



**Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans and MENA Region:  
Key Findings and Implications for Research  
Theoretical Synthesis Paper**

PUBLICATIONS



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**Authors:** Maja Halilovic Pastuovic, Johanna-Maria Hülzer, and Gillian Wylie

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## Acronyms

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
FFs	Foreign fighters
FTFs	Foreign terrorist fighters
ICoS	Islamic Community of Serbia
ICiS	Islamic Community in Serbia
IMRO-DPMNU	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
IREC	Intersecting Roles of Education in Conflict
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MoCA	Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDC	Nansen Dialogue Centre
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLA	National Liberation Army
NMK	North Macedonia
OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement
P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

PDA	Party of Democratic Action
PJR	Party of Justice and Reconciliation
SDP	Sandžak Democratic Party
SEEU	South East European University
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
SPP	Serbian Progressive Party
TSUOR	'two schools under one roof'
WB	Western Balkans

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## 1 Introduction

The PAVE project (Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Western Balkans and MENA) addresses the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism by focusing on the twin factors of community vulnerability and community resilience.

The PAVE project applied an interdisciplinary, participatory and inter-regional approach whose main objective was to advance evidence-based knowledge on violent extremism in MENA and the Western Balkans and to strengthen policy-makers' and community leaders' capacity in effective prevention of violent extremisms. PAVE conducted comprehensive fieldwork and in-depth case studies in four Balkan countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia) and three MENA countries (Tunisia, Lebanon and Iraq). The project employs a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. While the quantitative research is still ongoing, this report is based on the qualitative research: 278 interviews and 17 focus groups conducted at 16 fieldwork sites across the seven countries, involving local communities, government officials, religious leaders, NGOs and other civil society actors. In addition, stakeholder meetings were organised at all research sites. Discourse analysis and archival research were also performed.

PAVE focused on four thematic areas: a) cumulative extremisms (the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms); b) the interaction between religious and state institutions and actors, c) online and offline narratives and deradicalisation; and d) transnational interactions, including impact on and from Europe. PAVE has produced a theoretical framework paper, seven country reports, five working papers and three synthesis reports based on the research findings.<sup>1</sup> This report is an amalgamation of all these documents. While our publications to date present a detailed analysis of all case study countries across the four themes we covered in PAVE, the aim of this report is to provide *a bird's eye view* of our findings in relation to the field of radicalisation and violent extremism.

The sections of the report present messages we want to communicate regarding our research findings overall. The report starts with a discussion of legacies of intra-state violence and what it means for studies of radicalisation and violent extremism. We argue that a distinct trajectory exists in post-conflict societies that produces unique forms of radicalisation and violent extremism – such as ethno-political and ethno-religious. While this pathway may differ from setting to setting, it is always present. It includes failed reconciliation and consequential polarisation, and it leads to a cycle of violence. The model for understanding radicalisation and extremism in post-conflict societies hence differs significantly from other pre-existing models.

The following sections outline elements which we have identified in PAVE and which contribute to this trajectory: a) state structures, b) education, c) religious leaders, d) media, e) diaspora communities, and f) gender.

Based on the empirical findings, the final section argues that vulnerability and resilience are often two sides of the same coin and further research should therefore move away from a dichotomous understanding of vulnerability and resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.pave-project.eu/publications](http://www.pave-project.eu/publications)

## 2 Conflict-to-radicalisation and the violent extremism trajectory

The PAVE project teams conducted research in seven countries in the Western Balkans and MENA region. The main research findings from the project highlight a strong connection between past conflicts and current growth of radicalisation and extremism in all research countries.<sup>2</sup> The findings also point out that **new forms of radicalisation and violent extremisms** are developing in various settings **in response to the legacies of these conflicts** – including **ethno-political, ethno-religious and sectarian extremisms**. They are inter-related with various forms of nationalism and nationalistic sentiments. These developments are directly linked to **polarisation** in the researched states and ultimately lead to divided societies.

As the divides widen and tensions increase, political leaders capitalise on the potential to speak to a cause that efficiently and swiftly mobilises people. **Populism** hence rises in popularity, instrumentalising and manipulating ethno-political identities and divisions. For example, in North Macedonia, the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (IMRO-DPMNU)* represents this phenomenon, as a party which used nationalism-populism extensively to ‘cement its hold on power’ while in government, employing anti-Albanian slogans whose effect is to worsen inter-ethnic relations. Although these populist actors do not organise or actively call for violence against minority groups, their political tactics and narratives legitimise violence by framing minorities as a threat to the majority population. In this unstable and socially polarised environment, the media, often run and funded by certain ethnic groups, follow suit. The media incite radicalisation by publishing and spreading misinformation and engaging in sensationalist reporting. Online media are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon due to their unregulated environment and poor editing practices. Strong connections between state actors and extremist organisations can exacerbate a climate of radicalised opinions by mainstreaming and normalising them in public discourse, as can be seen in Serbia since the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) came to power. Normalisation of extremist discourse is further fuelled by the existence of a spectrum of actors that promote these ideas.

One of the underlying causes of ethnic tensions, polarisation, increased nationalism and populism is **failed reconciliation**. Failed post-conflict reconciliation is not limited to strained relations between ethnic groups. It is often systemic. After the end of conflict, countries adopt or maintain constitutional structures that nurture ethnic or sectarian divisions, creating a perfect breeding ground for radicalisation and extremism. In some cases, ethnic conflicts have caused territorial ethnic homogenisation where once-heterogeneous communities existed, and this situation has been institutionalised and constitutionalised in the post-conflict state.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, ethnic divisions have been constitutionalised by the *Dayton Peace Agreement*. Annex IV of the Agreement (Bosnian Constitution) confirms the existence of two ethnically distinct entities constituting the new state. In a similar fashion, the *Taif Agreement* that ended 20 years of civil war in Lebanon froze the power balance between the Lebanese sects. While it enshrines the abolition of sectarianism as a national priority, it falls short of outlining a timeframe for its implementation. As a result, the abolition has not been implemented, and political sectarianism prevails in Lebanon until the present day. Such systemic failure can lead to rejection of the system by

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<sup>2</sup> Tunisia is an exception, as it does not have a history of sectarian/inter-ethnic violence.

those who feel marginalised or under-represented (e.g. the Sunni population in Lebanon). In the case of Iraq, during Saddam's regime, Sunni Turkmen were privileged over their Shi'a peers in government posts and security services in the north of the country. After 2003, the distribution of power shifted and Shi'a factions took over the government authorities. The new governments that followed (especially those of al-Maliki) aligned with Shi'a groups and granted them certain privileges. This paved the way for harassment (torture, extrajudicial killings, sectarian property destruction) of the Sunni population by Shi'a authorities in areas like Tal Afar. In conjunction with these institutional failures, **enduring war narratives and incompatible interpretations of past events** run rampant and exacerbate the differences and animosity felt between population groups, thus increasing **polarisation**. This can lead to **competitive victimisation between groups** and adds to ethnic tensions.

All of this culminates in **cumulative radicalisation**.<sup>3</sup> This is characterised by the opening of a space for **collective radicalisation of populations and a tendency towards extremism, including the possibility of individual or collective violence**. In most of the investigated country cases that have a history of violent conflict, we can observe a specific type of radicalisation that can be described as cumulative or interactive and takes place in reference to an outgroup. Through polarising loops, opposing extremist narratives are strengthened in antagonism and are mutually reinforcing.

The conflict in **BiH** damaged the quality of relations between the ethnic populations living on the country's territory, which resulted in many local communities that were ethnically heterogeneous before the war becoming ethnically homogeneous, remaining as such until the present day. Annex VII of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which addresses the issue of returnees, was never fully implemented. Ethnically homogeneous environments, formed through ethnic cleansing and persecution during the war, became fertile ground for ethno-political narratives that led to the exclusion of 'others' in the post-war period. This was reflected in the population and (in)directly contributed to the emergence of political extremism and extremism motivated by ethno-nationalist ideology and religion, where 'others' are always labelled as 'enemies'.

In **Serbia**, conflicting historical narratives between Serbian and Bosniak population groups, competitive victimisations and collective grievances, combined with the poor economic situation, widespread corruption and malfunctioning of state institutions, fuel ethno-religious polarisation. As Perry (2019) argues, radicalisation in Serbia is embedded in the experience of violence and ethnic cleansing in the 1990s wars. The parastatal system that developed in response to state collapse in the 1990s was rejuvenated after 2012 with the electoral win of the *Serbian Progressive Party (SPP)*, which is mainly led by former members of the *Serbian Radical Party* (related to paramilitary groups that were active during the 1990s wars). Concurrently, the country is dealing with various manifestations of a socially embedded 'culture of extremism', which is primarily a consequence of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the events that followed it.

