

Original scientific paper

UDK: 327.56::351.86(075.8:308(497))

DOI: 10.5937/jrs20-43737

Received: 30 March 2023 / Accepted: 8 January 2024

Contextualizing Institutional Approaches to Radicalization in the Balkans, Middle East and North Africa

DAMIR KAPIDŽIĆ *

MUAMER HIRKIĆ **

SEAD TURČALO ***

Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract: This article introduces the special issue that explores the impact of institutions on radicalization and violent extremism (VE) in the Balkans and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It sets a common theoretical framework based on new institutionalism, and defines how norms, rules, practices, and relationships within and between institutional actors shape political and policymaking behaviors. Seven potential drivers of radicalization that will be considered throughout all case studies in the special issue are introduced. Through a comparative and contextual approach, all papers examine these seven drivers that include territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics, in relation to institutional practices and interactions. The analytical framework defines a common research methodology that is based on interviews and focus groups with representatives of various types of institutions, including state institutions, civil society organizations, international organizations, religious institutions, and media outlets. The findings in this article broaden traditional perspectives of VE by highlighting country-specific and complex forms of institutional practices and interactions, as well as by contrasting perceptions of drivers in different geographical and institutional contexts.

Keywords: radicalization, drivers, institutions, Balkans, MENA

* damir.kapidzic@fpn.unsa.ba; ORCID: 0000-0002-8619-3530.

** muamer.hirkic@fpn.unsa.ba; ORCID: 0000-0002-6071-3657.

*** sead.turcalo@fpn.unsa.ba; ORCID: 0000-0002-3577-6509.

Introduction

Radicalization can be conceptualized at different levels, primarily among individuals and groups, but also in relation to community and institutional structures. Reactions and strategies to deal with individual and group radicalization are just as broad and involve actors at multiple levels (Wimelius et al. 2018). The role of institutions in shaping responses to radicalization is widely recognized, but a comparative contextual approach based on empirical evidence in affected countries is lacking. The prevalent focus on state institutions also neglects the role of other institutionalized actors, such as civic, religious, or international institutions and the media (Stephens, Sieckelinck, and Boutellier 2019). This special issue is a result of the CONNEKT Project,¹ which aims to empirically examine the interaction between institutional (macro), community (meso), and individual (micro) levels, and establish a multidimensional map of drivers of extremism. Within this context, the goal is to situate the institutional level of interaction between the international environment and community but also explore how it connects to individuals (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020). In this way, institutions are broadly conceptualized and directly linked to the meso and micro levels, which represents an important basis for further research and understanding of radicalization and violent extremism (VE).

Moreover, a survey of institutional practices can lead to better institutional responses, meaning that better understanding and contextualization consequently pave the way for the adoption of appropriate strategies and initiatives. Studies conducted thus far lack empirically based knowledge produced on the topic in terms of volume and shape (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020). Focusing on seven predetermined drivers of radicalization – territorial inequalities, economic deprivation, political ideas, cultural factors, religion, digital literacy, and transnational dynamics – contributions to this special issue aim to comprehensively assess the role of institutions in relation to each of them. The added value of this research is reflected not only in comparability among cases and the possibility of cross-regional analysis, but also in the consideration of individual everyday practices and norms of both government and societal institutions, and their interrelationships, in two separate regional contexts. Research on radicalization and VE in the two regions, the Balkans and MENA, requires a multidisciplinary and multilevel approach grounded in empirical research to better understand evolution and trends (Torrekens and de le Vingne 2020). This can provide a broader picture of traditional perspectives in the academic and policy literature that largely focuses on Islamist radicalization (Frazer and Nünlist 2015). The first step towards such an approach is at the macro or institutional level.

1 Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies (CONNEKT) is a Horizon 2020 EU-funded research project that explores the drivers of radicalization and VE among youth in eight countries across two regions: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia in the Balkans and Egypt, and Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia in MENA. The focus is on the interrelationships and significance of the seven potential drivers of radicalization at three levels of analysis. More information available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu>.

Utilizing new institutionalism as a joint theoretical framework, the contributions begin with the assumption that institutions are actors independent of individual preferences, thus accentuating the rules, norms, and practices that guide the work of these structures (March and Olsen 2008). Within the research on radicalization and VE, significant relevance can be attributed to strategic approaches shaped by the framing of VE, as well as institutional interactions, meaning that institutions define priorities and channel resources but are also subject to both international and domestic interdependence. In this sense, new institutionalism is convenient to use at the macro level because it determines the relevant social and political dynamics and systemic root causes. Moreover, norms and values, which are informal institutional structures, can be empirically examined, and it is possible to determine the empirical impact of norms by examining institutional practices and behaviors (Cairney 2012). So far, little has been written on this topic from a theoretical perspective, and through these country and cross-regional studies, the contributions to this issue offer a new outlook and attitude towards research on radicalization and VE.

