CONNEKT

REGIONAL REPORT

Joint Study on Drivers of Radicalisation in MENA

Tasnim Chirchi

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3

METHODOLOGY 4

ON SOME INSTITUTIONAL IMPEDIMENTS IN DEALING WITH RADICALISATION AND VE IN THE REGION 5

FACTORS OF RADICALISATION: DISCUSSING FINDINGS FROM A MULTI-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE 8

CONCLUSION 21

REFERENCES 28



Introduction

This report aims to summarise the findings of the CONNEKT research project undertaken during three years in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region on social contexts and the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism (VE) in four countries: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. Departing from traditional, security-focused research approaches, the project adopts an innovative, multi-level, and interdisciplinary methodology to analyse and understand radicalisation and VE within the intricate web of social, political and economic contexts.

The project's primary objective is to map and investigate the interplay and specific relevance of these contexts, exploring seven potential drivers: religion, economic deprivation, political grievances, cultural and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics. This comprehensive examination occurs on three distinct levels of analysis: the macro level, meso level and micro level. By adopting this layered framework, the project seeks to build a cumulative knowledge and a deeper understanding of the complex phenomenon of radicalisation.

This report aims to synthesise the findings of research activities undertaken in the MENA region within this multilevel framework and discuss their intersections and significance.



Methodology

The project surveyed the state of the art of literature, took stock of the existing national Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) policies, institutions and actors in each national context and engaged the relevant institutions and actors in consultations on the social contexts and drivers of radicalisation and VE in their country. These consultations, carried out as part of the macro-level analysis took place in the four MENA countries through 81 interviews. These interviews were analysed via a new institutional framework. The findings of the macro-level research activities were used to identify three case studies in each country to help examine the drivers of radicalisation at the meso or community level. The data collection throughout the 12 case studies was done through 26 focus groups and 23 in-depth interviews with the participation of 198 individuals. Finally, at the micro level, four surveys were conducted to address the individual drivers of radicalisation with a non-representative sample of 400 participants in each country.

The project is built on the hypothesis that radicalisation needs to be analysed by considering multiple factors depending on the context, timing, and the unique individual journeys of each person, aiming to understand both the specific and the generalisable aspects which enable radicalisation and VE. Thus, the project conducted empirical research to study the role of seven potential drivers of radicalisation and VE in the MENA region. These drivers include religion, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational influences, digital socialisation, political factors (ideas and grievances), as well as educational, cultural and leisure opportunities.

The various research findings of CONNEKT in the MENA region emphasise the intricate connections between macro-level (large-scale) and meso-level (intermediate scale) factors, intertwined with local social contexts, influencing individual (micro-scale) paths towards radicalisation. These research findings underscore the complexity of radicalisation drivers, highlighting the need to move away from oversimplified explanations of the phenomena being studied and to adopt a nuanced understanding.

This report will focus on the main findings, trying to synthesise and compare the analysis of research undertaken on three levels of social reality (micro, meso and macro). The report shows their interplay while also addressing combinations of drivers that appear to be most significant in interaction with the social contexts of radicalisation and VE in the region.



On some institutional impediments in dealing with radicalisation and VE in the region

At the macro level, the project aimed to address significant gaps in knowledge and policy related to institutional weaknesses in the MENA region when it comes to effectively countering radicalisation and VE. This was accomplished by engaging in semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 80 representatives from both governmental and non-governmental institutions in these four countries. The data collected was analysed through a new institutional theoretical perspective. This macro-level research involved policy agencies responsible for ensuring compliance with P/CVE regulations, as well as state institutions and government bodies, such as ministerial departments. Field research has unveiled a distinct set of issues that demand attention when addressing P/CVE. These concerns are of paramount importance as they not only shape the context within which policies and strategies are formulated but can also significantly affect the prominence of specific drivers.

LEGISLATION AND INSTITUTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PHENOMENON

In all four countries analysed by CONNEKT, official definitions of "terrorism" have faced criticism for being overly broad, posing a threat to human rights. The literature mentions the absence of official differentiation between radicalisation, terrorism and VE as an important factor contributing to confusion between intellectual radicalisation, behavioural radicalisation, and social or political critique (Torrekens and De Le Vingne, 2020). Regimes in the region can potentially exploit antiterrorism legislation to silence dissent and portray themselves as defenders of order against internal enemies, invoking security concerns (Mhadeen et al., 2020). This highlights the need to redefine the traditional understanding of radicalisation and VE, which has been excessively securitised (Chirchi and Jrad, 2021; Mhadeen et al., 2020).

The data collected at this level pointed out to the rigid and severe nature of antiterrorist laws inadvertently legitimising various human rights violations under the pretext of combating terrorism and contributing itself to radicalising individuals. This troubling trend has been observed in Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and Egypt (Chirchi and Jrad, 2021).

INSTITUTIONAL HIERARCHIES AND OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE COOPERATION FOR P/CVE APPROACHES AND EFFORTS

All the country and regional reports from the MENA region countries underscore the predominant influence of state security-related bodies in shaping the approach to P/CVE (Bieber and Pollozhani, 2021; Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021). The hierarchical structures within these institutions and the lack of communication hinder the development of a unified approach towards VE. While coordination may seem imperative in P/CVE contexts, the reality reveals poor collaboration among state agencies and civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the field (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021).

Moreover, despite promising micro-level research findings highlighting high numbers on youth civic engagement, placing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and CSOs in a good position to

involve youth in potential PVE initiatives (Bondokji and Rawashdeh,2024), macro-level research has specified that actually the involvement of CSOs in PVE in a concerted way with state agencies is virtually negligible in most cases (Anzil et al., 2022). This is due to several structural impediments that seem to be fairly common in the region specified in previous national and regional reports and policy papers. Most of these reports for example highlight the fact that, in the MENA region, state agencies hold a total monopoly over national security and P/CVE matters, and do not share information which particularly prevents CSOs from critically assessing P/CVE strategies (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021; Anzil et al, 2022). In addition to this, political instability hinders the development of a coherent and unified approach to P/CVE and is considered a structural element favouring radicalisation processes (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021). This instability is compounded by a lack of resources for a consistent, substantial and sustainable strategy against extremism (Anzil et al., 2022; Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021).

