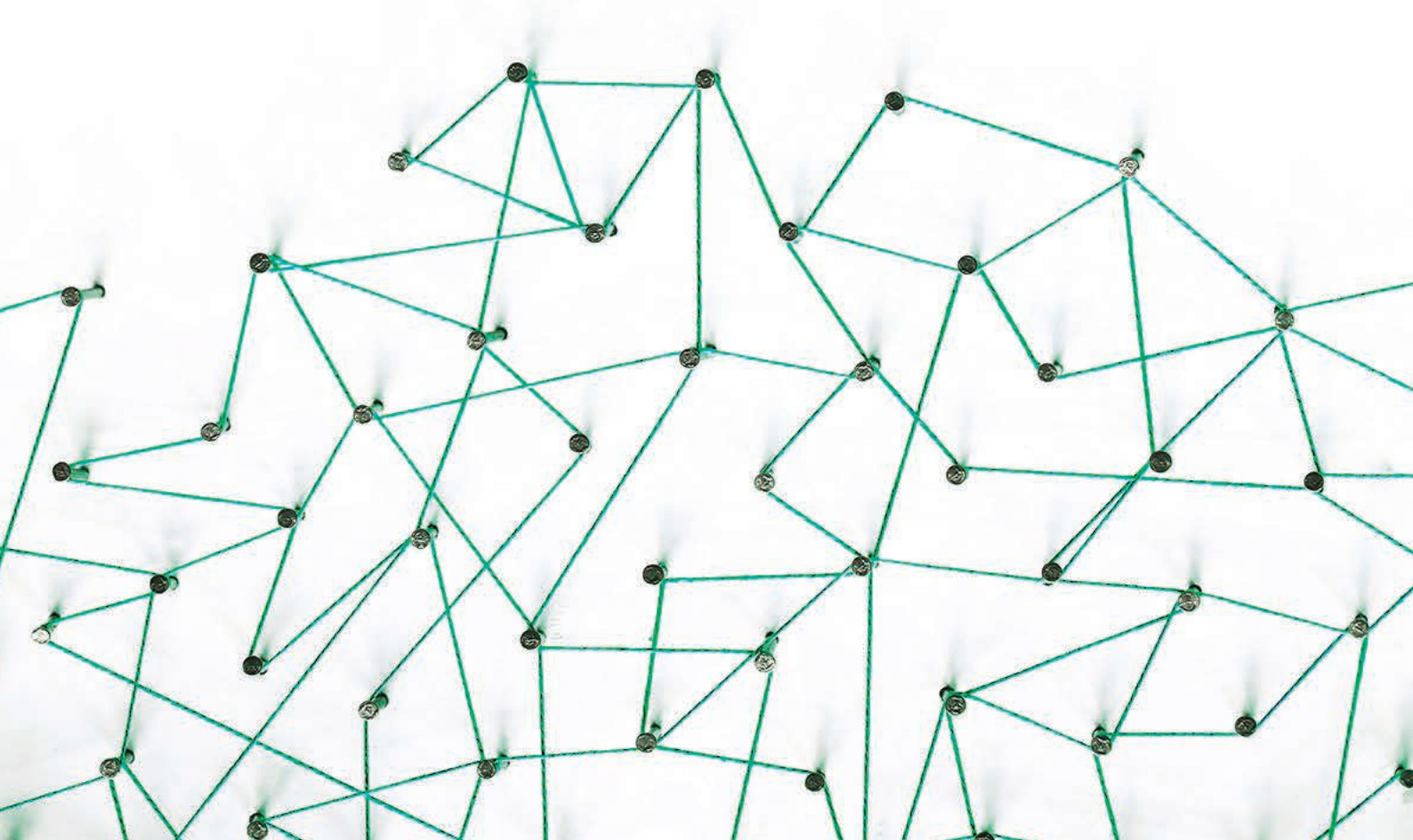




Addressing Violent Extremism in the MENA Region



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Overview

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region faces complex challenges in addressing violent extremism (VE) and radicalisation. This policy paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the research findings on these issues and offer recommendations for national governments, international organisations, and civil society actors to develop effective prevention strategies.