At the macro level, a special focus is dedicated to the seven potential drivers of radicalization and their correlation with institutional practices. Empirical evidence is gathered across eight countries from the Balkans and the MENA region: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.² The cases cover four countries in the Balkans and four in the MENA region, that are represented in the CONNEKT project. They were selected based on an initial literature review in preparation of the project based on documented levels of radicalization and extremism. This includes both real and perceived radicalization (Maksić and Ahmić 2020). This study is based on interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and representatives of various types of institutions whose work is closely connected to countering/preventing violent extremism (C/PVE). The empirical work was conducted in late 2020 and early 2021, except in Egypt, where researchers conducted fieldwork in June 2022. According to a common methodology and ethical guidelines, data were pseudonymized to ensure confidentiality and to adhere to European Union GDPR rules and national legislation. For the analysis, a broad range of institutions was included, such as formal state institutions, civil society organizations, offices of international organizations, religious institutions, and the media. Research was conducted during a series of unpredictable COVID-19-related disruptions, and some of the interviews were conducted in an online environment with appropriate software, while others were conducted in person.

When it comes to identifying significant drivers of radicalization, the findings suggest country-specific and complex forms of institutional practices and interactions as well as contrasting perceptions of drivers in different geographical and institutional contexts. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that drivers such as territorial inequalities and economic deprivation are not viewed as stand-alone drivers but rather as a manifestation of individual perceptions of various forms of injustice and marginalization, while others

2 The research articles for this special issue are based on working papers previously published on the CONNEKT Project website: www.h2020connekt.eu.

such as digitalization and transnational dynamics are seen as present and visible. These latter two drivers also play an important role in Kosovo, where they are intertwined with religion, or more precisely, the individual misinterpretation of Islam, and represent the major factor of violent extremism. On the other hand, although religion is often perceived as a major driver in Bulgaria, research shows that different types of institutions have different views regarding the importance of this driver, such as in the case of civil society, which highlights other factors, such as far-right ideology and populism. The need to analyze such 'non-traditional' drivers is also present in North Macedonia, where researchers have emphasized an increasing tendency to include new drivers, such as cultural factors.

The situation is notably different for MENA countries. In Tunisia there are several drivers that are noticeable in relation to both criminal violence and violent extremism, predominantly a 'triangle of drivers' concerning development models, territorial (regional) disparities and socio-economic grievances. Similarly, the Egyptian case shows the importance of socio-economic policy shifts that aim at general development, addressing deprivation, and more effective cooperation between the government and other institutional bodies that participate in the social life of Egyptian citizens. Socioeconomic exclusion is the dominant driver in Morocco as well, together with the drivers linked to the educational system that does not produce the skills necessary for social integration. Finally, the case of Jordan confirmed the importance of establishing links between individual drivers of violent extremism, as well as the need to look beyond specific spaces or territories when identifying correlations between drivers.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section two presents a theoretical overview that focuses on new institutionalism and radicalization, and thus takes into consideration the role of institutions in the study of radicalization and VE, typologies of institutions, and interactions among them. Section three provides insight into the background of levels of radicalization in the eight case studies in the two regions and an overview of research on institutional level approaches to radicalization. Section four gives an outline of all eight contributions to this issue, as well as a comparative analysis of the institutional drivers of radicalization in the Balkans and MENA. Finally, the closing section explores some of the general findings, common points, and differences between countries and regions.

New Institutionalism and Radicalization

New institutionalism seeks to identify and analyze the norms, rules, practices, and relationships that shape political and policymaking behaviors (Cairney 2012). In contrast to the more traditional or conventional conception of institutions, in which the state is viewed as the primary or sole actor, new institutionalism places this role in society (Peters 2005). New institutionalism builds on the foundations of behavioralism and rational choice but formed as a reaction to their limitations and focus on the actions of individuals. March and Olsen, who laid the theoretical groundwork for new institutionalism, felt

the need to revive certain features of the old institutional analysis but to extend its scope. They argued that it is more rational to rely on established institutional criteria to emphasize the individual level and give a common character to political behavior (March and Olsen 2008). In this sense, institutions are viewed as actors in their own rights, shaped by collective norms, identities, rational behavior, and historical path dependency.