The lack of communication with local stakeholders and an insufficient identification of issues further obstruct the development of programmes and long-term strategies (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021; Anzil et al., 2022). A corollary of this is a lack of efficiency of central governments in addressing local challenges that is detailed through the meso-level consultations across the region (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). This lack of policy efficiency indirectly contributes to radicalisation, particularly regional disparities. All of these factors at the local level lead to a widely shared perception of marginalisation of communities, of local organisations and especially of youth from access to channels of communication with decision-making spheres. This perception is exacerbated by the absence of a proper and timely response (other than the security lens) to local grievances and concerns, contributing to a lack of trust in the political institutions whether on the local level or the national level (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Following a highly centralised approach to countering radicalisation and VE, government bodies fail to engage non-governmental actors (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021). Local NGOs and CSOs, lacking state resources and financial support, often find themselves operating within the constraints set by the state. Worse still, these restrictions subordinate CSOs to a secondary role. In the absence of domestic funding and proper policy design for P/CVE, central institutions seem to rather engage with international donors and with their agenda directly or indirectly, disregarding the demands of the local community (Chirchi and Jrad, 2021; Chirchi et al., 2021; Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021; Anzil et al., 2022).

All of these factors contribute to widening the gap between central and local political bodies and local communities when it comes to cooperating on P/CVE approaches and efforts. These institutional impediments prevent local communities from effective participation, and proper interaction with institutions, which could otherwise enable a healthy channelling of community and individual grievances through maintaining a user-friendly interface that would facilitate participation. The gap between political bodies and local communities ultimately does not facilitate solving social problems and crises and instead contributes to deepening them. It is not strange in this context that the political participation of young people is low as its channels are either weak, absent or blocked (Chirchi and al., 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023) and as communities and youth have no hope in being heard or being able to contribute to reforming institutions.

Effective PVE efforts would have to include creating platforms where both local institutions and communities are engaged in a meaningful dialogue regarding the local grievances and issues, co-reflecting and co-designing solutions to these issues (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). This would contribute towards reducing the costs of highly securitised solutions to local qualms and grievances, build trust, and mend the gap between institutions and their citizens, thus effectively fighting radicalisation and VE. Such a locally engaged approach would also contribute towards strengthening the resilience of communities and individuals to radical narratives through multi-level cooperation between various actors.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The production of knowledge in this domain reflects a bias towards the state's monopoly on information. Researchers have limited access to reliable data which is held by the authorities, significantly hampering progress in the field. In the more authoritarian political contexts, particularly in the MENA region, the state remains the sole source of information regarding security-related events (Anzil et al., 2022). Consequently, the information broadcasted in the media largely aligns with the official discourse, especially when government-owned platforms dominate.

Jordan shows some level of openness, but data sharing remains limited to trusted institutions like the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. Tunisia exhibited a nascent enthusiasm for addressing these topics, with institutions like the Institute for Strategic Studies and the National Observatory on Youth collaborating with international and local organisations to promote knowledge in this area (Chirchi and Jrad, 2021; Mhadeen et al., 2021; Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021; Anzil et al., 2022). However, this trend is being curtailed by more recent significant restrictions on public and individual liberties and on civic space.

Overall, significant limitations to fieldwork and data collection were met in the four countries at different points, whether regarding the selection of case studies or local and official engagement. For various reasons, for instance, access was restricted or denied to the target group (prisoners in Jordan), there were difficulties getting clearance or permission to do fieldwork (Jordan and Egypt), and difficulties to communicate with some target groups (Morocco). In Tunisia, it has become dangerous for CSOs to deal with matters considered by the state as being related to its security, and the CSO's role is more and more limited to approving and legitimising state policies and choices (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). These limitations point out real difficulties in building knowledge of pressing issues in the region, although there are various degrees of openness to CSOs.



Factors of radicalisation: discussing findings from a multi-level perspective

Rather than detailing all the findings about the drivers, this report will focus on the main combinations of drivers that appear to be most significant from a multi-level perspective (macro-, meso-, micro-social reality). The various research findings confirm the project's hypothesis regarding the factors of radicalisation by emphasising the intricate connections between macro-level (large-scale) and meso-level (intermediate) factors, intertwined with local social contexts, influencing individual (micro-level) paths towards radicalisation. These research findings underscore the complexity of radicalisation drivers, highlighting the need to move away from oversimplified explanations of the phenomena being studied and to adopt a nuanced understanding. The CONNEKT research findings confirm the main research hypothesis of the project, stressing the importance of contextual factors in understanding the dynamics of radicalisation and violence in comparison with ideological factors.

THE COMBINATION OF TRANSNATIONAL FACTORS AND LOCAL GRIEVANCES

One of the important factors of radicalisation examined by the project is the role of transnational dynamics. The various research findings from the meso-level and the micro-level show that, as highlighted by macro-level findings, these dynamics are present in the MENA region as push factors of radicalisation and VE given that porous borders facilitate the spread of radical ideas (Chirchi and Jrad, 2020; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021; Mhadeen et al., 2021). In addition, the return of individuals from conflict zones poses a significant challenge, requiring international cooperation to manage this threat.

The micro-level survey conducted in the four MENA countries – Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia – aimed to provide a more specific analysis of the concept of transnational dynamics by addressing two important indicators: the role of the diaspora, and relations with ethnic and national groups (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2024). 67% of the respondents seemed to perceive the effect of diaspora as mostly significant in the socioeconomic situation, while 47% of them said that diaspora least affects their individual life (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2024). The findings could be enriched through further qualitative research by including other significant components of the transnational dynamics that are related to VE. Additional research should explore the role of borders, border countries with a significant number of VE groups and networks, migration flows, refugees, etc., which creates opportunities for radical groups to recruit new members. These dynamics were also highlighted in the meso-level cases studied in both Tunisia and Jordan.

Micro-level research findings also described youth perceptions of their government's foreign policy, and these findings can be included in the analysis of potential transnational factors of radicalisation. The micro-level findings highlight an important issue, which is becoming timely today in relation with

the perceptions of injustice towards the continuous and unaddressed conflict in Palestine in the region. The regional micro-level report emphasised "a deep and ongoing sense of injustice towards the continuous Israeli violations of International Law,[1] and the expansion in illegal settlements[2] that intensifies the feelings of injustice towards Palestinians in the region" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Although the surveys revealed in April-May 2023 that only 14% disagree with government policies towards Palestine (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023), the more recent wide popular street protests during October 2023 throughout the region may indicate higher percentages of disagreement and dissatisfaction with the regions' government policies regarding the Palestinian cause[3] as well as increase the sentiments of injustice.

Also probably linked to these current negative perceptions are the youth perceptions of foreign influences on their governments. The micro-level findings show that for young people in the region the United States (US) is considered to have a greater influence in respondents' countries with a total of 59% for answers on "yes, a lot" and "yes" followed by the European Union (EU) (54%), China (41%), Russia (40%), and Israel (28%) (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

The unresolved conflict and ongoing war and the lack of official US support for a ceasefire in Gaza has the potential for further intensifying existing feelings of frustration and anger amongst youth both against their governments' policies on the issue and against foreign influence on them. Further research is needed to explore how the current geopolitical context of polarisation of positions on the conflict, the intensified perceptions of injustice, and feelings of anger and frustration regarding the conflict will be affecting youth and their political perceptions.