Following the 1990s wars and the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, **Kosovo** was placed under international administration in July 1999. After two years of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, UN Special Envoy and former President of Finland Martti Ahtisaari presented to the UN Security Council the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement – commonly referred to as the *Ahtisaari*

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<sup>3</sup> See PAVE Glossary of Key Terms: [www.pave-project.eu/downloads-and-videoclips/\\_downloads-and-video-clips/PAVE\\_870769\\_MS2\\_publication\\_layout.pdf](http://www.pave-project.eu/downloads-and-videoclips/_downloads-and-video-clips/PAVE_870769_MS2_publication_layout.pdf)



*Plan* – which recommended that Kosovo's status should be independence, supervised by the international community for a period of time (UN Security Council, 2007). On 17 February 2008 – following the failure to reach a compromise agreement – Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence and committed to implementing the *Ahtisaari Plan*. The EU initiated the dialogue for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia in 2011. However, a decade later, the conclusion of the process with a comprehensive and legally binding agreement between the two countries remains an unlikely outcome (Stanicek 2021). The absence of normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia is a significant source of instability and tension in the Western Balkans. In addition, political forces use the unresolved issues to increase polarisation between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, fuelling cumulative radicalisation on ethno-political grounds.

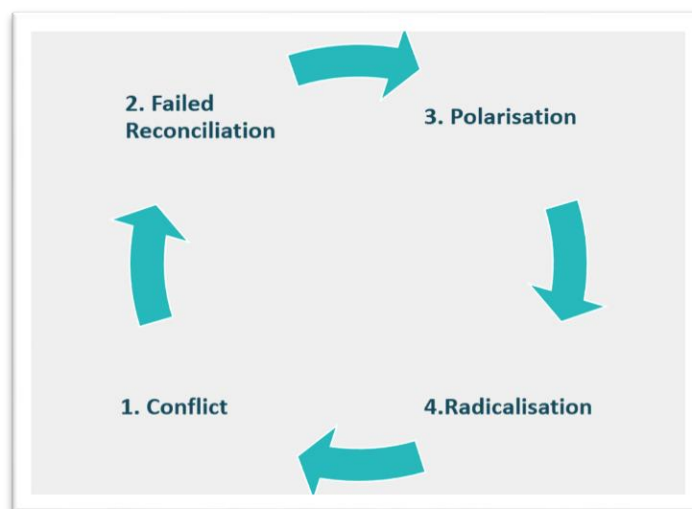
**North Macedonia** (NMK) emerged from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in September 1991 as a multi-ethnic state. As the Kosovo crisis spiralled into a war that ended after NATO's intervention in 1999, it also acted as a catalyst for developments in NMK. In January 2001, the so-called *National Liberation Army* (NLA) – an armed group with ties to the Kosovo Liberation Army – appeared on the scene, declaring that it had been formed 'following the failure of the Macedonian state to peacefully reform', and made various constitutional and political demands (Χρηστίδης 2021). The NLA expanded its presence in majority-Albanian areas (such as the municipalities of Tetovo and Kumanovo), underlining its appeal among ethnic Albanians. Its success on the ground forced the international community and, reluctantly, ethnic Macedonian politicians to negotiate the demands it had made. As a result, a process of political dialogue came about, which culminated with the signing of the *Ohrid Framework Agreement* (OFA) on 8 August 2001. This meant a political solution to a crisis that threatened to escalate into a full-blown ethnic conflict. The OFA established the principle of civic equality among ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians without, at the same time, introducing any territorial or/and institutional arrangements that could have undermined NMK's institutional cohesion and functions. However, for many ethnic Macedonians, the OFA was perceived to have been imposed by the international community ('the West'), favouring the ethnic Albanians (Χρηστίδης 2021). Although ethnic relations in North Macedonia have improved since 2001, they remain fragile. This fragility between the two main ethnic groups creates fertile ground for radicalisation and for extremist groups to gain a following on both the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian side (ibid. 2018).

**Iraq's** vulnerability to violent extremism can be traced back to the 1980s, as the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) has a unique meaning in the Islamisation of Iraq. The belligerents each encapsulated a religious identity: Sunni Islam for President Saddam Hussein and Shi'a Islam for Ayatollah Khomeini. Each side consciously linked religion to politics to garner internal allegiance and external support (Wright 1980 and 1985; Chubin and Tripp 1988). Inside Iraq, Saddam Hussein used war and emergency rules as a pretext to establish a totalitarian dictatorship. He accelerated the crushing of the organised Shi'a opposition and used chemical weapons against the civilian Kurdish population. Several of the Sunni communities in post-Saddam Iraq felt marginalised and developed grievances, not only against the American invaders but also against the Shi'a-dominated governments. This paved the way for jihadist groups to establish themselves more firmly in Iraq. These jihadist groups were mobilised on the basis of both a theological (Salafi-jihadist) and sectarian identity (drawing on Sunni grievances against Shi'as). Thus, sectarianism between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of jihadist extremism. In 2006, *Jamā'at al-Tawhīd wal-Jihad* and several other jihadi groups merged within

the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The latter’s goal was to establish a ‘Caliphate’ in Sunni areas of the country. Placed under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2010, ISI established the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in April 2013. In Iraq, the group resumed the insurgency, which escalated into a civil war when several major cities fell into the hands of the jihadists in early 2014. Although IS was officially defeated in Iraq in late June 2017, the legacy of the group and its policies on the social fabric and the remaining pockets of active militants in the country remain serious threats to post-conflict recovery and the resilience of its communities to violent extremism.

**Lebanon** is characterised by ethnic and religious diversity. In 1975, sectarian tensions that were heightened by the Palestinian relocation to the south of Lebanon eventually escalated into a civil war that lasted until 1990. Tensions between the parties have not disappeared with the end of the civil war but have been institutionalised through a continued religious-based power-sharing system enshrined in the *Taif Agreement*. The last decade witnessed sectarian tensions between Hezbollah and Sunni and Christian groups, which have increased — as has political gridlock. The existence of a political system that prioritises certain ethnic and religious groups paves the way for a feeling of deprivation and discrimination among all ethnic groups, since one always perceives the ‘other(s)’ as being more privileged.

Our findings show that there is a **clear pathway from past violent conflicts to new emerging extremist ideologies and movements within the cultures of extremism** that currently exist in the WB and MENA (see *Figure 1.*) These ethno-political, ethno-religious and sectarian extremisms, characterised by reciprocal victimisation, collective grievances and incompatible narratives, are inter-related in a more complex setup than violent extremisms in the EU and require a new understanding of cumulative extremisms. Research on **cumulative radicalisation** needs to take this recognition on board.



*Figure 1: Conflict-to-radicalisation and violent extremism trajectory*

In summary, P/CVE (preventing/countering violent extremism) approaches and cumulative extremism need to engage with research and literature on peacebuilding and reconciliation. An understanding of reconciliation as a concept, outcome and process, from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives,<sup>4</sup> should be incorporated into P/CVE endeavours. The relationship between radicalisation, violent extremism and transitional justice should also be addressed (Slye 2020), with a focus on non-militarised approaches (Ndiloseh and Maalim 2021). There has been some exploration of common issues between the process of reconciliation in post-conflict societies and disengagement or deradicalisation processes but these need to be explored further (Mühlhausen 2017). Finally, lessons from peacebuilding in general (*such as* Bosley 2020) and inter-religious peacebuilding in particular (*such as* Abu Nimer 2018) should inform future P/CVE efforts in relation to cumulative extremism in post-conflict settings.

### 3 The role of state structures

**State structures in WB and MENA enable the development of extremisms, albeit in different forms in different settings.** *Our country sample shows that the way in which states operate or do not operate contributes to the development of extremism. Although states in WB and MENA may have counter-terrorism strategies and policies, they are also institutionally and constitutionally implicated in allowing extremism to grow. Sometimes, as in the case of Iraq, a lack of functioning institutions opens up a space for extremist sections within society to flourish. At the other end of the spectrum, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, states are actively creating extremist polarisation by institutionalising segregation based on identity politics.*

Back in 2007, Asim Mujkic argued that the best way to describe post-conflict institutional and constitutional settings in the Western Balkans is ethnopolitics. In discussing the WB context, he called 'a community characterised by the political priority of the ethnic group(s) over the individual that is implemented through democratic self-legislation, and a community characterised by the political priority of the ethnic group's right to self-determination over the citizen's right to self-determination where the citizen's membership in a political community is determined by her or his membership in an ethnic community, *Ethnopolis [and] the political narrative and practice intended to justify this ethnically-based social construct, ethnopolitics'* (Mujkic 2007, p. 116). In a similar manner to Mujkic, Lise Howard (2012) problematised the US and international community's approach to building many representative governments worldwide as ethnocentric. In her paper, she extended her approach to both WB and MENA through case studies of Lebanon, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Iraq. She argued that such an approach produces ethnocracies rather than liberal democracies.

Ethnocracy, according to Howard, is 'a political system in which political and social organisations are founded on ethnic belonging rather than individual choice' (2012, p. 155). Ethnocracies are parliamentary systems with proportional or semi-proportional representation according to ethnic classifications where contrasting political platforms are of secondary importance to ethnic group membership and where ethnic bases for political parties are often mandated by law (ibid. 2012). According to Howard

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Conciliation Resources (2021), Bloomfield, Barnes and Huysse (2003), Abu Nimer (2001).