Different individuals are part of organized social structures, and these structures are guided by norms, rules, practices, definitions, and regulations. When bound and defined by practices that require repeated interactions we can talk of institutions. This primarily refers to the development of routines that shape the nature of an organization. Routines become more established over time and gain importance, and the degree of institutionalization of the complete structure increases (Cairney 2012). Furthermore, the basis of behavior within institutions is normative, which means that members are influenced by values as much as by formally established rules. However, different international actors and institutional cooperation at all levels influence the “appropriateness” of values within the common system. Over time, this common system has become either standardized or learned through practice. Depending on each individual state’s context, international norms can be promoted or diffused by various local or international organizations or a hybrid combination of both (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010). International interdependence is usually seen as a substantial driver of domestic institutional change.

Studies on the role of institutions in identifying and countering radicalization and VE have been gaining traction in recent years. However, it is largely focused on institutional approaches to countering violent extremism and radicalization (CVE) and less on the rules, norms, and processes that shape institutional understandings of radicalization.

At its core, the institutional approach emphasizes preventing violence before it occurs by developing more inclusive and resilient social environments (Turčalo and Veljan 2018). This can be achieved through investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure development, equal access to economic opportunities, and other initiatives that promote positive social change. Through a multifaceted strategy that includes both short- and long-term solutions, the institutional approach seeks to address the root causes of extremism while promoting resilience within vulnerable communities. These interventions aim to improve public involvement in decision-making processes and foster trust between citizens and their government. To support more thorough CVE strategies, the institutional approach also promotes increased cooperation among many stakeholders, including civil society groups, governmental organizations, and foreign partners.

The institutional approach also seeks to empower local communities by providing them with resources necessary for self-governance. This includes giving citizens access to knowledge and education on how extremism can be prevented, and how they can counter it within their own communities. Furthermore, this approach advocates for increased investment in community policing initiatives tailored to local needs, as well as more expansive social network analysis and data collection efforts aimed at identifying potential

radicalization triggers before they occur (Turčalo and Veljan 2018). By investing in education, infrastructure development, community policing initiatives, enhanced communication strategies, and other solutions tailored to local needs and contexts, governments can create more resilient societies that are better equipped to counter extremism before it takes hold. Finally, the institutional approach calls for improved communication between governments and vulnerable populations, through accessible information campaigns and other forms of outreach. This could include providing information on existing support networks and services as well as working with local religious institutions to spread messages of peace and tolerance.

The comprehensive and multifaceted framework of the institutional approach provides a practical framework for addressing radicalization and VE. The contribution of this study, with a focus on new institutionalism, is that it aims to view the partaking institutions as actors in their own right, with internal rules, norms, policies, and practices that do not necessarily overlap. A coordinated response among a diverse array of institutional actors is key for the institutional approach to be efficient; however, this has not been fully explored. By investigating the practices and views of radicalization of different types of institutions that work on CVE, it is possible to improve the essential requirements for reducing radicalization and violence in the long term. The significant diversity between institutional actors at the macro-level of analysis makes this a complex undertaking.

Among the institutions that will be analyzed, we can distinguish between institutions of the state, societal institutions, and international institutions. State institutions are traditionally the core category of institutional actors that play a role in CVE. These include executive and legislative government institutions and specialized agencies that deal with a broad range of issues, from education to intelligence, and internal and external threats. They include local-level institutions that function within the rules and frameworks created by the state, such as municipal governments, schools, and local development agencies. Finally, they include various forms of institutions of enforcement such as police, military, or judicial prosecution.

The second category of societal institutions can be seen as a residual because it combines a wide variety of institutional actors that emerge from specific societal interests and needs. This includes religious institutions and leaders, both formally institutionalized and loosely organized. It includes civil society organizations that can be NGOs, various forms of donor-oriented and donor-funded organizations, grassroots informal communities, social movements, and interest groups. The media also falls into this diverse category of societal actors, as they are important in shaping the public perception of values, norms, processes, institutions, and individuals that engage with CVE.

Finally, there is the category of international institutions and actors. It includes multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, the International Organization for Migration, NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and their country offices. There are also various international NGOs (INGOs) that work abroad or have

affiliated organizations outside their country of origin. It is important to mention that the values and norms that inform their work are not always a reflection of those in the country where they are active. Finally, there are diplomatic missions, development agencies, and programs of individual foreign countries that can significantly influence the institutional interactions and practices of CVE.

Not all institutions are relevant in each country of our study or have the same weight, and some apply to national-level concerns, whereas other institutions are more active at the local level. Their interactions as institutional actors still shape the way in which radicalization is perceived and addressed. In particular, issues of institutional hierarchy, societal relevance, access to resources, institutional expertise, capacity to deal with specific issues, capacity to be active across the country, openness towards citizen cooperation, and public perceptions of institutions themselves all shape how these institutions act among each other, towards citizens, and towards target populations.