Although transnational dynamics play a role in creating opportunities for radical groups to recruit new members, the meso- and micro-level research findings actually show that despite the presence of the latter in at least two of the countries of the MENA region, Tunisia and Jordan, it is mainly the local contextual factors that mostly contribute to the appeal of radical narratives (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). The MENA region case studies underscore the presence of active transnational dynamics in the studied countries, but they seem to be active only in combination with local grievances, local issues and contexts,[4] which significantly outweigh the impact of transnational influences in activating the push factors of radicalisation (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). An illustrative example is the Feriana case study in Tunisia, a city in Western Tunisia marked by economic and social marginalisation, sharing borders with the mountainous eastern Algeria, which makes it an ideal conduit for radicalisation networks in the country (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022).

[1] "Commission of Inquiry Finds That the Israeli Occupation Is Unlawful under International Law", OHCHR, 20 October 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/commission-inquiry-finds-israeli-occupation-unlawful-under-international-law

[2] "Settlement Expansion Fuelling Violence in Occupied Palestinian Territory, Middle East Peace Process Special Coordinator Warns Security Council | UN Press", press.un.org, 22 March 2022, https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14836.doc.htm

[3] Marc Español, Gaza Crisis Shakes Up the the Middle East's Political Landscape, *El Pais*, October 2023., available at: https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-10-22/gaza-crisis-shakes-up-middle-easts-political-landscape.html, also Sam Jones and agencies, Angry protests flare up across Middle East after Gaza hospital blast, *The Guardian*, 18 October 2023, available at : https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/18/gaza-hospital-al-ahli-al-arabi-blast-explosion-protests-demonstrations-middle-east

[4] For a detailed description of these local issues and context please refer to sections 2-6.

In Jordan, the research team emphasised the interplay between local grievances and transnational dynamics in driving VE, especially among Syrian refugees, and highlighted that digital socialisation intensifies their sense of victimhood, propagating narratives of injustice (Mhadeen et al., 2021).

THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY: RELIGION IN COMBINATION WITH CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Moreover, macro-level, meso-level and micro-level research findings illustrate differences in the perception of drivers of radicalisation, with a focus on ideology at the macro level (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2021; Anzal and al., 2022) and a more nuanced understanding at the meso (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023) and micro levels (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). This nuanced view highlights the importance of considering the complex interplay of ideological and contextual factors in the recruitment processes and the need to address the local drivers of radicalisation in the region. Thus, rather than revealing the role of a single push factor in radicalisation and VE, the CONNEKT research emphasises significant combinations of drivers of radicalisation and VE in the MENA region.

The aforementioned research findings do highlight a more nuanced and complex role of religion than previously thought. Religion, rather than being a direct cause, appears as becoming active as a push factor only in combination with specific historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts, mostly in marginalised areas with limited state presence (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco). In such areas, it is possible to intercept a high level of social, economic or political grievances (Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt), exacerbated by a deep sense of marginalisation and territorial inequalities (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

On the other hand, through the meso-level and micro-level research findings, religion was perceived within the populations of the region as the main focus in countering radicalisation rather than in fostering it (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Religion appears to have a multifaceted role, acting as both a driver (in combination with contextual factors) and a resilience factor depending on local contexts.

In terms of prevention policies, some countries prioritise security measures (Tunisia, Egypt), while others focus on religious education reform and promoting antiextremist religious discourse (Morocco, Jordan). The success of these strategies varies, highlighting the need for comprehensive policies involving religious institutions to effectively combat extremist narratives and their possible appeal for young people in the region.

This potential role of religion in contributing to PVE efforts is especially confirmed by the micro-level research findings showing that places of worship are relatively popular trusted spaces, visited "sometimes" by 40% of the participants and "regularly" by 19% of them, which makes them one of the entry points or enabling factors for PVE efforts in the communities of the region; especially considering that 32% of the respondents attributed the "great influence" that the "religious community" has on them, while 24% of them said that this influence is "great but not decisive" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). The micro-level findings on youth and religion confirm the latest findings of the Arab Barometer (Robbins, 2023). This trend reverses another previous trend observed in the 2010s when the percentage of youth identifying themselves as "not religious" was on the

rise. The report explains the more recent trend by many possible factors including "the effects of COVID-19, deteriorating economic conditions, or other challenges that make people more likely to turn to religion" (Robbins, 2023). More detailed demographic explanations based on age, the level of education, income, etc., are also discussed in the Pew Research Center in 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018). Regardless of such a discussion, data from the Arab Barometer clearly shows that "religion continues to play a key role in the lives of most people across the MENA region and likely will continue to do so for the foreseeable future" (Robbins, 2023).

Another factor that invites the inclusion of religion in PVE efforts and presents religious affiliation as an opportunity or an enabling factor for prevention is that young participants also seem to view religion positively as they mostly refuse to associate religious affiliation with violent attitudes. Based on the micro research, 71% of them disagreed with associating religious affiliation and experiencing violent reactions (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Finally religious education was perceived as a preferred or trusted tool for PVE by 87% of the survey respondents in Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, who "agreed or strongly agreed that religious education can effectively contain and limit the risk of VE" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Micro-level findings also highlight that while policy-makers and PVE stakeholders should capitalize on the positive perceptions of the role of religion amongst youth, they also have to "address religious discrimination and promote religious tolerance", which would also contribute to PVE efforts (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

THE COMBINATION OF ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, EDUCATION AND TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

Within the significant factors of radicalisation and VE in the region, economic deprivation appears as the most prominent driver impacting dynamics of VE in most of the case studies. This factor was one of the most significant criteria of relevance for at least six of the case studies in the MENA region.

The findings show that, in the eyes of young people from the MENA region aged 12 to 30 years old who took part in meso-level research activities, including focus groups and in-depth interviews, and those who aged 18 to 30 who took part in surveys, economic deprivation is the main driver of radicalisation (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). The survey of the individual youth perceptions of the drivers of PVE confirms what has been highlighted in meso-level case study reports, namely that economic deprivation is strongly associated with "limited social mobility, the mismatch between education and youth unemployment" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). The survey results in Jordan, Morocco and Egypt indicate that there are high levels of dissatisfaction with state policies and services related to these fields. Indeed, these results show that 63% of the participants said they were dissatisfied with employment opportunities and services, while 53% of them said they were unhappy with the public education services, which are viewed as inadequate (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

The situation of young people in the region faces common issues related to the contexts of education and employment, such as the lack of economic diversification, and the need for education system improvement. In addition, there is a lack of employment opportunities, which are

furthermore not adequately addressed through proper public policies (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). High education costs, early dropouts and violence within schools have been highlighted (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023) as characteristic of the education systems in the region with varying degrees. Moreover, the absence of religious education in curricula makes young people susceptible to extremist ideologies (Chirchi et al., 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Addressing these challenges is vital to sustainable P/CVE efforts.