Executive Summary

Institutional and legal context of dealing with the issues of radicalisation and VE, reveal not only definitional problems but also bureaucratic obstacles to the design and implementation of common vision, strategies and policies linked to some common institutional impediments. The limitations caused by this context of institutional weaknesses are also to be considered with knowledge and policy gaps in the MENA region exacerbated by the dominance of the hard security approaches and the centralisation of decision making concerning countering radicalisation and violent extremism (VE).

Multi-level (macro, meso and micro levels) research in the MENA region identifies common drivers of radicalisation in the region, including the crucial role of social local contexts marked by the influence of social and economic grievances exacerbated by regional disparities causing a heightened perception of social injustice. The strong reliance on the security approach, coupled with the lack of channels for the peaceful and risk-free expression of political grievances, and spaces for the acquisition of tools and skills of active citizenship structures, all contribute to creating an environment facilitating the influence of transnational factors. Religion and ideology play significant roles only in contexts where local grievances are not politically addressed. They appear to be more identified as prevention factors and a potential source for resilience than drivers of radicalisation. Successful PVE strategies and policies need to take these nuances into consideration for sustainable PVE initiatives.

Findings

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS IN CONNEKT

- The MENA region exhibits common trends in defining and addressing violent extremism (VE) and radicalisation despite country-specific variations.
- The macro-level perspective leans towards security structures, neglecting softer measures and civil society cooperation in PVE (Torrenkens and de La Vigne 2020, Mouna and Er-rifayi, 2021).
- Social and political grievances are often addressed through a security lens, impacting youth rights and freedoms (Chirchi and Ghribi 2020, 2021, Anzil).
- Various drivers, when combined, contribute to radicalisation in specific contexts, with local grievances being prominent (Bieber and Polozhaani 2023, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023).
- Economic and social factors, compounded by territorial inequalities, contribute significantly to radicalisation, especially in urban social contexts (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Chirchi 2024).
- The combination of economic challenges, political discontent, and lack of open dialogue platforms puts youth at risk of radicalisation.
- Rather than being a direct cause of radicalisation, religion is found to be active as a push factor in combination with specific social contexts, particularly in areas with high levels of social, economic, or political grievances and marginalisation (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Chirchi 2024).
- Religion and ideology play complex roles, serving as both vehicles for radical narratives as well as resilience and preventive factors, requiring nuanced approaches in different contexts (Mhadeen 2022, Mouna and Er-rifayi 2021, 2022, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023, Kahloun 2024, Chirchi 2024).
- Digital platforms play a dual role, serving as both facilitators of radicalisation and spaces for positive engagement.
- Sports and culture are alternative spaces of belonging for marginalised youth. They can be channels for positive participation.
- Gender dynamics show limited variations, with evolving perceptions of female leadership suggesting a greater role for women in PVE initiatives.

- Overall, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive, context-specific approaches addressing systemic issues to effectively counter violent extremism in the region (Chirchi and Ghribi 2022, 2023; Mhadeen et al. 2022; Roche, 2023).

COMMON TRENDS IN THE REGION

The project conducted interviews with representatives from governmental and non-governmental institutions in four countries over a period of 3 years. The project conducted extensive research in the MENA region, involving literature reviews, national policy assessments, and consultations with key stakeholders. This included 81 interviews at the macro level, 26 focus groups, and 23 in-depth interviews for meso-level case studies, and 4 surveys at the micro level, totaling 400 participants in each country. The research aimed to understand the multifaceted nature of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) by examining the institutional context of the efforts for addressing them as well as by examining the multi-level interplay between seven potential drivers: religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational influences, digital socialisation, political factors, and educational, cultural, and leisure opportunities. The findings highlight the complex and dynamic interaction between macro, meso, and micro factors, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of radicalisation drivers, moving beyond simplistic explanations.