The seven drivers that are considered are defined through the research framework of the CONNEKT project (CONNEKT 2020). These are also called factors of radicalization and describe structural and societal circumstances that can, but don't have to, contribute to radicalization amongst youth (Vidal i Bertran 2020). The first is religion, a prominent driver in literature and media, where its relevance to other factors is assessed, alongside questions of its role in prevention and appeal to youth. The second is digitalization that looks whether online environments enable radicalization by providing channels for communication, recruitment and spread of ideas. The third is economic deprivation, another popular contributing factor in the literature, that looks at the weight of poverty and marginalisation in radicalization. Territorial inequalities are a fourth driver that can produce collective grievances that intersect with identity or ideological dimensions. Transnational dynamics as the fifth potential driver explore how globalisation, foreign policy, and transnational movements impact violent extremism, as well as cross-border family patterns and criminal networks. The sixth driver of political ideology or socio-political demands explores the impact of the political context, including democracy, authoritarianism, nationalism, and rule of law in shaping perceptions and expectations as drivers of radicalisation. Finally, the driver of educational, cultural and leisure opportunities explore the extent to which lack of access to educational opportunities has a role in driving radicalisation.

Radicalization and VE in the Balkans and MENA

The most distinguishable trend in the Balkans is the foreign fighter phenomenon, coupled with the issue of return and repatriation from foreign battlefields, primarily in Syria and Iraq (Glušac 2020; Jiménez Sánchez 2022). This trend became immensely notable when the Islamic State began to lose considerable territory, which in turn resulted in a sharp decline in departures. Meanwhile, the region noted another trend of pro-Russia-oriented individuals leaving for the battlefield in Ukraine and joining paramilitary forma-

tions, mostly with the help of organized groups from Serbia. However, Peci and Demjaha (Demjaha and Peci 2021) argue that despite having other forms of radicalization, such as extremist political ideologies, ethnic nationalism, Christian religious fanaticism, violent extremist threats are still mainly viewed through the prism of radical Islam in all four countries under study: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. All the previously mentioned countries have adopted National Strategies, relevant laws, and multi-agency approaches to the issues of C/PVE – the only departure being the lack of international presence in Bulgaria, in contrast to other countries.

On the other hand, the MENA region faces many different structural factors that allow radicalization and violent extremism, and some of the most conspicuous ones can be viewed through the prism of religion, politics, and education. These first and foremost refer to the unregulated religious sphere and state-imposed singularity or homogeneity of religious discourse, the lack of training for religious personnel and institutions, and the political exclusion of not only religious groups but also ethnic groups in countries such as Egypt and Morocco. In addition, common causes, such as corruption and distrust in officials and the government, but also those less mentioned, such as poor urban planning and access to services, are important factors in Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia. One of the most striking trends in previous years was the problem of returnees from foreign battlefields, who were mostly imprisoned or removed from the limelight, meaning that the focus was on the punitive aspect of dealing with VE. As Jrad and Chirchi (2021) noted in their regional overview, out of the four countries under study, Morocco was the only one that has sought to put in place a comprehensive program focused on de-radicalization.

Looking at both regions, it is possible to see an exclusive focus on Islam-related extremism, although there are other motivations in both the Balkans and MENA, ranging from far-right, nationalist, and racist to far-left ideologies. In their cross-regional study on radicalization and violent extremism, Bieber and Pollozhani noted that state capture, high levels of corruption, and low trust in institutions were the main challenges confronted in both regions (Bieber and Pollozhani 2021). Moreover, there is a multidimensional transnational component in all countries, either through radical interpretation of religions, supremacist movements, or ideological movements. The turning points in the notion of C/PVE were 9/11 for the MENA and wars in the 1990s for the Balkans, meaning that at the height of the power of the Islamic State, the governments of the countries in both regions had some knowledge and experience related to C/PVE activities. However, in contrast to the Balkan countries, MENA region authorities generally adhere to a strong security-based response to possible extremist threats.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that in addition to Islamist extremism in Syria and Iraq, Ukraine is also considered a destination where a small number of BiH nationals go to fight for foreign armed separatist groups (Kapidžić et al. 2020). Although BiH state institutions have adopted a strategy as well as a law on the prosecution of individuals participating in foreign wars, most of the funds entering the C/PVE domain come from foreign donors, meaning that implemented programs are rarely funded by state institu-