Economic factors like unemployment contribute to multi-dimensional exclusion, affecting youth identity and social roles, leading to cultural and political exclusion. As education and economic/employment opportunities shape the young people's paths towards adulthood, economic inclusion and social recognition, the various and multi-level research findings point out to a deeply concerning situation marked by economic deprivation, coupled with factors like social marginalisation and low social mobility levels (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). All of these factors increase perceptions of relative deprivation and vulnerability to radicalisation. High unemployment rates, limited economic opportunities, and inadequate living standards foster discontent and frustration among youth, making them psychologically and socially susceptible to extremist ideologies. A strong sense of alienation can drive young people toward radical and extremist ideologies as a form of alternative belonging (Chirchi et al., 2021; Mhadeen et al., 2021).

Macro-level research findings in Tunisia have already shown that economic deprivation as a factor is often combined with that of territorial inequalities, which exacerbates the perception of multi-level marginalisation and exclusion. Territorial inequalities contribute to radicalisation, particularly in areas lacking social services and public infrastructure. These marginalised spaces become breeding grounds for extremist ideologies, with urban planning playing a significant role (Chirchi et al., 2021; Anzil et al., 2022).

Economic deprivation consistently appears as a significant factor of radicalisation in the region in combination with other factors in the research findings throughout the various levels (macro, meso and micro), which strengthens its position as a push factor. This is probably linked to the fact that the governance model in the region is not based on an equal, inclusive and sustainable development model and policies (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Very centralised models of governance in the region contribute to a territorial concentration of power and resources exacerbating the effects of economic deprivation and contributing to a perception of deep economic and social inequalities (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Some of the countries like Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia have, to different degrees, implemented some form of decentralisation of power and development but the fruits of this process do not seem to have eliminated some historical territorial disparities and inequalities. Indeed, these inequalities are still perceived (Morocco and Tunisia) as central to the social and political grievances that youth have towards the state. The local surveys in the MENA region show that territorial inequalities come forth in ranking as the most important VE drivers (Bonodkji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

It is worth noting that the participants have identified equal distribution of services and wealth within their countries, as well as improving economic conditions, as directly affecting the prevention of

radicalisation in their country. Indeed, they consider that equal distribution of services and wealth comes third in terms of importance in this regard (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). In addition to highlighting the importance of an inclusive and equal distribution of services, these findings point out to the significant link between public service provision, political grievances and political participation as another relevant combination of social contexts and drivers of radicalisation in the region.

THE COMBINATION OF PUBLIC POLICY DEFICIT, TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES, POLITICAL GRIEVANCES AND LACK OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The local social contexts of radicalisation in the MENA region cannot be understood without referring to the clear deficit in the role of the state in providing policies and services to the citizens as well as exercising an inclusive, just and equal governance addressing the dimensions of human security and human development.[5] Because of the absence of effective public policies, social and economic grievances are exacerbated, contributing to a deep sense of injustice, thus producing strong perceptions of relative deprivation amongst youth in the region. Political grievances, such as corruption, cronyism, and the lack of political accountability, further fuel radicalisation. Political exclusion contributes to feelings of alienation, and pushing individuals toward VE. Addressing these political issues is vital to mitigate the risk of radicalisation.

Research findings through the meso and micro level show that young people in the region are highly dissatisfied with public (administrative) services. While education services come at the top of the services with which they are unhappy (63%), the relationship with bureaucratic structures come second in terms of dissatisfaction levels of the respondents (53%) (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Public services are also problematic in the region because they are not equally distributed territorially. This has been confirmed through macro-level, meso-level or micro-level research findings (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023; Anzil et al., 2022).

This dissatisfaction towards public services is part of deep political grievances that young people have towards the state and political institutions. Through macro- and meso-level research findings, political grievances appeared to be at the heart of a "triangle of anger" formed by economic demands, political grievances and regional disparities (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Anzil et al., 2022). Micro-level research findings not only confirm this combination of drivers of VE to be relevant but also show that youth view political factors or "politics" (policies, state action, political life) as having a significant role as drivers of radicalisation, as they "ranked politics as the second most important VE driver" (Bondokji and Rwashdeh, 2023).

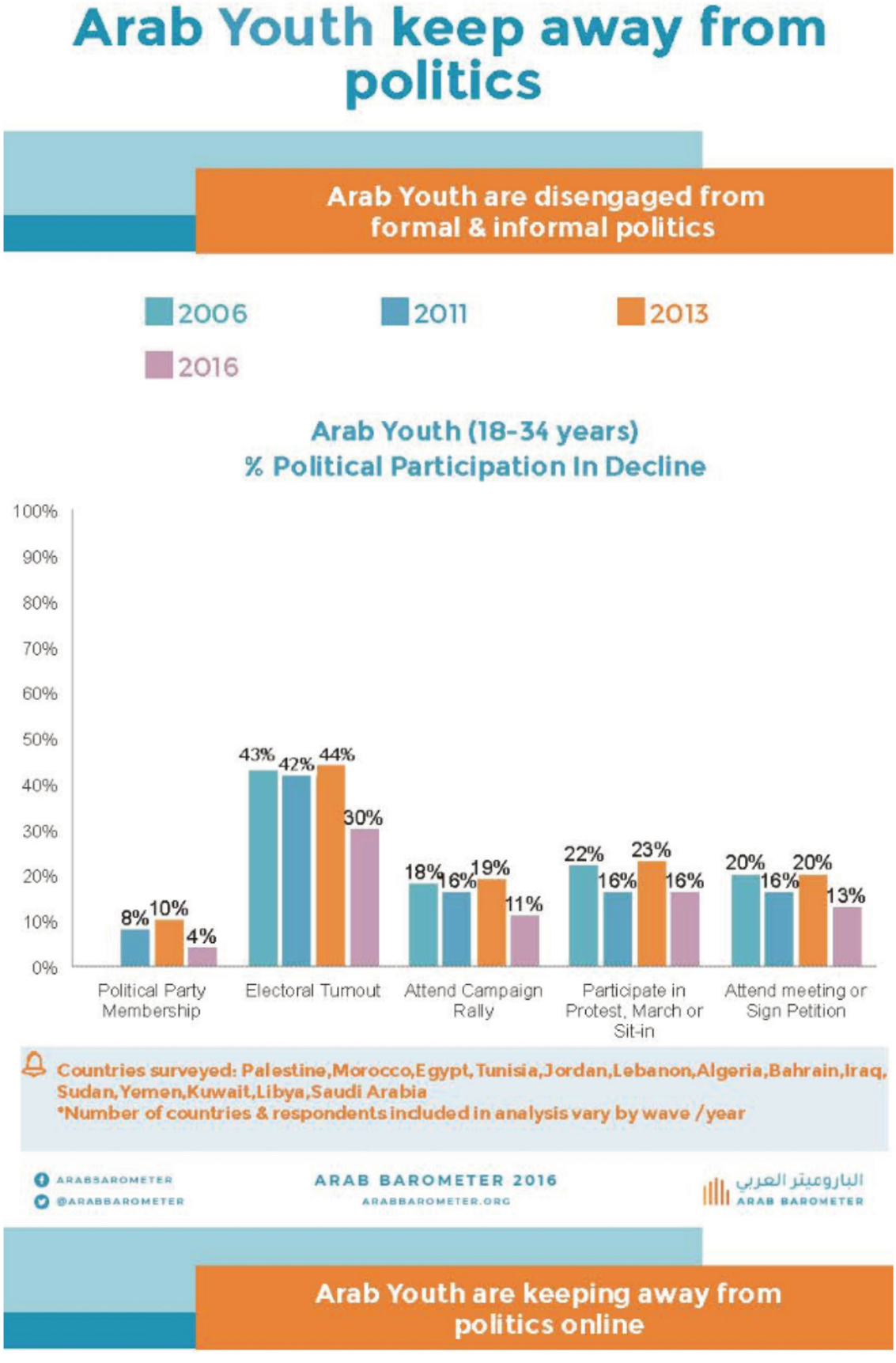
[5] The UNDP Human Development Report of 1994 defines human security as "safety from chronic threats and protection from sudden hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life." This non-state centric conceptualisation of security and rather people-centered conceives the concept of security in a holistic way as made of several dimensions of security: Economic - Assured basic income; job security, basic food needs met; Health - Freedom from diseases and debilitating sickness; Environmental - Healthy physical environment; Community - Support from family and broader groups; Political - Respect for basic human rights; Personal/physical - Freedom from physical violence. According to Walter Dorn: "The power and novelty of the concept of human security is perhaps best shown when it is compared and contrasted with related concepts which are widely accepted. For instance, human security and human development are often described as twin concepts, being simply "freedom from fear" and 'freedom from want,' respectively. To elaborate, human security is the ability to enjoy the fruits of human development in a safe environment. Human development is one important means to create human security. The two initiatives are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Without one, the other becomes difficult, if not impossible". Human Security: An Overview, available at: https://www.walterdorn.net/23