Institutional Impediments to Effective PVE Strategies and Policies

Legislation and Institutional Understanding

Official definitions of “terrorism” in the region have been criticized for being overly and threatening human rights. broad (Jrad and Chirchi 2020, Torrenkens et De la Vigne 2020, Anzil et al 2022). There is a lack of differentiation between radicalisation, terrorism, and VE, which can lead to confusion and misuse of anti-terrorism laws to suppress dissent (Torrekens et De La Vigne 2020). The securitisation of radicalisation and VE needs to be redefined to prevent human rights violations.

Institutional Hierarchies and Obstacles

State security-related bodies dominate the approach to preventing and countering VE, leading to hierarchical structures and poor collaboration among state agencies and civil society organisations (CSOs) (Chirchi and Ghribi 2020, Mhadeen et al, 2021, Mouna and Er-rifayi 2021, Kassim 2023, Chirchi et al 2021, Anzil et al 2022, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Chirchi 2024). While there is potential for youth engagement in prevention initiatives (Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023), the involvement of CSOs in PVE with state agencies is limited due to structural impediments and political instability (Chirchi and Ghribi 2021, Anzil 2022, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023). This lack of engagement with local stakeholders and inefficient policy development contributes to community marginalisation and a lack of trust in political institutions (Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Chirchi 2024).

Knowledge Production

There is a bias towards the state’s monopoly on information, limiting researchers’ access to reliable data. The state’s control over information influences media discourse, hindering independent knowledge production. While some countries show openness to addressing these issues (Mhadeen et al, 2021, Er-rifayi and Mouna 2021), recent restrictions on public liberties and civic space pose challenges to knowledge production (Chirchi 2024).

In conclusion, research findings emphasize the need for a redefined approach to addressing radicalisation and VE in the MENA region, focusing on human rights, improved collaboration between state and non-state actors, and independent knowledge production. Effective PVE efforts should engage local institutions and communities in dialogue to address grievances and build trust, ultimately contributing to resilience against radical narratives.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO RADICALISATION

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ECT identifies commonalities in the national contexts of radicalisation, revealing shared patterns across diverse countries (Chirchi and al., 2022). It delves into economic, psychological, political, and social drivers of youth radicalisation, emphasizing local contexts' influence and widespread marginalisation and injustice (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

In the MENA region, various combinations of drivers contribute to violent extremism and radicalisation. While shared events like conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, along with global trends, impact radicalisation potential (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023, local grievances play a crucial role that enable the role of transnational factors as drivers (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023 and 2024). Religion and ideology, traditionally seen as primary drivers, are more vehicles for expressing contextual factors and must be addressed based on each context and the most significant drivers (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Chirchi, 2024).

The combination of transnational dynamics and local grievances

Transnational dynamics, including porous borders and the return of individuals from conflict zones, as push factors for radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) (Chirchi and Jrad, 2020; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021; Mhadeen et al., 2021). The micro-level survey in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia delved into the impact of the diaspora and relations with ethnic and national groups, revealing perceptions of their significant influence on the region's socio-economic situation (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). This study suggests further research into components like borders, migration flows, and refugees to understand how they facilitate radical group recruitment. Additionally, the survey highlighted youth perceptions of government foreign policies, particularly concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, revealing deep-seated feelings of injustice and growing dissent (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Despite the influence of transnational dynamics, local grievances seem to play a more significant role in driving radical narratives, as seen in Tunisia's Feriana case study, where economic and social marginalisation intersect with transnational networks (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022). In Jordan, the interplay between local grievances and transnational dynamics, especially among Syrian refugees, contributes to violent extremism, exacerbated by digital socialisation amplifying narratives of victimhood (Mhadeen et al., 2021). Further research is needed to understand how the geopolitical context and perceptions of injustice affect youth and their political views in the region in the current context.