tions and without critical evaluation systems. Along with BiH, Kosovo has often been marked as a “hotspot” for Islamist radicalization in the Balkans, with an enhanced focus on C/PVE being expressed since 2014, during the rapid rise of the Islamic State when many foreign fighters were spotted. However, as Peci and Demjaha note, it is also necessary to understand the post-1999 reality in the country, when the entire Kosovar society was rapidly exposed to a variety of competing ideas, both liberal and conservative (Peci and Demjaha 2020). Northern Macedonia, as most other Balkan countries, was also affected by the problem of mobilization and departure to foreign battlefields, but with a small number of organized groups. As Kambovski and others assert, the current presence of radical and violent groups in the country is primarily reduced to a few notable imams and the use of social platforms to promote their own ideas and attitudes (Kambovski et al. 2020). However, Bulgaria is only marginally affected by Islamist VE, and its role is mostly regarded as a transit route for departees. In addition, Bulgaria represents a noteworthy case in the Balkans because of other forms of radicalization, including far-right groups, hate speech, hate crime, and xenophobic attitudes. Still, Dzhekova states that, despite being more prevalent and resulting in more violence in comparison to the highly publicized instances of so-called Islamist radicalization, far-right extremism has not received as much public attention and has not been subject to any sustained efforts at assessment or counteraction (Dzhekova 2020).

Regarding the MENA countries covered by the study, several states face the issue of violent militant groups, and institutional responses are fundamentally concentrated around the work of security institutions. In contrast to the Balkan countries, where the work of non-state actors is pronounced, there is also a lack of civil society participation that could enhance new approaches regarding C/PVE. A similar trend can be observed in Morocco, where in addition to this issue, there is a lack of critical evaluation systems for the conducted activities. Moreover, some authors suggest that the role of women in violent extremism has not only been neglected in many previous academic works but also in most state-funded initiatives, which should specifically target women (Mouna et al. 2020). The same case is observed in Jordan, where the impact of C/PVE measures has not been sufficiently documented. Moreover, although there is a notable number of actors in charge of C/PVE, researchers point to the lack of a comprehensive strategy to regulate their work, stating that a balanced C/PVE approach is needed – one that not only tackles the issue from a pure security lens but also extends to address the structural issues that are still present in Jordanian society (Mhadeen et al. 2020). As in Egypt, institutions in Tunisia are also focused on hard security approaches, which complicates access to information for stakeholders working on C/PVE topics. Experts state that a notable drawback of inter-institutional cooperation is poor communication and coordination between C/PVE actors, revealing that Tunisian civil society has faced security restrictions when working on the issue of violent extremism due to the continuing closed culture in the security sector (Chirchi et al. 2020). Similar to most Balkan states, Tunisia is heavily dependent on foreign donors and their perceptions of threats and susceptible to changes in focus during the implementation of programs.

Considering all the above components of national approaches to C/PVE, contributions to this issue pay significant attention to the drivers and their interactions at different levels and in different contexts, which have not been fully explained in the studied countries thus far. Moreover, there is an urgent need to acknowledge the underlying drivers to have appropriate policy responses, which confirms the importance of institutional perspectives on C/PVE. Thus, it is possible to examine the level of institutional contribution when solving problems arising from VE, as well as to evaluate whether state policies exacerbate or mitigate the risk of radicalization. Although most countries have generally accepted national strategies, this research helps understand institutional memory, which could ultimately contribute to a better understanding of institutional efforts and shed light on the success of the implementation of these strategies. In addition, it is possible to recognize the way in which inter-institutional cooperation takes place, as well as the role of state and non-state actors in C/PVE processes. In some countries participating in the study, the macro level has not been analyzed thus far, meaning that the current analysis will allow a clear distinction between the three levels (macro, meso, and micro), but also present possible interactions once the next two levels are explored. Finally, a cross-regional approach should not only provide a deeper understanding and offer a broader perspective on the Balkans and MENA, but also enable the discovery of commonalities and structural differences in the realm of C/PVE.

The Contributions to This Issue

The first paper of the special issue titled “Influence of Drivers of Radicalism and Violent Extremism at Macro and Meso Levels: The Case of Kosovo,” written by Lulzim Peci, offers a comprehensive analysis of institutional perceptions in relation to seven drivers of violent extremism in Kosovo. Religion is found to be the most important driver at both macro and meso levels, along with digital literacy and transnational dynamics (Peci 2025). Furthermore, the author asserts that economic deprivation is not the main driver but can contribute to vulnerability to extremist ideologies. Political grievances, on the other hand, do not have a direct effect, but dissatisfaction with political parties or government performance can make individuals vulnerable. Education, leisure, and cultural opportunities are seen as resilience factors, but the security-centric approach of the Kosovo Government proved to be insufficient – meaning that a comprehensive and long-term approach at the national and local levels is required to address structural problems such as low education levels and limited access to employment and social welfare.