The many national and case study reports as well as micro-level survey results thus show that multi-level marginalisation (economic, social, and political) is a core grievance in various social contexts, leading to frustration and anger. Urban areas seem to be more prone to radicalisation, with different forms of exclusion requiring tailored responses (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023; Anzil et al., 2022). This urban context is illustrated by the case studies of Tunisia (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2021, 2023) and Egypt more specifically (Kassim, 2023) where, even in proximity to major urban centres, disparities in infrastructure, economic opportunities and services exist, exacerbating feelings of marginalisation and injustice among youth.

These disparities contribute to a sense of exclusion from economic, political, and social spheres, fuelling violence in urban neighbourhoods. The dynamics engaged by the triangle of anger (the intersection of the lack of economic development, youth unemployment, and the ineffective role of education) thus appear to be more evident in the urban contexts throughout the case studies examined in the MENA region. As has been laid out in the meso-level regional research when referring to Tunisia, "there are deep disparities in infrastructure, economic opportunities and services between each of these urban centres (Tunis and Sousse) and their neighbourhoods. These disparities provide fertile ground for perceptions of marginalisation and injustice, and exacerbate young people's sense of exclusion from economic, political and social circles, despite the geographical and social proximity of the centre of strength (the capital). All of these factors contribute to fuelling violence in these urban suburbs and neighbourhoods" (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). These dynamics, namely the influence of the urban setting in providing the social context of radicalisation, have also been detected in case studies in Egypt and Jordan. Furthermore, demographic factors, particularly the social contexts of urbanisation and the young population, play a significant role in predicting protests and violent activities in developing countries (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). The increase in urbanisation and the "youth bulge" are associated with protest formation and appear to be better predictors of radicalisation (but not of VE) than ideology or indoctrination (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

The political marginalisation of youth is evident through many qualitative and quantitative indicators detailed through the meso-level research findings. For instance, the survey in the region examined young people's views on political issues through three groups of indicators: voting in elections, institutional trust, and perceptions of foreign influence and foreign relations. The regional comparison of the results of this survey reveal that "only 10% of the respondents eligible to vote have done so in most elections, while around 43% of respondents never voted, and around a fifth (21%) of respondents voted in a limited number of elections, with no significant gender variations in this regard" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). These numbers point to a disengagement with political processes that previous qualitative findings might help explain. This lack of political participation can be related to the previous multiple factors that were detailed in the meso-level case studies as blocking or discouraging participation (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). These include the lack of trust in political institutions and the gap separating the rulers from the masses, especially youth, despite the brief surge of youth political participation during the regional wide street protests of the Arab Spring. This trend has been confirmed through several indicators from the Arab Barometer, monitored over 10 years from 2006 to 2016.[6]

[6] Arab Barometer, Arab Youth Keep Away from Politics, 2016, Graphics available at: https://www.arabbarometer.org/2018/08/arab-youth-keep-away-from-politics/


Arab Youth keep away from politics
Arab Youth are disengaged from formal & informal politics
2006
2011
2013
2016
Arab Youth (18-34 years)
% Political Participation In Decline
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
8%
10%
4%
43%
42%
44%
30%
18%
16%
19%
11%
22%
16%
23%
16%
20%
16%
20%
13%
Political Party Membership
Electoral Turnout
Attend Campaign Rally
Participate in Protest, March or Sit-in
Attend meeting or Sign Petition
Countries surveyed: Palestine,Morocco,Egypt,Tunisia,Jordan,Lebanon,Algeria,Bahrain,Iraq, Sudan,Yemen,Kuwait,Libya,Saudi Arabia
*Number of countries & respondents included in analysis vary by wave /year
ARABBAROMETER
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ARAB BAROMETER 2016
ARABBAROMETER.ORG
الباروميتر العربي
ARAB BAROMETER
Arab Youth are keeping away from politics online

Meso-level research findings point to different degrees and manifestations of youth disengagement from the political processes, depending on the national political context. Still, it is possible to identify common causes to this lack of engagement that have been already highlighted by other research studies, such as the stifling of political life because of party marginalisation (Storm, 2022) through legal and financial restrictions but also through the rise of unelected technocrats in key decision-making positions. The technocratic trend is problematic because they have no political accountability to electors, which widens the gaps between the sphere of decision-making and citizens (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Storm, 2022; Bonodkji and Rawashdeh, 2023) and lessens in transparency and accountability.