(2012), the biggest problem with such systems is that they lead the whole country into an ethnocracy trap where it is impossible to operate outside ethnopolitics. Ethnocracy traps all the institutions within the system to function in its favour and for its reproduction.

Following these insights, in PAVE we argue that ethnopolitics, which persist to this day in both regions, create fertile ground for radicalisation and extremism.

The internal political and social dynamics of **Bosnia and Herzegovina** (BiH) are determined by the war legacy and are strongly reflected in the country's constitutional make-up. It comprises two entities: Serb-dominated Republika Srpska and a Bosniak/Croat-dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although the 1992-1995 war changed the ethnic structure of the population in most areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country remains a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. According to the 2013 census, 50.11 % of the population declared themselves Bosniaks, 30.78 % Serbs and 15.43 % Croats (Balkan Insight 2016). The polarisation that persists between these groups is institutionalised in the country's complex multi-level governance structure based on power-sharing between the three main groups. This consociational system froze the peace process and the conflict instead of resolving it (Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung 2021).

**Serbia** struggles with the legacies of wars, international isolation during the 1990s and late democratic and economic transition, which started in the 2000s after the fall of then president Slobodan Milošević. The NATO bombing in 1999 and subsequent secession of Kosovo produced strong anti-Western and anti-globalist sentiment among the population in Serbia. Western policy was considered unprincipled and unjust, which, combined with the country's economic failures, fostered frustration and self-victimisation and strengthened far-right nationalism. The international isolation of Serbia in the 1990s brought about state collapse, creating a parastatal (clientelistic) system that served to satisfy citizens' basic needs. This clientelistic system was based on informal networks, consisting of paramilitary groups, criminals, representatives of the regime, tycoons, football fan groups, and other groups that profited from such a system. After a short period of optimism following the fall of Milošević in 2000, a new context of political and economic transition, with its shortcomings (corruption, unemployment, etc.), created space for the transformation of former paramilitary groups into various far-right movements and associations. The *Serbian Progressive Party* (SPP), which came to power in 2012, has connections to far-right networks and implements a policy of benevolence towards these actors, legitimising their radicalising behaviour. In recent years, especially since 2014 when Aleksandar Vučić – who is the president of the SPP party – became Prime Minister, and 2017, when he became President of the Republic of Serbia – the SPP has collaborated, officially and unofficially, with various far-right groups.

In Serbia, parastatal control of right-wing extremist activities also serves, paradoxically, as a resilience factor. The government can influence these activities and prevent the groups concerned from committing violent acts. In this way, the government can control their expressions of violence ('localised violence'). This form of control is most visible in the relationship between the government and football fan groups, where there have been no significant outbreaks of rioting and violence since 2012. The SPP has very good relations with football fan groups, with its leader being a member of one of them, which has allowed it to integrate these groups into a parastatal network controlled by the current Serbian

regime. Although the regime has used football fan groups for various political and criminal purposes, it has managed to reduce violence among them.

While the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in **North Macedonia** established the principle of civic equality among ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians without, at the same time, introducing any territorial or/and institutional arrangements of ethnic segregation, many ethnic Macedonians perceive the agreement as favouring the ethnic Albanian population (Χρηστίδης 2021). It was seen as ‘humiliating and the beginning of a feared binational or federal state’ (Democratisation Policy Council and Eurothink 2021). After the 2006 elections, the *IMRO-DPMNU* party came to power by mobilising ethnic Macedonians through nationalistic-populist discourse and slogans that implicitly carried an anti-Albanian bias. Following the December 2016 parliamentary elections, it sought to block the formation of a new government by spreading nationalist narratives (Marusic 2017a; Marusic 2017b). This was a period of dangerous political polarisation that culminated in the events of 27 April 2017, when Parliament was stormed by a mob of IMRO-DPMNU supporters following the election of Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as Speaker of Parliament.

**Kosovo** exists under a contested statehood with disputed territorial integrity – the north of Kosovo is home to 50,000 Kosovo Serbs who reject the authority of Pristina and instead look to guidance from Belgrade. In addition, Kosovo still struggles with the lack of international legitimacy. This is also reflected in the fact that it remains the only country in the Western Balkans with no visa-free travel to the Schengen area and other countries in the EU.

Following the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing global campaign against terrorism, Saddam Hussein was toppled by a US-led intervention in **Iraq** in April 2003. Under US influence, the *Coalition Provisional Authority* (CPA) dissolved the coercive arm of the Iraqi state and implemented the de-Ba’athification<sup>5</sup> of the state. This policy quickly resulted in general chaos and institutional collapse. At the same time, a number of Iraqi religious leaders, including the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who claimed to have more legitimacy than the coalition-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, questioned the legitimacy of the CPA. The agitation against the US presence in Iraq was reinforced by the colonialist and criminal behaviour of the US in the country. The ensuing power vacuum was exploited by several non-state actors, including local and foreign Islamists. Moreover, the US occupation of the country triggered the proliferation of armed insurgents and jihadi groups. In the words of Desker (2005), these groups were an ‘amorphous mix of foreign Salafi, local jihad, and ex-Ba’athist Sunni elements mounting a serious assault on the Allied occupation’. The unfolding ISIL insurgency, covered in the previous section, was also a product of the institutionalisation of sectarian divides in the 2006 constitution, the sectarian policies of the Iraqi state under al-Maliki’s premiership (2006-2014) and the emergence of controversial Iran-backed Shi’a militias as a so-called peacekeeping force in Sunni areas, which was integrated into the state’s security apparatus.

**Lebanon** is organised as a consociational democracy that is meant to incorporate the three main religious groups within the population: Maronite Christians (represented by the President), Shi’a Muslims (represented by the Speaker of Parliament) and Sunni Muslims (represented by the Prime Minister).

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<sup>5</sup> De-Ba’athification refers to a policy undertaken in Iraq by the Coalition Provisional Authority and subsequent Iraqi governments to remove the Ba’ath Party’s influence in the new Iraqi political system after the US-led invasion in 2003.

Although freedom of conscience is enshrined in Lebanon's constitution, specific religious communities are favoured in public employment, the government and the legislature (Saliba 2010). The power-sharing system no longer reflects the demographic situation. Together with the perceived scrutiny and different treatment of Sunni suspects by the security services, which is seen as a major source of grievance, this contributes to the perception of discrimination and injustice among the Sunni population.

Unemployment, corruption, inadequate religious education, social marginalisation and exclusion, weakness of the state and its inability to provide either basic services or an inclusive sense of citizenship are additional factors of unrest. All of these factors have diverted people's sense of belonging and allegiance from the national state to narrow identity politics based on religion/sect (Council on Foreign Relations 2019; Osborne 2018). Lebanon's economy has struggled recently, partly because of political gridlock, but also because of a spill-over from the Syrian civil war, which worsened the existing sectarian tensions. Furthermore, Lebanese politics have become a proxy battleground for Iran, which provides support for Hezbollah, and Saudi Arabia, which supports former Prime Minister Saad Hariri and other Sunni politicians. The escalated tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have repercussions across the conflicts in the region in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere, and the engagement of Hezbollah in Syria is considered by various national and international actors to be one of the main grievances for extremist groups from the Sunni spectrum.

After the 2011 **Tunisian** revolution (also called the Jasmine Revolution), Tunisia transitioned from autocracy to a democratic system through the drafting of a new constitution, which proved difficult to implement due to remaining tensions. The 2013 National Dialogue and the new constitution did not address these tensions (Hostrup et al. 2017), and post-revolution expectations have not been fulfilled. This is particularly relevant for young people who are facing unemployment, barriers to civic involvement and lack of political freedom (Hamdi 2016, 2018). The fall of the autocratic regime in Tunisia contributed to the emergence of a new socio-political context characterised by extremes. New political and religious organisations emerged in parallel to new discourses and practices related to Islam. In addition, there is ongoing structural marginalisation of the inner and southern regions of the country, which have been continuously neglected in economic development policy by the central government and its international partners. The connected loss of legitimacy of the nation-state, leading to the search for alternative identities, plays a role in the rise of Salafi ideology and in violent extremist engagement (Hamdi 2015; Ennaifer 2018). Tunisia has supplied more foreign fighters than any other country in the world.

These accounts illustrate that the state plays a major role in enabling the development of political, ethnic and religious extremism in all seven country contexts. Institutional and constitutional fragilities and, paradoxically, institutional and constitutional rigidities, both brought on by past conflicts and grievances, open up a space for emerging extremisms. In addition, state actors' strong connections to extremist organisations can exacerbate a climate of radicalised opinions by mainstreaming and normalising them in public discourse. Normalisation of extremist discourse is exacerbated by the existence of a spectrum of actors that promote these ideas.