The Combination of local contexts and ideological factors/religious factor

The CONNEKT research in the MENA region reveals nuanced differences in the perception of radicalisation drivers across macro, meso, and micro levels, with ideology emphasized at the macro level (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021; Anzal and al., 2022), and a more complex view at the meso and micro levels (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). This nuanced perspective underscores the interplay of ideological and contextual factors in recruitment processes and the need to address local drivers. Religion is found to be active as a push factor only in combination with specific contexts, particularly in areas with high levels of

social, economic, or political grievances and marginalisation, rather than as a direct cause (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). However, it also emerges as a resilience factor and a focus of counter-radicalisation efforts (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Countries vary in their prevention strategies, with some prioritizing security measures (Tunisia, Egypt) and others emphasizing religious education reform (Morocco, Jordan). The micro-level findings highlight the importance of religious institutions and places of worship in PVE efforts, as they are perceived as trusted spaces with potential influence (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Additionally, religious education is viewed favorably as a tool for PVE, with a majority agreeing on its effectiveness in containing the risk of VE (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). This corroborates the Arab barometer findings highlighting that religion continues to play a significant role in the lives of young people in the region (Robbins, 2023).

The Combination of Economic Deprivation, Employment Opportunities, Education and Territorial Inequalities

The research findings in the MENA region underscore economic deprivation as a significant driver of radicalisation, especially among young people aged 12 to 30, as revealed in meso-level research and surveys (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). This deprivation is linked to limited social mobility, education-employment mismatches, and dissatisfaction with state policies and services, with 63% of participants expressing dissatisfaction with employment opportunities and services, and 53% unhappy with public education services (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Economic challenges are compounded by issues in education systems, such as high costs, dropouts, and violence, as well as the absence of religious education, leaving youth susceptible to extremist ideologies (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023). These factors contribute to multi-dimensional exclusion, affecting youth identity and social roles, ultimately increasing vulnerability to radicalisation (Bondokji and Rawashdeh).

Territorial inequalities further exacerbate economic deprivation, creating breeding grounds for extremism, particularly in areas lacking social services and infrastructure (Chirchi and al 2021, Anzil et al., 2022). The centralisation of governance models in the region concentrates power and resources, deepening economic and social inequalities (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023). While some countries have implemented decentralisation, historical disparities persist, fueling social and political grievances (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023).

Young people in the region emphasize the importance of equal distribution of services and wealth in preventing radicalisation, highlighting the interplay between public service provision, political grievances, and political participation as key drivers of radicalisation in the region (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Combination of Public Policy Deficit, Territorial Inequalities, Political Grievances in social contexts marked by the Lack of Political Participation

The MENA region's local social contexts of radicalisation are deeply influenced by the state's shortcomings in providing inclusive, just governance and essential services, exacerbating social and economic grievances and fostering a sense of injustice among youth. Political grievances, including corruption and lack of

accountability, further fuel radicalisation, with political exclusion alienating individuals and driving them towards extremist narratives.

Dissatisfaction with public services, particularly education and bureaucratic structures, is widespread among young people, reflecting deep political grievances and contributing to a “triangle of anger” formed by economic demands, political grievances, and regional disparities (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Urban areas, such as those in Tunisia and Egypt, exhibit disparities in infrastructure and services, intensifying feelings of marginalisation and injustice among youth.

These disparities, combined with demographic contexts like urbanisation and a youthful population, are associated with protest formation and are better predictors of radicalisation than ideology or indoctrination. Additionally, low political participation among youth, as evidenced by low voter turnout and lack of trust in political institutions, reflects a disengagement with political processes, further highlighting the challenges in the region’s governance and political systems (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023, Anzil et al., 2022, Kassim, 2023). Despite youth political disengagement, they participate in non-political activities, indicating social responsibility (Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023). However, this non political civic engagement, especially at the local level, does not translate in effective political participation for many reasons that meso and micro-level analysis helps capture.