As political parties are supposed to present options for public policies, including policies addressing social and political demands, the weaknesses of these political parties and the marginalisation of citizens vis-à-vis these parties prevent citizens, and youth in particular, from having incentives for participation to find answers to their economic, social and political grievances (Chirchi et al., 2021; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Through some meso-level case studies, young participants reported, for instance, that they felt that traditional party politics excluded them (Tunisia, Morocco) and they are only participating occasionally through issue-based mobilisation, which is also supported by other research in the region (Storm, 2022). Previous reports on the emergence of "technocratic populism"[7] defined as "a situation where the State is managed like a firm and experts are used to bypass accountability" (Storm, 2022), and the waning of ideological parties in the region point out to the fragmentation of protest movements as one of the reasons for youth electoral apathy (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023; Storm, 2022). Another significant factor is also the long historical trend of repression of political participation by authoritarian regimes in the region as one of the explanations of the lack of youth political engagement (Storm, 2022; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Some of the CONNEKT meso-level case study reports, including Tunisia and Morocco, mentioned the lack of meaningful consultation platforms with youth as a reason for youth political disengagement, which leads to resorting to violence to express dissent and contestation (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). The lack of platforms for open and informed dialogue as well as free expression is clear through the frequent use of a virtual private network (VPN) to use the Internet, which is a good indicator of the fear that youth have of consequences of exercising their rights. As indicated by micro-level research findings, they are using VPN mainly to protect their privacy and counter government censorship (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). This is an important indicator of the level of the lack of trust that young people have in the political institutions, which is translated into specific practices of self-protection of the young Internet users. This needs to be contrasted with the fact that digital platforms of participation are central to youth education, employment, cultural opportunities and leisure.

[7] Lise Storm (2022) talks about a new mode of authoritarianism that is common to many populist state ideologies, where common features can be identified and one of them is technocratic populism. This is how Lise Storm describes it: "If one scratches the surface a little, it becomes readily apparent that most of the post-uprising authoritarian Middle Eastern states, whether Arab or non-Arab, and regardless of their brand of authoritarianism, are very similar in terms of the practices they have institutionalised – or are beginning to institutionalize – in order to guarantee the survival of their regimes. At the core of this new mode of authoritarianism appears to be the phasing out of a unifying ideology in favour of what some have labelled 'technocratic populism', i.e., a situation where the state is managed like a firm and experts are used to bypass accountability. Hence, while ideology is largely irrelevant, loyalty is central to the functioning of technocratic populism, as is a passive citizenry, something which is achieved via the gradual erosion of institutional checks and balances as well as the demobilisation of the general public by undermining the confidence in the country's representative institutions in conjunction with the increasing reverence of (loyal) experienced personalities unbound by ideological ties", (2022:81))

The countries of the region show variable degrees of openness to youth civic and political participation. Non-political and volunteering in charitable activities seems to be the main type of civic participation the respondents have declared being involved in (20% of the respondents from Morocco, Jordan and Egypt). These activities are related to supporting people with disabilities, the elderly and children (16%), sporting events, and religious activities (9%). These numbers may, however, indicate an overrepresentation of middle-class youth and civil society members in the survey sample due to selection bias. Nonetheless, while these activities that young people declared taking part in are mainly non-political activities, this participation indicates a "sense of social responsibility" and is also a good indicator of strong social ties and social cohesion in the region. This level and type of participation has a good potential for being an enabling factor for potential prevention efforts, especially through NGOs and CSOs that "promote peaceful dialogue and instil self-confidence and sense of purpose among youth" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023), making them a prominent PVE actor in local communities. There is a need regionally to support and empower CSOs to achieve this role (Mouna and Er-Rifayi, 2022; Anzil et al., 2022; Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bonokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

The combination of these factors puts young people in the region, who constitute a significant portion of the population, at a great risk of radicalisation as they experience social injustice, economic deprivation, and political exclusion. This environment leads to frustration in a context marked by the lack of open platforms to discuss and imagine alternatives that could help channel this frustration into peaceful civic and political action. Most of the research reports emphasise the significance of these social contexts, economic challenges, and political dissatisfaction in activating the drivers of radicalisation in the region. Young people seem to consider that governance issues related to state policies can have a great role in the prevention of radicalisation and VE as micro-level research findings show that a large majority of the respondents to a survey in mid-2023 (77%) either agree (42%) or strongly agree (35%) that one of the important solutions to radicalisation lies in government action. In their opinion, "state policies and measures can effectively contain and limit the risk of VE by ensuring equal rights and providing resources for all citizens" (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023), as well as creating frameworks for better and more inclusive development for fair and open societies.

THE COMBINATION OF MULTI-LEVEL GRIEVANCES, WITH SOCIAL DIGITALISATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

Macro-level findings highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated online radicalisation, emphasising the importance of addressing digital illiteracy and counteracting disinformation campaigns (Anzil et al., 2022). Further meso-level research findings highlight the role of digital platforms, particularly social media, in facilitating recruitment and providing alternative discourses for young people (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Micro-level research provides further insights into the Internet usage patterns of youth, including concerns about exposure to extremist content, online gaming, monitoring of social media, and VPN usage for privacy and freedom of expression (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023).

Internet access amongst the surveyed group is very high, with 96% of the respondents having access, and 59% of youth spending a significant amount of time (over 3 hours daily) online, which might expose them to VE material. 41% of surveyed youth use a VPN, which raises concerns about the right to access information but, at the same time, provides opportunities for engaging with

extreme ideologies or alternative ideologies without fear of persecution, especially in combination with psychological and social vulnerabilities and insufficiently addressed multi-level grievances (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). However, monitoring of social media in this context does not seem to be a prevention factor as it raises concerns about individual freedoms, privacy, and securitisation, particularly in the context of antiterrorism laws. As has been pointed out in the meso-level and macro-level research, Internet policing is more likely to lead to arbitrary curtailments of freedom rather than effective PVE strategies.

Based on these findings, digital social spaces in the region may seem to carry the potential of being exposed to radical and VE media material without a possibility to carry out an open debate about those risks from a prevention perspective. However, as shown by consultations with youth at the meso and micro levels, digital social spaces are not only spaces for potential recruitment of youth by extremist networks online, they also have the potential to benefit youth positive participation. The securitisation of digital spaces does not seem to be a viable solution in this context, and innovation is needed to balance out security considerations and participation rights for optimal prevention solutions (Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023). Strengthening youth intellectual and cognitive resilience to radicalisation through open discussion online and in face-to-face interaction through civic engagement, civic education and alternative narratives regarding social, economic, political and cultural grievances seems to be a more sustainable solution (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

While the economic deprivation and regional inequalities are corollaries of the lack of cultural opportunities for a great number of youth in the region (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023), the digital platforms can offer alternative avenues for more accessible cultural opportunities and for better participation for youth, thus contributing to PVE efforts. Through various research findings, from the meso and the micro levels, digital spaces in the region appear as important alternative socialisation and participation venues for youth, where the lack of participation platforms and cultural opportunities are partly mitigated. The negative impacts of social exclusion can be decreased through a wider access to digital platforms that can be sustained through a positive face-to-face participation and youth local engagement building on the already existing potential for positive participation found in the region and revealed through micro-level findings. This positive participation can be also sustained through the recognition of various emerging forms of youth artistic expression in the visual arts and music (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023).