## 4 The role of education

**There is a lack of integrated models of education and ‘critical thinking’ skill sets within the education sector in both WB and MENA, enabling polarisation and the development of cumulative extremism. Our interviewees and stakeholders across sectors in all countries stress the quality of education as an essential factor of resilience. Expansion of cooperation is recommended between academic institutions and governmental and non-governmental actors in the individual states, as well as cross-regional cooperation in designing digital education platforms and courses dealing with intercultural communication, critical thinking, media and religious literacy. These skill sets are seen as crucial elements of reconciliation and countering and preventing the growth of extremism in all its forms. In addition, segregated education, which exists in many settings in WB and MENA, is a factor of vulnerability.**

The existing literature on the topic of education and conflict does not place sufficient emphasis on the role of education in the development of violent extremism. Halafoff, Lam and Bouma (2019) highlight the role of education in transmitting nationalist narratives in contexts of recent conflict, including in segregated schools, and map current research gaps in this area. Sjøen and Jore (2019) explore impacts and implications of educational measures in prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. Bloodworth (2020) explores ‘how educational policies, institutions, and practices perpetuate ethnic segregation in North Macedonia, and how growing up in a divided society shapes individuals’ conceptions of themselves and other predominant ethnic groups’. However, an explicit link to the role of education in the emergence and persistence of extremism is still lacking. A recent addition to the literature opens up this space, however, by exploring the role of textbooks in peacebuilding. Vanner, Akseer and Kovicham-Levi (2022) introduce a new analytical framework, known as *Intersecting Roles of Education in Conflict* (IREC), which proposes that education and textbooks play a crucial role in post-conflict settings in three major ways. Education can be a *victim* of violence where schools and educational infrastructures are destroyed; it can also play an *accomplice* role where it becomes a tool of intolerance, aiding and abetting dominance, or a *transformer* role where it alters the roots of violence, paving the way for social justice and peace.

While these roles can overlap somewhat in different settings in PAVE, we argue that a) in most post-conflict settings, education assumes an accomplice role and aids the status quo by perpetuating a frozen conflict; and b) unless the accomplice role transitions into a transformer role (*some noteworthy examples already exist, paving a way towards this transition*), a gap will exist where extremism can flourish. Examples from our research countries illustrate this argument.

In **Lebanon**, history teaching is a political issue. Paul J. Yoder states: ‘Education has served as a vital means of controlling and disseminating information.’ (2015, p. 140). Yoder argues that history teaching has been used as a means against national social cohesion and integration and thus against the idea of a single national narrative. In his view, three main factors are responsible for this weakness. The first is the uninterrupted presence of denominational schools since the existence of the Ottoman Empire (Abouchedid and Nasser 2000; Bashshur 2005). According to Frayha (2003) and Jalbout (2015), 60 % of students attend private religious schools that are run by Lebanese sectarian communities (Yoder 2015; Abouchedid and Nasser 2000; Bahous, Nabhani and Rabo 2013). Therefore, the loyalty of these schools is directed towards their own sectarian groups (Abouchedid and Nasser 2000; Bashshur 2005) rather than the Lebanese state. Second, the state has been unable to produce, impose and disseminate

a national curriculum, which was one of the main tasks of the Center for Educational Research and Development after the *Taif Accords* (Frayha 2003; Volk 2008). Thirdly, the interference of political parties in the creation of the history curriculum contributes to a political impasse. In his analysis, Bashshur (2005) adds another factor that predates the education system and undermines the creation of a single national narrative. Indeed, the sectarian approach to the teaching of history relies on the passing on of a sectarian memory, and thus a sectarian narrative. This heritage is present not only in schools but also in families, neighbourhoods, towns, etc., all of which have *a story to tell* about their relations with other sectarian communities and thus participate in the passing on of a memory of animosity towards the Other. In the Lebanese context, the legacy of relations between sectarian communities exists in all layers of society. Importantly, our research does not understand education in its narrow sense, but rather in the broad sense that every interaction is an opportunity for education and a space for memory transfer. Therefore, the phenomenon of 'conflicting historical narratives' (Bashshur 2005) goes beyond schools in the Lebanese sectarian system and penetrates all levels of society.

In the case of **Iraq**, Iraqi identity has traditionally been constructed on the basis of a dominant discourse of Arabness, causing social discontent among non-Arab minorities, notably Kurds and Turkmen. This led to a negative relationship between state and society under Saddam Hussein. After 2003, a new sectarian system was created in which the state had no say in religious education. As in the case of Lebanon, there are two types of schools in Iraq: religious and public. Religious schools depend on the various endowments, while public schools have no religious affiliation and are run by the Ministry of Education. In public schools, only Islam and Christianity are taught, which leads to a feeling of exclusion among members of other faiths present in the country (e.g. Yezidis). Religious schools, as noted above, are affiliated with one of the three endowments and are completely independent of the government. Each endowment follows different procedures for the recruitment and assignment of imams and cadres, whom they also train. The endowments are also responsible for the development of religious education curricula. Our research shows that the lack of cooperation between the different endowments and the absence of a unified curriculum have become precursors to sectarian division and violent extremism. A common national curriculum that recognises Iraqi diversity is also seen as a necessity. The current national Arabic curriculum contains texts from the Holy Koran but no holy books from other faiths, which can cause students from other faiths to feel excluded while learning the national language of Iraq. Thus, the sectarian nature of public schools, the lack of recognition of all religious groups in public schools, and an outdated curriculum which is still largely Arab-Muslim in character are vulnerability factors related to the education system.

The education sector in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** reflects the state constitution. It is defined by the BiH Constitution, the constitutions of the entities and cantons, and the Statute of Brčko District, all of which govern legal responsibilities for education. As stated above, BiH consists of two entities (Republika Srpska and the Federation of BiH) and Brčko District. Republika Srpska has a centralised government and a Ministry of Education. The Federation of BiH has a decentralised government and consists of 10 cantons, each of which has its own Ministry of Education. There is also a Federal Ministry of Education; however, this ministry merely has a coordinating role. Brčko District has its own Department for Education. This means that there are 12 institutions responsible for education in BiH: the Ministry of Education and Culture of Republika Srpska, 10 cantonal Ministries of Education in the Federation of BiH,



and the Department for Education in Brčko District. There are also two other ministries with coordinating roles: the Federal Ministry of Education and Science coordinates activities between the 10 cantons within the Federation of BiH, while the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH (MoCA) is established at the state level and coordinates activities among all the education institutions. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are three constituent peoples and three official languages – Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian – which are taught as mother tongues in schools. In general, there is political tension within the education system in Bosnia, where constitutional segregation leads to curriculum segregation.

BiH's education system is ethnically segregated, resulting in the permeation of curricula with various ethno-political narratives. These narratives are frequently at odds with one another, fuelled by self-victimisation and 'othering', resulting in disparities in educational values across Bosnia and Herzegovina. Consequently, the values obtained from education in Bosnia and Herzegovina have a limited range of resilience and cannot fully realise their potential in strengthening resilience. The phenomenon of 'two schools under one roof' (TSUOR) operates within the segregated education system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. TSUOR is a policy of ethnic segregation where Bosnian Muslim and Croat children attend classes in the same building but are physically separated in different classrooms and taught ethnically differentiated curricula. This has had a negative impact on security in the region by creating fertile ground for ethno-radicalisation of young Bosnians (Halilovic Pastuovic 2022).

The last three decades in **Serbia** have been marked by profound political and social changes, including reforms in the education sector that have not been very successful, leaving Serbia with only 11 % of the population with higher education. Reforms in primary and secondary education led to comprehensive changes in the prescribed curriculum. They have emphasised nationalist interpretations of past historical events while introducing many stereotypes about other ethnic and minority groups in the country and the region, thus reinforcing an exclusionary mindset among young people. In addition, religious education ('*veronauka*') in primary and secondary schools is problematic. Religious education is an optional course, and students can choose between this course and civic education. This is a vulnerability factor because it segregates students according to their religion (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim) and is controlled by religious communities (curriculum, textbooks, teachers). On top of this, there is no inter-religious communication or inter-religious education programme in the Serbian education system. Both Islamic communities have their *maktabs* (primary education) and madrasas (secondary/higher education) for training clergy (imams). Some of them continue their education in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia or Algeria. In addition, education in Sandžak is affected by segregation policies, whereby Serb and Bosniak pupils attend separate classes (based on language preferences and ethnic/religious affiliation). This inevitably results in various forms of separation and segregation in everyday life (outside the classroom), with little or no inter-ethnic contact.

PAVE research also identified various examples of good practices emerging from the education sector to overcome segregation and other factors of radicalisation. For instance, the Catholic School Centres project in **BiH** is an important initiative by the Catholic Church for preventing politically and religiously motivated extremism by conveying values of humanity. The first centre was founded in 1994 and students from all religious communities participated. Furthermore, universal preventive interventions are implemented as part of regular school activities in BiH, in addition to a mechanism for the monitoring of factors that present a risk to positive development. Multi-sectoral teams, including social work cen-

tres, the police, health centres and parents, collaborate on developing an individual care plan for working with the students if the monitoring mechanism discovers a risk. In addition, Nansen Dialogue Centre (NDC) Mostar is an independent non-governmental organisation which uses education to encourage democratic practices and promote dialogue among different ethnic, religious, political and interest groups as a tool for prevention and resolution of conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In **North Macedonia**, the presence of educational institutions such as the State University of Tetovo and the South East European University (SEEU) are seen as key factors of community resilience to radicalisation compared to the municipality of Kumanovo, which has similar socio-economic conditions to Tetovo, but has been more vulnerable to radicalisation. In the municipality of Mitrovica South in Kosovo, developing critical thinking among high school students is identified as a key measure to counter and prevent campaigns aimed at radicalisation of the youth.