The second paper, titled “Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Friends or Foes in the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism?” by Muamer Hirkić, Damir Kapidžić, Sead Turčalo, Veldin Kadić, Sarina Bakić, and Sanela Bašić investigates two main aspects of institutional analysis in the study of radicalization and VE. The first are institutional perspectives on violent extremism in BiH, and other institutional perceptions of seven drivers of radicalization (Hirkić et al. 2025). The study indicates clear and specific forms of institutional practice in the C/PVE realm and inter-institutional cooperation

that is marked by complex interaction and communication, both formal and informal. The study also reveals that some drivers, previously considered exclusively relevant, are no longer the most important in the BiH context. These primarily relate to territorial inequalities and economic deprivation, with the first driver displaying an increasing shift of radicalized communities to urban and suburban areas, and the second driver diminishing as radicalized individuals come from all economic backgrounds. Finally, the authors find that most drivers are context-dependent with notable overlap and compounding effects.

The third paper, titled “Institutional Responses to Radicalization and Violent Extremism in North Macedonia (2017–2022),” written by Lidija Georgieva, Vlado Kambovski, Elena Mujoska Trpevska, and Naum Trajanovski, regards some of the current and previous institutional actions aimed at C/PVE in North Macedonia as a hybrid model of a normative and a coercive isomorphism. The study of this specific context shows that there are several significant shortcomings in inter-institutional cooperation such as different understandings of the implementation of the national strategy (leading to low efficiency), weak inter-sectoral cooperation, as well as insufficient communication between state institutions and civil society organizations (Georgieva et al. 2025). On the contrary, when speaking of the drivers of violent extremism, the research indicates that there has been a shift in perception of relevant factors, which moved from traditional ones such as religion to the newer ones such as the cultural factors. Furthermore, the authors suggest that there is a lack of focus on some drivers – for instance digital literacy that is relevant for the Macedonian context – while emphasizing the low resilience of citizens to disinformation confirmed through the several low index rates.

The fourth paper, titled “Macro-Level Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia Through New Institutionalism,” written by Tasnim Chirchi and Khaoula Ghribi, assesses institutional perceptions of some of the country’s main factors behind different forms of violence, including violent extremism. The research suggests that dominant drivers comprise the triangle that involves the failed development model, regional disparities, and socio-economic grievances (Chirchi and Ghribi 2025). Also, an important community-level driver is contained in socio-economic and cultural marginalization of the entire regions, due to the recent history of the centralized governance model. Moreover, a direct link is established between different types of criminal behavior and violence, and territorial inequalities and low employment rates, which therefore facilitates the extremist discourse that exploits these grievances. The research also reveals the lack of development policies that would meet the economic needs of society, as well as the number of vulnerabilities including unequal access to leisure and culture, and the lack of political participation. Finally, the authors argue that government institutions are unable to properly address these factors, which ultimately aggravates the existing drivers.

The fifth paper, titled “Combating’ Violent Radicalism in the Moroccan Context: When the State Monopolizes the Religious,” by Amina Er-Rifaiy and Khalid Mouna, provides an overview of the major drivers of violent extremism in Morocco – first and foremost among young people – and makes suggestions for mitigating the consequences caused

by these factors (Er-Rifaiy and Mouna 2025). First, the authors believe that the education system in the country produces social exclusion, although its main role is to develop competencies, cognitive skills, and to help young people in social integration. At the same time, the state has not changed its hard, security-based approach, which comprises restrictions (such as freedom of speech) or socio-economic exclusions, meaning that C/PVE actions do not have the desired effect in this setting. The research also provides a set of recommendations that could facilitate C/PVE approaches in the country, including better networking and cooperation of state institutions and civil society organizations, establishing youth councils and empowering young people in the decision-making process, as well as greater investment in modern technology, in order to establish better communication among stakeholders.

The sixth paper, titled “The Complexities in Jordan’s Institutional Response to Violent Extremism,” by Neven Bondokji, Barik Mhadeen, Aisha Bint Feisal, and Jadranka Štikovac Clark offers a comprehensive review of institutional practices, as well as the gaps in the current inter-institutional cooperation in Jordan. The authors argue that there is little shared understanding of the concept of VE in the country, despite having significant funds invested in this sector in the previous years (Bondokji et al. 2025). Moreover, the research has shown that sole focus on security approach in responses to VE, as well as observations of the phenomenon through an ideological/religious lens, proved to be ineffective. Jordan still has a high degree of weak inter-institutional collaboration, which negatively affects existing C/PVE efforts and contributes to a shift in institutional VE patterns. The authors conclude that there is a need to look beyond specific spaces or territories when identifying relations between drivers of VE.