Hence, we can say that digital platforms do not create radicalisation but rather facilitate recruitment and the spread of the influence of radical narratives, particularly on vulnerable young people, especially those who lack critical judgment and face social and economic challenges. But digital platforms have a dual role: they can be a facilitator of radicalisation but also a space for learning and growth, depending on how they are used.

Sports also play such a dual role based on the two case studies from Tunisia and Morocco, where the theme of football fan clubs was explored. These groups serve as platforms for alternative socialisation and self-expression for young males. They often convey rejection of authority and grievances, potentially preparing the grounds for radicalisation (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). Both the

micro-level and meso-level research findings point out the need to further strengthen the preventive potential of sports (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Bondokji and Rawashdeh, 2023) as they contribute to engaging youth in positive participation. Sports can provide them with opportunities for social inclusion through building self-esteem and a sense of belonging and agency, all of which have a great potential in strengthening their individual resilience and their community engagement.

Sports and culture could also be good arenas to counter the effects of another common issue in the region that has emerged from research findings, namely the link between drug use amongst young people and radicalisation. Reports from Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan indeed mention this issue as linked to limited spaces for entertainment and culture, difficult social and economic conditions, and sometimes low education levels. The absence of constructive opportunities, such as youth centres or cultural activities, and limited economic opportunities contribute to drug consumption (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023). These factors can also lead young people to engage in networks of delinquency and violence, including VE, especially when combined with limited religious knowledge among young people in these countries, as has been highlighted in the meso-level and micro-level findings as a facilitating factor for these issues. Examples from Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan illustrate how youth are drawn into drug use due to a lack of alternatives, economic deprivation and territorial inequalities. Rather than dealing with the problem through health public policies, the drugs problem is rather dealt with through the security lens. This is exacerbated in Tunisia, for instance, through a punitive approach via the justice system. The role of the justice system varies across case studies. In Tunisia, the punitive justice system is highlighted as a factor that contributes to the involvement of young people in various offences, including VE (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2023; Anzil et al., 2022).

GENDER

Overall, the research findings do not point to major gender variations when it comes to the perceptions of the youth of the region on the drivers of radicalisation and on their general views on several issues. However, it is worth noting that meso-level case studies have explored gender dynamics in Tunisia and Jordan. In Tunisia, economic challenges and cultural expectations of masculinity led young men to seek material provision through informal economy networks, intersecting with radicalisation networks (Chirchi and Ghribi, 2022, 2023). In Jordan, female preachers compensated for the lack of formal education opportunities, playing a crucial role in informal religious education (Mhadeen et al., 2022).

Moreover, micro-level findings have revealed some gender variations on different issues. For example, with regards to political participation, while no gender variations were generally observed, when it comes to institutional trust, the gender breakdown shows a tendency amongst males to distrust the media and religious leaders more than females. In addition to this, leisure activities show gender variations, with males having a preference for outside activities, like going out and meeting with friends, and females showing preference for watching TV. Nonetheless, while both genders are actively engaged in volunteering, data shows potential gender specific preferences in certain activities with females being slightly more involved in support-oriented activities and males more engaged in organising sports events. Also, although statistically not very significant, it is worth noting that according to micro-level findings, females reported greater influence of the religious community in their area.

While these results do not seem to be conclusive in terms of understanding the gender dynamics in the region with regards to the issue of radicalisation and VE, other results suggest that there has been a noticeable change in the region in the past 10 years in perceptions of female social and political leadership, suggesting a greater role that women can play in PVE initiatives. According to recent data from the Arab Barometer, women's leadership is more and more accepted based on polls in the countries of the MENA region over the past 10 years, which comparatively shows that there is dramatic increase in most of these countries in the popular support for women as political leaders. Also, in 8 of the 11 countries for which the Arab Barometer has trend data, disagreement with the idea that men make better political leaders than women is at an all-time high. These changes are not only observed at the level of the population but also within age cohorts. This means that "citizens who were in their twenties, thirties or forties ten years ago are today less likely to think men make better political leaders than women" (Roche, 2023). This change suggests deeper cultural and political changes of opinion in the region with regards to gender dynamics, the family, and political participation.



Conclusion

The multi-level research findings reflect some common trends as well as differences in defining and addressing VE and radicalisation in the countries of the MENA region. There are important common combinations of drivers despite the specificities of the countries of the region in regard to the influence of the drivers.

On the macro level, despite some differences (Morocco and prevention based on involving religious dialogue and education in PVE efforts), the institutional perspective relies on security structures in order to tackle VE and radicalisation. Softer measures and cooperation with civil society and academic institutions do not seem to be at the top of the policy preferences in the region when it comes to dealing with the issues of radicalisation and VE. Social and political grievances are dealt with mainly through the security lens, which has led to stricter policies that particularly have an impact on youth and access to rights and freedoms, such as free speech and political participation. This has contributed to considerable difficulties in holistically understanding and dealing with prevention.

When considering the factors driving VE and radicalisation, there are several common combinations of drivers that can be highlighted. Some of the factors appear to be mainly activated in combinations with other factors and in specific contexts while others appear to be being connected to some important factors, contributing to deepening their role as drivers of radicalisation.

Overall, the CONNEKT research findings in the MENA region show that the region is impacted by shared events, such as the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Palestine, as well as other global trends and developments that affect the potential for radicalisation in each country (borders, VE networks, digital radicalisation, etc.). However, these findings also emphasise the importance of local grievances, despite the presence of transnational factors of radicalisation. The latter seem to be active only in the presence of local significant grievances.

Moreover, religion and ideology, which have been classically identified as the most important drivers of radicalisation, appear to be rather activated as vehicles for expressing strong contextual factors that need to be addressed in differentiated ways according to each context and to the combination of drivers that seems to be most significant. For instance, when the drivers are mainly economic and social, it would make more sense to include economic prevention factors in the prevention initiatives rather than only focusing on counter-radicalisation narratives. Also, research findings guide us towards a more refined understanding of the role of religion, not just as a vehicle or a symbolic reservoir of meanings and motivation for VE but most importantly as a prevention factor.