In **Serbia**, the state financially supports religious education by all religious communities at both primary and secondary level. This 'equal opportunities' policy presents the state as an impartial and equal supporter of all religious communities in Serbia. Although there is generally a lack of dialogue and communication between religious communities in Serbia, the issue of religious education is one on which a consensus is easier to reach. The latest example is the cooperation of all religious communities on the reform of religious education. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) brought together representatives of all communities (including the two Islamic communities) to discuss the position of religious education in the Serbian education system. Initiatives like this can help further intra- and inter-religious dialogue, as the SOC managed to bring together representatives of the two rival Islamic communities in Serbia, which is a rare occurrence. Similarly, religious education in maktabs and madrasas is a factor of resilience rather than vulnerability. Both Islamic communities adhere to the moderate Hanafi school of Islam and tend to check the radical influences of preachers trained in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. As a result, the community has been able to moderate the influence of the Salafis in Sandžak.

Formal religious institutions cannot always act in time after a period of crisis, however, especially in centralised systems such as **Tunisia's**. In this centralised system of governance, the government controls religious affairs in general, including the management of religious schools. In the case of Tunisia, Al-Zaytouna University (an institution under the Ministry of Higher Education) is responsible for the creation of all knowledge related to Islam in Tunisia. This includes the development of religious education programmes in primary and secondary schools, as well as the training of graduates in Islamic studies. The unification of Islamic knowledge creation in a respected and recognised institution such as Al-Zaytouna University was noted by PAVE interviewees as an element of resilience against violent extremism, as it illustrates how a serious academic institution can have legitimacy in the religious community. Nevertheless, officials acknowledged significant weaknesses in the channels for disseminating this knowledge among the Tunisian population. Some elements of vulnerability mentioned related to the reality of public schools and religious schools, which are often under-resourced and understaffed.

## 5 The role of religious leaders

The religious environment in the countries studied is vast and complex. Some religious figures have official titles and belong to a formal institution, while others are not affiliated with any formal institution, but have just as much influence within their community. Contrary to the common assumption that religious leaders and their messages are risk factors in violent extremism, our findings show that they can equally contribute to community resilience.

Our research found that the leverage of religious leaders depends very much on whether communities see them as legitimate. Religious leaders who are seen as legitimate can be granted authority by the community they claim to represent, even if they are not operating under the guise of an official religious institution. They can be seen as central actors and entry points for engagement on the topic of violent extremism and resilience. At the other end of the spectrum are religious figures who are part of official religious institutions but are not seen as legitimate authorities by the community. This opens the space for unofficial religious leaders to fill this vacuum.

Findings across all research contexts show that religious leaders' role in these countries is often not limited to guiding a religious congregation but is also political. This is particularly pronounced in the case of formal religious leaders in consociational power-sharing systems like Lebanon and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Not only do formal religious leaders in these countries always play a political role; their engagement or non-engagement for inter-religious dialogue is also inherently political and can influence the political climate. Here, informal religious institutions can circumvent political deadlock by not being bound to official party or institutional positions. In such cases, informal religious leaders can foster community resilience, while formal religious institutions contribute to a dysfunctional status quo.

Only a limited number of academic studies explore the role of religious leaders in P/CVE efforts. The studies by Sandal (2017) and Mandaville and Nozell (2017) are exceptions. In his book, Sandal investigates the role of religious leaders in conflict transformation in Northern Ireland and other contexts, albeit without explicitly mentioning the topic of violent extremism. In the 2017 USIP Special Report, Peter Mandaville and Melissa Nozell analyse the potential roles of religious actors in countering violent extremism. They analyse dynamics between religious actors and government institutions, and map challenges and opportunities for engaging religious actors in P/CVE. The PAVE country case studies contribute to the knowledge needed on this topic.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, many interviewees emphasised the politicisation of religion and instrumentalisation of religious institutions as important drivers of vulnerability. Various anniversaries and commemorations (especially those related to past war events), as well as elections, are occasions where the politicisation of religion takes centre stage. Political and religious extremism largely encourages homogeneity within communities during these manifestations, emphasising the importance of preserving unity and identity as a guarantee of survival in relation to 'Others'. On the other hand, cooperation between different religious groups has been institutionalised through the Interreligious Council, which was identified by our research as a significant actor in the prevention of extremism. Although many problems cannot be solved at the institutional level, the interviewees consider the existence of

such an institution to be a 'symbolically good thing'. For instance, organised joint visits to places of suffering are highlighted as a positive example of preventive action against political and religious extremism. Another positive example of the interaction of religious institutions at the local level is the joint celebration of Eid in Prijedor 'with children from the St. Sava Grammar School. It was a great opportunity to meet, and it was covered by the media' (Halilovic Pastuovic et al. 2022).

The weakness of state institutions in Lebanon forms the environment for religious institutions and their political counterparts to step in and fill this void by providing security, livelihoods and political representation for their communities. This continuously reinforces the indispensability of these sectarian institutions for their respective communities and contributes to persistent political and religious polarisation. Whenever there has been a political crisis, religious institutions utilise religious references to mobilise members of their communities and act as their representatives.

In this setup, informal religious actors can make important contributions to building community resilience since they are not bound by official political positions; they can also generate legitimacy within their community by being more responsive to the public mood and building bridges between different religious communities. The ability of informal grassroots religious institutions to mediate between armed groups and government in order to de-escalate violence can be a source of community resilience in this context. A good example of this is seen in the troubles that hit border towns in Lebanon in 2014. In Aarsal, members of Da'esh and Tahrir al-Sham used to cross over from Syria to find refuge in the area. The Lebanese Army, along with Hezbollah, responded to this incursion with an armed operation. The informal Sunni institution, the 'Lebanese League of Muslim Scholars, took the lead in a dialogue that involved the Lebanese President and the Army Command, which led to a temporary ceasefire. Allegedly, these dialogue initiatives saved the lives of 120 Syrian refugees in Aarsal.

In Iraq, the official alignment of the state with a specific sect (Sunni Islam) under Saddam Hussain despite the religiously diverse population of the country has contributed to 'tit-for-tat escalation' (Garcia Coll et al. 2022) between different extremisms that shaped the country's recent history and culminated in an unresolved violent sectarian conflict. At the same time, the pseudo-political role that religious leaders played in Iraq may be key in inter-faith solidarity initiatives that can prevent violent escalation. A good example of this could be seen during the Iraqi protests in 2019. These protests were led by the Iraqi Shi'a Endowment. Foreign Christian leaders supported the protests and Iraqi Patriarch Sako cancelled the Christmas celebrations in Iraq in solidarity with the protesters, thus creating inter-religious solidarity and highlighting shared grievances rather than divides and rivalry between the religious communities.

Tunisia represents a dissimilar case in this sample. While there is less religious diversity in the country than in the aforementioned cases, there is considerable polarisation on what status religion should have in public life. After the Tunisian revolution, the government reduced its interference in religious matters, although it still enforced a marginalisation/monopoly strategy through the security forces (which banned certain movements and religious expressions). This official religious discourse losing ground allowed new informal religious organisations, including violent extremist ones, to spread easily. In such an environment, where state-led religious institutions lack legitimacy, it was shown that there is a need for relatable religious reference points. Former extremists from Tunisia explained how they

were guided by the ‘search for the first Islam, the pure Islam’ at a time when all the religious organisations were under the control of the government. The Ministry of Religious Affairs tried to recover its space by rehabilitating the discourse in mosques, applying new policies that respected freedom, disconnecting the Ministry of Religious Affairs from the Ministry of Interior, and issuing new laws in agreement with other ministries. However, the jihadi Salafist movement was already a reality.

Nevertheless, in some cases, the emergence of political options that shared some principles with Salafism diverted former extremists from violence and involved them in political life and civil society. A former Tunisian Salafist interviewee explained his previous disappointment with the available political options but remarked that the emergence of the Al-Karama Coalition in 2019, along with the religious guidance he received from Al-Zaytouna University (which showed him the inconsistencies of the Salafist jihadi movement), marked his transition away from violent jihadi circles to non-violent activism. A female Salafist interviewed in Tunisia recalled that the emergence of the Hazmieh movement drew her away from jihadi Salafism. Thus, despite the emergence of extremist movements and political parties being a risk factor, allowing them to play by the rules of the political game can be a resilience factor in diverting these movements and their followers away from violence.