The absence of meaningful political consultation platforms with youth disengages them, with traditional party politics seen as exclusionary. Other factors that were already highlighted in other studies like weakness of political parties or restrictions on them and the rise of unelected technocrats, have been mentioned in other studies (Storm 2022, Arab Barometer 2022, 2023) and can help further understand the impacts of the disconnect between youth and political institutions in the region (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023). Historical repression by authoritarian regimes also contributes to this disengagement (Chirchi and al. 2021, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Storm 2022, Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023). An indicator of this is the reported high use of VPNs by youth (67%) to protect their privacy, showing a lack of trust in political institutions (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

The combination of economic challenges, political discontent, and lack of open dialogue platforms puts youth at risk of radicalisation. These factors emphasize the need for inclusive governance and policies (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2022, Anzil et al, 2022, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Bonokji and Rawashdeh 2023). According to micro-level research, a majority of respondents believe that government action is crucial in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism by ensuring equal rights and inclusive development (Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023). Comprehensive policies addressing economic, social, and political grievances will effectively counter radicalisation in the region.

Combination of Multi-Level Grievances with the Dual Role of Social Digitalisation, Leisure, and Cultural Opportunities

Wide internet access among youth raises concerns about exposure to extremist narratives and content (Bobdokji and Rawashdeh 2023, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Mouna and Er-rifayi 2021). Micro-level research reveals widespread internet access (96%) and VPN use among youth, raising concerns about exposure to extremist content and privacy (Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023).

However, looking deeper at the use of the internet from meso and a micro perspectives, underscore the digital sphere as having a potential dual role both as a risk factor but also as an alternative socialisation sphere for many youth, where the use of the internet is an integral part of their lifestyle rather than a threat (Chirchi and Ghribi 2023, Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023). Young people are compensating the lack of platforms for free speech, access to information, entertainment and access to leisure by the use of the internet.

Internet monitoring, that classically seems to be the option favored by official institutions, raises concerns about privacy and individual freedoms (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023, Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023, Chirchi 2024). Digital spaces offer potential for both radicalisation and positive youth participation, requiring innovative solutions to balance security and participation rights (Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023). Strengthening cognitive resilience through open discussions and civic engagement is seen as a sustainable approach (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

While economic deprivation and regional inequalities limit cultural opportunities for youth (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023), digital platforms can offer accessible cultural opportunities and improve youth participation, contributing to prevention efforts (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Sports serve as platforms for socialisation and self-expression but also convey grievances, potentially preparing the grounds for radicalisation (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Strengthening the preventive potential of sports is crucial for positive youth engagement (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023, Bondokji and Rawashdeh 2023).

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Drug use among young people is linked to limited entertainment and cultural spaces, economic challenges, and low education levels (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). This, combined with limited religious knowledge, can lead to violent extremism (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). The punitive justice system exacerbates these issues, with varying roles across case studies (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023, Anzil et al 2022). Haut du formulaire

GENDER DYNAMICS IN RADICALISATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE MENA REGION

Overall, the research findings show limited gender variations in the perceptions of youth in the MENA region regarding radicalisation drivers and general views. However, meso-level case studies in Tunisia and Jordan highlight gender dynamics. In Tunisia, economic challenges and cultural expectations of masculinity push young men towards informal economy and radicalisation networks, while in Jordan, female preachers compensate for the lack of formal education through informal religious education (Chirchi and Ghribi 2022, 2023; Mhadeen et al. 2022). Micro-level findings reveal some gender differences. While both genders are equally involved in political participation, males tend to distrust media and religious leaders more, and prefer outdoor activities, while females are slightly more engaged in support-oriented activities and report greater influence of the religious community (Chirchi and Ghribi 2022, 2023; Mhadeen et al. 2022). Recent data from the Arab Barometer suggests a shift in perceptions of female leadership, with increasing acceptance of women in political roles, indicating broader cultural and political changes in the region (Roche, 2023). This suggests an evolving role for women in PVE initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The multi-level research findings in the MENA region reveal commonalities and differences in defining and addressing violent extremism and radicalisation. While there are variations across countries, some common