The final paper, titled “Beyond Securitizing Radicalization and Violent Extremism. Key Findings from the Balkans and the MENA Region,” by Lura Pollozhani and Florian Bieber concludes this special issue. Authors assert that the focus on the macro level in the Balkans and MENA hides the diverse and complex drivers of radicalization, which are intertwined and often context dependent (Pollozhani and Bieber 2025). The paper also touches on the political tensions in tackling radicalization and extremism, including the under-regulation of far-right extremism and the sidelining of women. The institutional approaches to radicalization and extremism have limitations, including a focus on control and punishment over support and improvement of societal conditions. Nonetheless, the paper concludes that future research should incorporate the social and economic effects of radicalization and extremism, gender norms and expectations, and the views of various actors on the ground to better understand the complexity of the issue.

General Findings and Point for Further Research

In the research of radicalization and violent extremism in the Balkans and MENA, several common themes have emerged. First, there is a recognition of the role that education and socio-economic factors play in driving radicalization among young people. Education systems are often seen as producing social exclusion, rather than promoting social integration and development, while poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunity can all be contributing factors. Another common theme is the lack of effective cooperation between state institutions and civil society organizations, which can hinder C/PVE efforts. In several of the studies, it was suggested that there needs to be greater networking and collaboration, along with more investment in technology, to better facilitate communication and coordination between stakeholders.

In some cases, the authors also highlight the importance of empowering young people, for example by involving them in decision-making processes, or creating youth councils to give them a voice. Additionally, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of radicalization and violent extremism, which goes beyond a simple security-based or ideological/religious lens. In some of the countries studied, such as Tunisia and Egypt, the authors also consider the impact of broader historical and political factors, such as the legacy of colonialism or the recent developments in the region. The role of religious institutions and the relationship between religion and politics is also a recurrent theme, with some of the authors calling for a separation of the two.

From an academic perspective, the findings highlight the importance of comparative studies for understanding different contexts of radicalization. They also point to different explanations and the context-specific nature of the drivers behind VE and radicalization. By comparing eight countries across two different regions, while focusing on the institutional level of politics, the contributions to this special issue have expanded our understanding of context dependent radicalization. From a practitioners' perspective these studies highlight the multi-faceted nature of radicalization and violent extremism, and the need for a nuanced approach to addressing these challenges. While there is no single solution to these complex problems, the authors suggest a range of recommendations that must be context dependent. These range from empowering young people, investing in education and socio-economic development, and improving inter-institutional cooperation, as main ways to help mitigate the effects of drivers of radicalization.

The goal is for future research to build on these findings in a way that delves deeper into individual and context-dependent drivers, moving away from a simplistic focus on religion (mostly Islam) as the major driver of radicalization. Future work within the CONNEKT project will explore the relevance of the seven drivers at different levels of analysis, the societal meso-level, as well as the individual micro-level. Only by gaining a holistic and contextual understanding of institutional, societal and individual drivers of radicalization and violent extremism can we hope to build effective prevention strategies.

Acknowledgements

This research, conducted within the framework of the project Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies (CONNEKT), has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 870772. More information available at: <https://h2020connekt.eu>.

References

- Avant, Deborah D., Martha Finnemore, and Susan K. Sell. 2010. *Who Governs the Globe?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bieber Florian, and Lura Pollozhani. 2021. *Perspectives on radicalization and violent extremism in MENA, the Balkans and the European Union: Compared perspectives on radicalisation and violent extremism in MENA, the Balkans and the European Union*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CONNEKT-Cross-Regional-Report.pdf>.
- Bondokji, Neven, Barik Mhadeen, Aisha Bint Feisal, and Jadranka Štitkovac Clark. 2025. "The Complexities in Jordan's Institutional Response to Violent Extremism." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 143–176. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-43779>.
- Cairney, Paul. 2012. *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chirchi, Tasnim and Khaoula Ghribi. 2025. "Macro-Level Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia Through New Institutionalism." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 97–122. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-43791>.
- Chirchi, Tasnim, Intissar Kherigi, and Khaoula Ghribi. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Tunisia*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Tunisia_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- CONNEKT. 2020. *Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies – About the Project*. Accessed November 14, 2023. <https://h2020connekt.eu/the-project/>.
- Demjaha, Agon, and Lulzim Peci. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Kosovo*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Kosovo_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Demjaha, Agon, and Lulzim Peci. 2021. *Perspectives on radicalization and violent extremism in MENA, the Balkans and the European Union: Regional perspectives on radicalization and violent extremism in the Balkans*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Balkans-Regional-Report.pdf>.
- Dzhekova, Rositsa. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Bulgaria*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bulgaria_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Er-Rifaiy, Amina, and Khalid Mouna. 2025. "'Combating' Violent Radicalism in the Moroccan Context. When the State Monopolizes the Religious." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 123–142. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-57666>.