Both Islamist and far-right extremists in Serbia trace their ideological beliefs to religious and war narratives. The ideology of Islamist extremism took root in Serbia (Sandžak region) as a consequence of the jihadi presence in the Bosnian War (Perry 2019), while almost all of the far-right nationalist organisations emphasise religious elements of Serbian identity in their political programmes (Bakić 2013; Stakić 2015). The Sandžak community is polarised inter-ethnically (between Bosniaks and Serbs), intra-ethnically (between different Bosniak political parties) and religiously (between two Islamic communities). During the 1990s, the major Bosniak party, the Party of Democratic Action (PDA), opted for Sandžak’s secession (and integration with Bosnia and Herzegovina) or, alternatively, for it to be granted the status of an autonomous region in Serbia. The Serbian government rejected these demands as an attempted coup. This conflict led to the complete isolation, both political and economic, of Sandžak, which still continues today. The post-2000 governments tried to rectify the position of Sandžak by including its representatives in central state institutions. This led to internal competition between the Bosniak parties in Sandžak for the role of a minority coalition partner. In each of the governments since 2000, there has been at least one Bosniak party represented, creating animosity among those excluded. Over the years, this form of political manipulation evolved into a mechanism of ethnic regulation with the potential to both improve and undermine the relations between Bosniak and Serbian communities and between different Bosniak parties in Sandžak. For instance, the co-optation of the PDA in the Serbian central government (from 2008 to 2014) led to a moderation of its politics and ideology, but only for it to radicalise itself again after returning to opposition in 2014. The PDA is confronted with two other major Sandžak parties as well, namely the Sandžak Democratic Party (SDP) and the Party of Justice and Reconciliation (PJR). The former is traditionally loyal to the Serbian government, while the latter pursued a radical political agenda vis-à-vis the government (similar to the PDA’s approach) until it was recently incorporated into it. The Muslim population in Serbia is further affected by the split in the Islamic community, which is represented by two rival organisations: the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) and the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS). This division is primarily political, a

consequence of the above-mentioned mechanism of ethnic regulation. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities adopted in 2006 recognises the Belgrade-based ICoS as the only legal community. After a few unsuccessful efforts to unite the two Islamic Communities, the ICiS was officially founded in 2007, operating under the auspices of Sarajevo. The ICoS is affiliated with the PDA, while the ICiS shares the leadership with the PJR. This split continues despite various attempts to reconcile the two Islamic Communities, including mediation by Turkey between 2010 and 2014. This religious and political division opened the space in Sandžak for external fundamentalist influences. It is therefore considered one of the drivers of the Muslim population's vulnerability to radicalisation and extremism.

## 6 The role of media

The media play a negative role in radicalisation. In both WB and MENA, the media incite radicalisation and enable the growth of extremism through misinformation, poor editorial practices and sensationalist reporting. Online media are more vulnerable to this trend due to the unregulated environment in which they operate. When it comes to the role of online channels in radicalisation and extremism, several patterns can be noted in the two research regions (the Balkans and MENA). Findings from research in Kosovo suggest that the online domain is dominated by radical ethno-political communities. Interestingly, most radical content is initially created in more traditional media channels (for example TV debates on contentious issues). Platforms like Facebook are used afterwards to propagate these messages. Research carried out at the four sites in Tunisia and Lebanon confirms that the negative impact of traditional media extends into the cyberspace. Over the last three decades, online channels in Tunisia have been contributing to the spread of Salafist ideologies, including Wahhabism. The research also found strong instrumentalisation of religion on the Facebook pages and websites of some political parties and politicians in Tunisia, aimed at spreading radical Salafist ideology.

Most previous research has treated the online and offline spheres as two distinct routes for the spread of violent extremist narratives, thereby widely disregarding their potential interactions. In their chapter 'The Roles of 'Old' and 'New' Media Tools and Technologies in the Facilitation of Violent Extremism and Terrorism', Scrivens and Conway (2019) map the use of different types of media by violent extremists, without exploring how the use or effects of these types of media (online and traditional) interact. One exception is a paper by Valentini et al. (2020) which employs the term 'onlife' in order to highlight the close interrelationship, identified by the authors, between online and offline aspects within radicalisation trajectories. This concept is identified as the latest stage of a strand of research that calls for the analytical integration of real-life and online manifestations of violent extremism. The focus here is on interactions between the online presence of extremist organisations and their physical operating mechanisms. According to this work, the manifestation of extremism within online and offline spheres is to be seen as a continuum, replacing a 'false dichotomy' between the online and offline worlds. Gaudette et al. (2020) investigated the online and offline activities of former members of racist skinhead groups in Canada during the time they were active in these groups. The study includes asking the former extremists about the relevance of the Internet for their extremist activities and the connection

between their online and offline living environments. It stresses the importance of the interplay between the Internet and violent extremism and highlights the significance of the interactions between violent extremists' online and offline worlds.

Despite these exceptions, the existing literature still lacks a) a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between the online and offline spheres, and b) comparative analysis of this interplay as expressed in different countries and regions. PAVE contributes to the discussion with the examples below.

In Kosovo, dealing with online radicalisation is a major challenge due to various factors, including weak capacities of government institutions and civil society to understand and respond to online (de)radicalisation. It is estimated that there are 1.1 million active social media users in a country of roughly 1.8 million people. The high number of social media users shows that Kosovars are dependent on online channels for accessibility and delivery of information, which has been confirmed to PAVE by high-ranking government officials in Kosovo who argue that social media are the real fourth estate.

Social media are overwhelmingly considered to be a driver of vulnerability in Kosovo, although cases of radicalisation exclusively through online platforms are not referenced specifically. In Kosovo, research has consistently found a direct link between online radicalisation and participation in the wars in Syria and Iraq, which also introduced Kosovo to the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs). The link between online media and FTFs was emphasised by those interviewed during the PAVE fieldwork. While local institutions and NGOs have noted that religiously inspired radicalisation has shifted in intensity since the start of the crisis in Syria, networks of individuals continue to make use of online platforms to amplify hate speech and extremist views. Facebook has been identified as the main source of access to radicalised content due to its ability to host a range of interactive online tools, including video content, messaging, closed community group creation and networking. Facebook is thus perceived to be the primary social media network that enables dissemination of radical content and propagates violent extremist rhetoric in Kosovo. With regard to the effect of other social media platforms, Twitter is often disregarded due to low use in Kosovo, but TikTok and YouTube, alongside Facebook, are considered to be the main platforms that target individuals above 25 and where radicalising messages are disseminated.

The plight of civilians in Syria and Iraq, including moral-shock campaigns online showing disturbing images or videos of repressive actions by the Syrian government against civilians, has been the single most important narrative leading people to adopt radical views and even in some cases to travel there to join the fight. The cognitive aspect of online (de)radicalisation poses one of the most critical challenges to its effective regulation. In the case of Kosovo, while the government has implemented measures to counter radicalisation and prevent it from leading to violent extremism, these measures mainly consist of securitised responses to a rather complex challenge, and public institutions have yet to formulate an effective policy against online (de)radicalisation. The government response to radical content online has been to close down such sites, but this has not solved the problem, as the authors of such content simply create an alternative online presence.

The dissemination of online content via some social networks such as Facebook is difficult to control due to the availability of diverse tools, including video content, messaging, closed community group creation and networking. Moreover, the global nature of religious affiliations and their use by ethno-political radical agents make societies more vulnerable to online radicalisation, whether ethno-political or religious, due to difficulties in controlling origins and channels of dissemination of radical online content.

Some positive examples of deradicalisation measures implemented in Kosovo are those by moderate imams disseminating knowledge through lectures released on YouTube, which tackle issues such as nation, religious tolerance and patriotism as components of Albanian identity. Examples identified through PAVE fieldwork in Kosovo include the case of Imam Idriz Bilalli, the FoITash online portal and the 'Real Jihad' platform. Focusing on young people and their vulnerability to online radicalisation, field research in Kosovo points to the role of education and media literacy, as well as online peer-group socialisation through social media. As focus group participants in Mitrovica and Podujeva have noted, societies with a higher quality of education utilise social media to increase social cohesion, while those with a lower quality of education tend to use social media to exacerbate social cleavages.

In North Macedonia, easy access to radical material on the Internet has been identified as a factor contributing to extremism. All participants in the fieldwork in both Tetovo and Kumanovo stated that online propaganda has the potential to be effective in further radicalising individuals in their communities. Fieldwork conducted in the country suggests that a combination of online and offline practices are used to attract, radicalise and recruit individuals. The analysis of pages and profiles on Facebook and channels and videos on YouTube revealed differences in the content of posts before and after the arrests of imams/recruiters. Before 2014, we could identify direct and open calls to violence in the form of Islamist extremism. Many of these posts consist of videos that cover the massacres of Muslims in Syria and elsewhere (Palestine, Somalia, China and Chechnya, etc.) and photographs of soldiers fighting the enemy. This narrative has the potential to work perfectly as a source of inspiration for young people, not only in ethnically and religiously divided communities like Tetovo and Kumanovo. The criminalisation of the spread of violent extremist content online, leading to the arrests of a number of imams, recruiters and militants, altered the nature of online posts. The most recent posts are camouflaged as religiously oriented teachings.

