthermore, the link between radicalisation and VE merits further understanding; namely, of what the causes are that facilitate individuals to engage in violence to pursue a radical world view. While radicalisation is a pre-condition for VE, not all instances of radicalisation lead to VE and there are examples throughout Salafi communities that are rejecting existing social and political structures yet do not engage in violence. The lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of the state responses further intensifies the need to understand the roots, causes and most effective ways to address radicalisation, extremism and VE.

Finally, the transnational dimension of radicalisation and VE is a core unifying theme from all the country studies. Radical movements are mostly transnational, and the communication of ideas, resources and information occurs commonly through such channels, including social media and diaspora networks. The role of social media and other channels of communication as well as the links to the diaspora are still not well understood and should be given central attention, as these appear to have often played a greater role than radical communities or individuals through interpersonal contacts. The new methods of radicalisation and VE show the need for further research that balances theory and empirical research. An analysis of the different level of factors and influences, the national and the transnational, the methods used by states in countering extremism and radicalisation and those used by recruiters in turn and the ideologies fuelling radical and extremist behaviour all form part of the web of research that is in need of further in-depth analysis in order to advance the understanding of these phenomena.

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ANNEX 1

COUNTRY	LAW/STRATEGIC DOCUMENT	ADOPTION
Kosovo	Strategy on Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism 2015-2020 and Action Plan	September 2015
Kosovo	Law on Prohibition of Joining Armed Conflicts Outside State Territory	March 2015
Kosovo	Kosovo Penal Code	
North Macedonia	National Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022 (NS/CVE)	March 2018
North Macedonia	National Strategy for Countering Terrorism 2018-2022	March 2018
North Macedonia	National Plan for the reintegration, resocialization, and rehabilitation of returnees from foreign wars and the members of their families (women and children)	June 2020
North Macedonia	Criminal Code	
North Macedonia	Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism	
Bulgaria	National Strategy for Countering Radicalization and Terrorism 2015-2020 and Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy (Annual 2016,2018, 2019 + Implementation Reports)	December 2015
Egypt	No Strategy or National Plan	
Egypt	Counter Terrorism Law No. 94/2015	
Tunisia	National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism	November 2016
Tunisia	National Strategy to Counter Terrorism	2014 (not adopted)
Tunisia	Organic Law on Countering Terrorism and Prevention of Money Laundering	August 2015
Morocco	Law 03-03 on the Fight Against Terrorism	
Morocco	Strategy only covering airports and sites of potential terrorist targets	
Jordan	Strategy for the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) – Arab Army to counter violent extremism and terrorism	
Jordan	Action Plan of the P/CVE Unit at the Prime Ministry	
Jordan	Counter Terrorism Law No. 55	2006 amended by CT Law No. 18 in 2014

COUNTRY	LAW/STRATEGIC DOCUMENT	ADOPTION
Bosnia and Herzegovina	The Strategy of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Prevention and Combating Terrorism 2015-2020	Summer 2015
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Action Plan for Implementation of the Strategy	October 2016
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Criminal Code	Changes in 2014



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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