drivers emerge. At the macro-level, security structures are prioritized over softer measures and cooperation with civil society and academia. This security-centric approach has led to stricter policies impacting youth rights and freedoms. Despite transnational influences, local grievances remain most significant, emphasizing the importance of local contexts. Religion and ideology, traditionally seen as drivers of radicalisation, are also influenced by contextual factors, highlighting the need for tailored prevention strategies. Digital platforms play a dual role, serving as both facilitators of radicalisation and spaces for positive engagement. Sports and culture also impact radicalisation, with certain activities potentially contributing to radicalisation while others, like sports, can be channels for positive participation. Gender dynamics show limited variations, with evolving perceptions of female leadership suggesting a greater role for women in PVE initiatives. Overall, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive, context-specific approaches addressing systemic issues to effectively counter violent extremism in the region (Chirchi and Ghribi 2022, 2023; Mhadeen et al. 2022; Roche, 2023). The factors and contexts of radicalisation and VE in the MENA region thus highlight systemic governance issues, underscoring the need to address them for effective prevention efforts (Bieber and Polozhani, 2023, Chirchi and Ghribi 2023). The failure to address basic needs and social injustices creates fertile ground for radical ideologies, demanding systemic solutions focusing on improved human development conditions, socio-political changes (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023) and institutional adaptations to deep demographic and cultural changes. In summary.

Recommendations for Better PVE Strategies and Policies in the MENA region

CONNEKT's findings reveal the complex nature of radicalisation drivers in the MENA region, emphasizing the need for context-specific prevention strategies. These include addressing the need for better public policies addressing economic disparities, and fostering social inclusion through collaboration between various stakeholders.

To prevent radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in the MENA region, a tailored, multifaceted approach is crucial, focusing on education, economic equity, and social inclusion, as well as cooperation between governments, religious institutions, local communities, civil society, and international organisations. National governments should enhance public services and urban policies, promote territorial equality, empower youth economically, reform religious education, improve education and social inclusion, and foster open civic spaces. Recommendations to the EU and international organisations include aligning strategies with international standards, strengthening cooperation, supporting stable funding for civil society organisations, and promoting research and knowledge sharing. Civil society actors should focus on economic empowerment, political participation, civic education, collaboration with educational institutions, and innovative approaches to religious education and digital spaces.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

- Enhance public services, including education, healthcare, and cultural access.
- Develop inclusive urban policies considering diverse populations and marginalized regions.
- Ensure transparency in resource allocation and adopt a gender-sensitive approach.
- Address territorial inequalities and prioritize public service provision as a security priority.
- Include the informal economy in policies and encourage investment in high unemployment regions.
- Simplify administrative procedures and facilitate cooperation between local communities.

Youth Economic Empowerment:

- Reform administrative structures to support youth entrepreneurship.
- Provide access to low-interest loans and establish policies for self-employment.
- Invest in vocational skills and collaborate regionally for job opportunities.

Religious Institutions and Education:

- Promote religious discourses rooted in openness, moderation, and human rights.
- Integrate religious education into comprehensive PVE approaches.
- Implement religious education programs in schools promoting tolerance.

Education and Social Inclusion:

- Ensure accessible and high-quality education for all.
- Include experiential learning and critical thinking in education.
- Create spaces for open dialogue in schools and cultural/youth centers.

Promoting Open Civic Space and Civic Education:

- Develop comprehensive civic education policies involving governments and civil society.
- Foster partnerships for good governance and community engagement.
- Recognize and reward youth volunteering and civic engagement.

Digital Spaces:

- Prioritize digital literacy and critical thinking to counter extremist narratives.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EU AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS:

- Encourage countries to align strategies with international standards.
- Strengthen regional cooperation and support cross-regional dialogue.
- Ensure stable funding for CSOs and coordinate donor efforts.
- Establish a platform for religious leaders to counter hate speech.
- Provide training for civil servants to manage religious diversity.
- Promote entrepreneurship and increase mobility programs for employment.
- Create cooperation networks among peripheral regions.
- Conduct empirical research to understand urban policies and VE.
- Define online hate speech and enable legal action against it.
- Promote good governance and support research on foreign policies.
- Expand European internship programs and promote cultural exchange.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS:

- Partner with the private sector for economic programs.
- Design and implement political literacy programs for youth.
- Engage in violence reduction efforts within educational institutions.
- Collaborate with local religious affairs officers for religious education.
- Develop digital literacy programs to combat extremist ideologies.

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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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