Online content often features narratives against the imams of the official Islamic Community of North Macedonia, characterising them as fake and deceitful imams whose ideas and work do not serve Islam but their personal interests. Not only are religiously radicalised people directly influenced by these kinds of narratives; many Albanian youths and elderly continue to separate themselves from the mainstream religious community and support conservative Islamic ideas that cater to jihadist narratives. The radical imam is the main figure legitimising violence. The cyberspace is used but is an associative element of the imam's preaching. The strategy to place a particular conflict or struggle within a religious context provides radical imams with the required theological justification to call for support. In other words, they need to be perceived as legitimate conveyors of religious values in order to have a solid theological standing and justify violence.



The general perception in North Macedonia is that online extremist propaganda represents a serious threat to citizens' and communities' security and to public order in general. As PAVE's analysis of online content in this country found, the narratives of radical structures among the ethnic Macedonian community go beyond ethno-nationalism. Such content spreads far-right extremism, taking the form of anti-migrant and anti-vaccine rhetoric, support for right-wing politicians and condemnation of Western progressive values perceived by such ethno-political extremists as undermining traditional Orthodox and family values. The ethnic Albanian foreign fighter phenomenon shows that the online presence of radical groups and imams can contribute to radicalisation of individuals and perpetuation of violence offline.

In Lebanon, by the time the Syrian war erupted in 2011, the Internet had become widely available and applications such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and particularly Telegram were popular. The latter played an important role in communicating violent events, as jihadist organisations were trying to extend their control and influence over cyberspace. According to a study published by the SMT Studies Center, the number of websites affiliated with these groups increased from 12 in 1997 to 150,000 in 2017. The huge number of these media outputs and activity shows the organisations' ability to employ social networks for two primary purposes: ideological propaganda and demonstration of greatness and strength. They attracted many young people from Majdal Anjar, who watched these releases and told their friends about them. They would meet to watch the videos and documentaries issued by IS with the same excitement as friends gathering to go to the cinema.

The Telegram application also had an important impact by providing a direct channel of communication with extremist organisations. The application contains various pages with different purposes, including one which allows users to chat with members of the organisations, to pledge allegiance, for instance, or to obtain information on how to reach the 'Caliphate lands'. Other pages on the application were designed for publishing extremist literature, circulating religious chants and mobilisation videos or broadcasting scenes of combat operations; some provided training material on the use of disguises and how to deal with interrogation during captivity, or provided instructions on using weapons and building booby traps.

Primary measures to deal with online radicalisation have been led by civil society organisations, such as the Berghof Foundation in cooperation with Dar al-Fatwa, which has included development of capacities for utilising online media to promote a culture of tolerance and moderation. Other support included the development of a Digital Media Strategy, expert workshops, media and outreach training on religious content and media techniques with the aim of offering young people attractive narratives as alternatives to the extremist content online that was prevalent. Training from Lebanese and Egyptian experts covered topics such as debunking radical narratives online based on Islamic texts, deconstructing and contextualising rulings on jihad and violence against 'the other' and detecting signs of youth extremism and ways to manage them.

## 7 The role of diaspora communities

**Transnational dynamics play an important role as factors of both vulnerability and resilience in relation to existing and new forms of violent extremism.** *Our research on transnational and transregional dynamics between Europe and the WB and MENA regions highlights the important role diaspora communities play in both enabling and mitigating against violent extremism and radicalisation. Overall, we have identified several risk and resilience factors related to transnational dynamics while understanding diaspora dynamics as a multidirectional and complex phenomenon. Risk factors related to vulnerability are a) individuals' identity crises and related perceptions of marginalisation and discrimination among individuals and their communities in a host society, b) international geopolitics and immigrants' perceptions of Western foreign policy as enacted in their countries of origin, c) the role of the Internet and social media in spreading radical propaganda, d) linkages with home countries and engagement with politicised state and non-state actors and e) linkages with foreign terrorist fighters. Factors related to resilience concern a) successful integration strategies and initiatives (such as community cohesion programmes) by host societies with regard to immigrants (refugees in particular), b) inter-religious dialogues and measures against global Islamophobia, c) community cooperation and engagement with moderate voices and d) use of counter-narratives on social media. While our focus was on Muslim diaspora communities in Greece, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Denmark and France, the results can potentially be applied and should be further investigated beyond this cohort.*

A considerable amount of scholarly work explores different dimensions of transnational and transregional manifestations of violent extremism, such as the role of diasporas, foreign fighters, transnational recruitment, and organised crime. It includes a paper by Skender Perteshi (2020), which traces the radicalisation trajectories of Germans with Kosovar origin who have joined violent extremist organisations and travelled to Syria and Iraq to join IS. In her 2015 article 'Radicalisation of diaspora communities', Huma Haider introduces micro, meso and macro level factors that can contribute to the radicalisation of individuals in diaspora communities.

The influence of external violent conflicts on radicalisation within diaspora communities is exemplified by the relevance of the Bosnian war in the 1990s for the distribution of Islamist radicalisation narratives in Germany, as described by Sinja Hantscher (2014). Joana Cook and Gina Vale (2018) provide a comprehensive overview of the trajectories of women and children associated with IS after the fall of the physical 'Caliphate'. However, there is no recent and comparative study that analyses the relevance of factors contributing to community radicalisation or resilience among diasporas from the MENA region and Western Balkans living in EU countries. PAVE research aims to help fill this knowledge gap.

Our research into Muslim diaspora communities in Europe that originate from the WB and MENA regions pinpoints 'identity crisis' as one of the most important vulnerability factors for violent extremism. This is usually linked with a lack of belonging and marginalisation in a host society. Often, the new generations of migrants are initially refugees, which makes the integration process difficult. Individuals who left their country involuntarily not only carry the trauma of war, but are generally vulnerable psychologically and economically and have insecure legal status (such as the Bosniak community in Germany or the new generations of migrants in Ireland).

The role of religious leaders is important here. The absence of a legitimate and credible representative body for the Muslim communities and the numerous unofficial mosques or places of prayer (operating

in Greece currently, for example, and in Ireland) are conditions that lead to poor integration and risks of radicalisation. The final factor related to identity crisis is discrimination (whether real or perceived), with accompanying feelings of stigmatisation and marginalisation. Global Islamophobia was closely linked with discrimination and stigmatisation in all researched societies.

Another source of diaspora communities' vulnerability is Western foreign policy, especially Western interventions in predominantly Muslim countries. For Bosniak diaspora communities in Germany, the role of the West in the Balkan wars was linked to their perceptions of marginalisation and lack of acceptance in the host society (it was perceived as unjust). In general, extremist propaganda portrays the war in Bosnia as an attack by the West on the Islamic world, thereby establishing a direct connection to Islamist ideology in the interpretation of the conflict. Other fields of EU policy, such as freedom of movement from third countries, were also perceived as having a negative impact (for the Amazigh community in Spain, for example). For the Palestinian diaspora communities in France and Denmark, Western support for Israel was a very important factor influencing extremism and radicalisation. Finally, the war in Syria was highlighted as the most important turning point.

Engagement by state and non-state organisations in the home country can play a role in the position of diaspora groups. In some countries, political Islam has tended to operate through non-violent political channels and has veered away from intolerant extremism. From the point of view of the Bosniak diaspora community in Germany, various networks (such as war veterans' networks) are important non-state actors in terms of linkages and engagement with the home country. German Salafi-Jihadist organisations like 'The True Religion' (Die Wahre Religion) and successor organisations are well connected with their counterparts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and there is a great deal of contact between these German-based organisations and jihadi networks located in the Western Balkans. For Muslim diaspora communities in Ireland, the lack of an official state-led legitimate procedure on who can and cannot be an imam in Ireland means that communities bring their own religious interpretations/practices/worldviews and have their own mosques/places of prayer. These places can become hotbeds of more fundamental interpretations of Islam.

Jihadist propaganda is very prominently disseminated via the Internet. Radicalisation entrepreneurs are targeting individuals who are looking for answers through propaganda online. There are two to three 'star preachers' in Bosnia and Herzegovina who disseminate their radical sermons and messages online via videos and texts. Through social media, this content is directly accessible to members of the diaspora. For Muslim diaspora communities in Greece and Spain, cyberspace and especially social media also play an important role in networking and recruitment. Many interviewees from the Palestinian diaspora in France and Denmark describe the Internet as a main factor of radicalisation, mainly through the spread of various negative images of Islam and Muslims. In the case of the Amazigh communities in Spain as well, the role of social media and satellite TV was named the main external influence in radicalisation.

Not surprisingly, in light of the above, successful integration was highlighted as the primary condition for a resilient community. Cooperating with different non-governmental initiatives and organisations as well as state institutions is an important factor here. Furthermore, the role of education in general is very important for integration. The promotion of school activities and courses that spread the principles of human rights and cultural and religious respect was seen as crucial. Another important factor

that can be linked to better integration is intercultural exchange, including learning from the experiences of other cities and countries. Some examples are the visiting schools in Germany and the Garda Diversity programme in Ireland, as well as the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees.