- Frazer, Owen, and Christian Nünlist. 2015. *The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism*. CSS Analyses in Security Policy, 183. Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse183-EN.pdf>.
- Georgieva, Lidija, Vlado Kambovski, Elena Mujoska Trpevska, and Naum Trajanovski. 2025. "Institutional Responses to Radicalization and Violent Extremism in North Macedonia (2017–2022)." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 77–96. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-43731>.
- Glušac, Luka. 2020. "Criminalization as Anxious and Ineffective Response to Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the Western Balkans." *Journal of Regional Security* 15 (1): 39–74.
- Hirkić, Muamer, Damir Kapidžić, Sead Turčalo, Anida Dudić-Sijamija, Veldin Kadić, Sarina Bakić, and Sanela Bašić. 2025. "Institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Friends or Foes in the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism?" *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 49–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-44227>.
- Jiménez Sánchez, Carolina. 2022. "Caliphate women limbo and the action of the European Union." *Journal of Regional Security* 17 (1): 65–82.
- Jrad, Eya, and Tasnim Chirchi. 2021. *Perspectives on radicalization and violent extremism in MENA, the Balkans and the European Union: Regional Perspectives on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in MENA*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/MENA-Regional-Report.pdf>.
- Kambovski, Vlado, Lidija Georgieva, and Naum Trajanovski. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: North Macedonia*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/North-Macedonia_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Kapidžić, Damir, Anida Dudić, Veldin Kadić, and Sead Turčalo. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bosnia_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Maksić, Adis, and Nihad Ahmić. 2020. "Constructing the Muslim Threat: A Critical Analysis of Marine Le Pen's Twitter Posts During the 2017 French Election Campaign." *Journal of Regional Security* 15 (1): 131–148.
- March, James. G., and Johan P. Olsen. 2008. *Elaborating the 'New Institutionalism'*. Oxford Handbooks Online.
- Mhadeen, Barik, Aisha Bint Feisal, and Jadranka Štikovac Clark. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Jordan*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Jordan_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.

- Mouna, Khalid, Marouan Lahmidani, and Jawad Agudal. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Morocco*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Morocco_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Peci, Lulzim. 2025. "Influence of Drivers of Radicalism and Violent Extremism at Macro and Meso Levels: The Case of Kosovo." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 23–48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-44184>.
- Peters, B. Guy. 2005. *Institutional Theory in Political Science: the 'New Institutionalism'*. London: Continuum.
- Pinfari, Marco. 2020. *Country Reports on National Approaches to Extremism: Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans: Egypt*. Barcelona: The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed). Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Egypt_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Pollozhani, Lura, and Florian Bieber. 2025. "Beyond Securitizing Radicalization and Violent Extremism. Key Findings from the Balkans and the MENA Region." *Journal of Regional Security* 20 (1): 177–194. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs20-43804>.
- Stephens, William, Stijn Sieckelink, and Hans Boutellier. 2019. Preventing Violent Extremism: A Review of the Literature. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44 (4): 3461–361.
- Torrekens, Corinne, and Daphné de le Vingne. 2020. *Concepts and Analytical Framework: Debating Notions and Approaches to Radicalisation and Violent Extremism*. Barcelona: European Institute of the Mediterranean. Accessed April 15, 2024. https://h2020connekt.eu/wpcontent/uploads/2021/01/Bosnia_CONNEKT_Approaches_to_extremism.pdf.
- Turčalo, Sead, and Nejra Veljan. 2018. *Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Country Case Study 2*. Berlin/Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative and Berghof Foundation.
- Vidal i Bertran, Lurdes. 2020. Mapping the Drivers of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in MENA and the Balkans. CONNEKT Article. Accessed: November 14, 2023 <https://h2020connekt.eu/publications/mapping-the-drivers-of-radicalization-and-violent-extremism-in-mena-and-the-balkans/>.
- Wimelius, E. Malin, Malin Eriksson, John Kinsman, Veronica Strandh, and Mehdi Ghazinour. 2018. "What is Local Resilience Against Radicalization and How can it be Promoted? A Multidisciplinary Literature Review." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46 (7): 1108–1125.