Increased social (community) cohesion builds relationships and reduces the marginalisation that can be a potential driver of violent extremism, as described above. Community cohesion programmes have been initiated by governments and civil society organisations in European countries. These programmes have aimed to build collective community resilience against radicalisation. Examples are the National Youth Council of Ireland and the activities that promote Amazigh culture and intercultural dialogue with the local community in Spain, mainly through culture and art. An important part of social cohesion is support for vulnerable populations and especially refugees and unaccompanied minors. For example, support for Bosnian refugees in Germany includes initiatives which focus on spiritual approaches to process trauma and provide economic support and administrative/legal assistance. Another example is mentoring for unaccompanied minor migrants in the Basque Region and the 'Protecting Children in the Context of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in Europe' programme in Greece.

For all Muslim diaspora communities researched, inter-religious dialogue was seen as an important factor in community resilience. For example, the Irish Muslim Peace and Integration Council challenges theological divisions. Inter-religious dialogue is also part of intercultural training and awareness-raising programmes. One example from Greece is the intercultural training for police officers and public servants. The aim of this programme is to improve police officers' knowledge and understanding of migrants' different cultures, accompanied by development of communication skills in a multicultural environment and management of fragmented communities in order to promote respect for human rights and cultural and religious difference.

The role of the media has also been highlighted as a very important resilience factor. Counter-narratives in Ireland and elsewhere have done much to challenge stereotypes and prejudice that people might have about different cultures and religions. One example is the Hijabs and Hat-Tricks programme which encourages young Muslim women to participate in football in Ireland. In the case of Germany, counter-narratives teach the value of diversity and multi-perspective approaches. For the diaspora communities in Spain and Greece, our research shows that social media play a crucial role in resilience.

## 8 The role of gender

**Academic studies have demonstrated that violent extremism and resilience to it are shaped by gender dynamics.** *In simplistic terms, violent extremism is most often the world of men – drawn in by the allure of militarised masculinities, a dented sense of male entitlement or ideological convictions around patriarchal worldviews. Women, surrounded by gendered taboos on the use of violence and associated with relationship-building, are assumed to be potential agents in countering VE. This dichotomous narrative contains some truth but is inevitably too reductionist. Men’s and women’s relationships to violent extremism are more complex. In PAVE, we treated gender as a cross-cutting theme in each work package. In this way, we can contribute to the discussions about gender and extremism by exploring each of the main themes underlying the development of extremism (war legacies, state enablement, education, religious institutions, online and offline media and transnational linkages) in our gender analysis.*

The **legacies of war** (leading to lack of reconciliation and subsequent social polarisation) contain gendered histories. In the WB and in Iraq, legacies of conflict-related sexual violence are intrinsic to the narratives of war, leaving unreconciled memories and perceptions of ‘competitive victimisation’. As described above, **the states** that have emerged in these post-conflict contexts across WB and MENA are largely ones in which political structures and political actors are maintaining and even exacerbating social polarisation and legitimising sectarianisms and extremisms. In some places, these polarising discourses deploy gendered politics – as in the Tunisian government’s ‘hijab polemics’, for example (Al-Baalbaky et al. 2022, p. 25) which pushed some women towards violent extremism, or the similar effect produced among diaspora women by anti-hijab policies in Western Europe (Armakolas and Triantafyllos 2022). In general, the political landscape of all the states surveyed in PAVE is described as ‘patriarchal’ and women’s participation in formal institutions (of politics, state or religion) is negligible. The figures for Lebanon, for instance, are indicative of this gap in women’s political space – with six women elected to the 128-member Parliament in 2018 (Kortam 2022, p. 31). Women are also absent from official peacebuilding committees in Iraq. In these contexts, the transformative role that women could potentially play in changing the state politics that enable extremisms remains unknown and untapped. Similarly, all the PAVE researchers across WB and MENA describe the influential **religious institutions** as patriarchal and exclusionary of women’s leadership. Religious teachings underpin patriarchal values, such as the words of Sheik Amin Shihabi quoted in Kortam (2022) that ‘a woman’s role is to be a mother and a housewife’. In diaspora contexts, experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation can lead to more conservative religious interpretations being embraced by women and men, with the adoption of dynamics towards greater ‘purity’ (Armakolas and Triantafyllos 2022). Although not explicitly reported in PAVE studies, conservative religious teachings can also legitimise the use of gendered violence in familial relationships, which is a phenomenon often associated with drivers of extremism.

Women and men alike are subject to the complex influences of online and offline media in relation to radicalisation. A heroic, ostentatious and carnal masculinity is portrayed in many extremist videos (Crone 2016), yet women too are targeted for radicalisation in online spaces. For example, researchers encountered instances of the use of Telegram messaging directed at ‘beloved sisters’, who were urged to ‘protect the umma’; there were also examples of online propaganda designed to create role models for women (Armakolas and Triantafyllos 2022; Ilazi et al. 2022) which prompted some women to travel

to the Caliphate. On the other side of this coin, women who engaged in the public sphere as political candidates or civil society activists have received online and offline misogynistic abuse (the experiences of women activists in Tunisia, Kosovo and NMK).

The PAVE findings make some reference to gender and **education**, particularly women's potentially positive presence as educators in Tunisia and Lebanon. The role of women as students and teachers at Al-Zaytouna University in Tunisia sits well with this educational institution's reported moderating effects on some young people's vulnerability to radicalisation. In general, across all the field sites, there was consensus that if given space to participate, women's civil society groups offered great opportunities to build social resilience. The field researchers encountered many examples of this – including the MotherSchools of Kosovo that empowered women to challenge radicalisation in their families, and the work of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women. In general, field sites which evinced high degrees of gender equality and women's participation were seen as resilient to extremism; an example is the city of Kef in Tunisia with its liberal tradition of women's social inclusion and their evident involvement in the vibrant cultural life of the city. This finding supports the general analytical view that high levels of gender equality tally with low levels of violent extremism.

## 9 Vulnerability and resilience – two sides of the same coin

Overall, the findings show that a variety of new types of extremisms are developing in the seven researched countries. These extremisms often interact. They are connected, feed on and exacerbate each other, interact in a diasporic space (political and religious, far-right and Islamist, Sunni and Shi'a, etc.) and thus cause vulnerability.

Similar findings apply to resilience. Different types of resilience have been forming within each empirical country case and interact with and shape each other. It is also important to stress that there are different levels of resilience. The individual can be resilient, but so can the state and the community. In PAVE, we criticise the strong focus on individual resilience found in the current literature because it is often utilised in a neo-liberal discourse to de-politicise structural problems and put the responsibility of coping with an adverse environment on the individual (Halilovic Pastuovic et al. 2021). On the macro level, we find that state and religious institutions often inhibit the development of resilience at the community level. This interaction is exemplified by exclusionary state structures that are sometimes built on systemic failures of post-conflict reconciliation. Religious institutions also play a political role within the states and are seen to foster vulnerability at the community level. At the same time, extra-institutional engagement by community-based agents of change is seen to contribute to community resilience.

As stated in the sections above, several vulnerability factors were identified during our study. However, a number of them, when flipped around, can act as strong sources of resilience.

For example, the Kosovo team on the project identified a lack of education and inability to think critically as strong factors of vulnerability towards violent extremism. There is also an interconnected relationship between education and social media radicalisation. Education and media literacy were found to be the overarching factor that hinders progress in addressing online radicalisation. The North

Macedonian team identified religiously motivated radicalisation as a strong factor which fuels radicalisation among Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians alike. It is associated with the spread of violent extremist ideologies and inciting hate by radical imams and priests, as well as with the foreign fighters (FFs) phenomenon.

While looking at resilience factors both in Kosovo and in North Macedonia, the teams found that the antidote to the vulnerability factors are narratives and initiatives that assist marginalised groups in changing potential radicalisation into resilience. For example, the Kosovo team noted that **education** (including online media literacy), if used effectively, acts as an important factor in developing community resilience. Their main argument was that the education system has certain attributes that make it ideally suited to building individual, community and systemic resilience. In ethnically divided countries, in particular, education retains high public value because it reaches both populations, serving as a vital hub for information-sharing and critical thinking. Similarly, for the North Macedonian team, the antidote to religiously motivated radicalisation is inter-faith dialogue and exchange between the two largest religious communities, the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community. Both communities can play important roles as part of the multi-agency system for the prevention of radicalisation. However, the inclusion of religious communities in the process remains a challenge.

The cross-cutting gender analysis in PAVE also underpins this conclusion. The gendering of extremism is complex – there is no simple male extremism/female resilience dichotomy; as shown in our analysis, some women are also drawn to violent extremism. However, what is clear is that in contexts of patriarchy, civil and political exclusion and online misogyny, vulnerabilities to extremism are exacerbated. Resilience is found in gender inclusion and women’s empowerment.

While these are just three examples, in summary, our research shows that to be effective, C/PVE (countering/ preventing violent extremism) measures need to create synergies between different forms of resilience and vulnerability and look at a given country/area as an ecosystem where all stakeholders are interdependent. Thus, there are different types of actors who matter for the communities’ ability to be resilient against violent extremism. They include religious figures, the state, the education sector, civil society, online actors and the international diaspora. Remarkably, they are equally relevant when it comes to paving the way for community vulnerability. This leads us to conclude that vulnerability and resilience are often two sides of the same coin and that further research should move away from the current dichotomous understanding of vulnerability and resilience.

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