Religion serves as a symbolic resource that can be harnessed in various ways within different contexts. In the eyes of the youth of the region, religion can be utilised to fuel radicalisation and VE, but it can also be employed to fortify individual and community resilience. Religion indeed emerges in

meso- and micro-level data collection and analysis as a component of discourses that gain prominence in the absence of relevant political-civic narratives capable of addressing real challenges and complexities. Findings reveal that religion becomes a driving force behind radicalisation in the voids and gaps left by educational and meso-level institutions (such as family, school, the education system, and religious institutions). This phenomenon is exacerbated in situations where critical thinking skills are lacking and among disempowered youth who feel deeply marginalised with no prospects for improving their circumstances. Moreover, they often have no means to express their anger and frustrations constructively through political-social dialogue or proper channels for participating in public decision-making.

This sense of disempowerment starkly contrasts with a pseudo-empowerment offered by violent radical narratives, which present seemingly plausible alternatives when hope for individual and collective improvement is absent. Notably, individuals recruited by VE groups are often described by the communities they target as lacking significant religious knowledge or adhering to unconventional interpretations of religion that are not widely accepted in the societies of the countries under study. Nevertheless, the underlying motivation for the religious views embraced by VE groups, justifying violence, is rooted in the perception of relative deprivation and profound social injustices and inequalities attributed to the state.

There are important synergies or commonalities between the various national contexts in the region in terms of combinations of drivers. The comprehensive analysis of youth radicalisation in the MENA region reveals significant commonalities across diverse countries. The multi-level findings delve into the economic, psychological, political and social drivers contributing to the radicalisation of youth. A comparative examination of macro, meso and micro levels highlights prevalent patterns: the pivotal role of local contexts in shaping youth radicalisation, a pervasive sense of marginalisation and perceived injustice, and multi-faceted exclusion characterised by limited employment opportunities, diminishing educational prospects, and mounting social and economic frustrations. These factors strongly influence individuals, especially young people, predisposing them to accept radical narratives. Research findings also underscore how digital socialisation, especially through social media, can influence radicalisation among vulnerable youth in the MENA region, while equally emphasising that not all young people are susceptible. Additionally, these findings highlight the connection between drug use and VE, where limited opportunities and social factors contribute to both problems.

Economic deprivation and social grievances seem to be deeply interconnected to territorial inequalities, heightening perceptions of injustice and exclusion. These feelings of marginalisation are exacerbated in urban settings as expectations for better social and economic condition are higher, thus deepening the perceptions of relative deprivation and creating grounds for receptivity of radical VE discourses, especially in social contexts marked by the lack of religious education as well as the absence of platforms of political participation, enabling open and peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution.

Interconnections between these factors lead to identifying common threads between them in relation to common governance issues in the region. Addressing their relevance and importance in

understanding the phenomena of radicalisation and VE in the region is central to successful and efficient PVE efforts. The social contexts of radicalisation in the region seem to share the common feature of the state's failure to address basic needs and social injustices, which creates a breeding ground for radical ideologies, making it crucial to address these underlying issues to counter VE effectively. Deeper systemic issues within state-citizen relationships are the common factor between the several social contexts and the factors examined in the region. Solutions, therefore, must address these complex and systemic problems, considering demands for improved human development conditions and significant socio-political changes in the region as central to sustainable PVE strategies and policies.

In summary, the findings highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of radicalisation drivers in the MENA region, with variations across countries and cases. The role of political dynamics, social and economic grievances, informal education, and other factors in radicalisation is explored in different contexts, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A multifaceted, context-specific approach is essential in preventing radicalisation and VE in the region. This includes comprehensive education reform, addressing economic disparities and fostering social inclusion, collaboration between governments, religious institutions, local communities, civil society, and international organisations.

Recommendations to national governments:

Improving public policies and services

- Enhance the quality of public services, including education, healthcare and cultural access.
- Develop inclusive urban policies that consider the evolving nature of cities, their diverse populations, and marginalised regions.
- Focus on improving transportation, building recreational and cultural facilities, modernising markets, and showcasing local products while involving the community in decision-making.

Territorial equality

- Ensure transparency in resource allocation and conduct strategic communication campaigns to document government public services.
- Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to public service provision, particularly in areas where women face barriers.
- Recognise the provision of public services as a national security priority, addressing territorial inequalities to mitigate feelings of resentment among youth.
- Include the informal economic sector and provide incentives for better resource management.
- Encourage investment in regions with high unemployment by offering tax benefits to projects that create jobs and add value to the region.
- Simplify administrative procedures for projects and make them accessible to marginalised regions, breaking their isolation.
- Facilitate cooperation between local communities and municipalities, as well as promote

cultural and economic exchanges with other regions and communities worldwide to draw on comparative experiences and provide funding for marginalised areas.

Youth economic empowerment

- Reform administrative structures to simplify bureaucratic processes hindering youth entrepreneurship and innovation.
- Facilitate access to low-interest loans for young entrepreneurs.
- Establish legal frameworks and policies that encourage self-employment, creativity and innovation.
- Invest in vocational skills for youth, provide information on emerging career paths, and collaborate regionally to create job opportunities in innovative sectors.
- Partner with the private sector to incentivise local hiring through financial support and skill enhancement programmes.

Religious institutions and religious education

- Unify and promote religious discourses rooted in Islamic values, emphasising openness, moderation, reconciliation and human rights.
- Integrate religious education into a comprehensive PVE approach, involving governments, religious leaders, educational institutions, and CSOs.
- Continuously evaluate and build upon successful religious education initiatives, focusing on capacity-building for religious educators.
- Implement religious education programmes in schools through sports or arts, emphasising age-appropriate and culturally sensitive content promoting religious tolerance and diversity.
- Collaborate with diverse religious groups to ensure inclusivity and community support.

Education and social inclusion

- Ensure accessible and high-quality education for all.
- Include experiential learning and critical thinking components.
- Create spaces in schools and cultural/youth centres for open dialogue on social, economic, religious, political, and international topics.
- Offer second-chance education programmes and vocational training to prepare youth for the job market.
- Collaborate with CSOs, associations and university students to establish clubs and extracurricular activities that improve the relationship between youth and education.

Promoting an open civic space and civic education

- Develop a comprehensive civic education policy involving governments, educational institutions, CSOs, and the media, drawing on successful international models.
- Foster partnerships with civil society to promote good governance, community engagement, and resilience, moving away from heavy security-focused approaches.
- Establish safe spaces where young people can engage with government officials to facilitate dialogue, build trust, and establish common rules of engagement.

- Recognise and reward youth volunteering and civic engagement to help marginalised youth access culture and social inclusion.
- Encourage peaceful expression of grievances through legal channels and engage in dialogue with youth and active civil society to alleviate frustrations.
- Encourage youth to take initiative and collaborate with local authorities to improve their communities, fostering pride and ownership.
- Boost young people's self-confidence and cognitive resilience through programmes that encourage autonomous and critical thinking.

Digital spaces

- Address online extremist content through data-driven methods like redirecting individuals from extremist content to education and counter-narratives, inspired by initiatives like the 'Redirect Method'.
- Prioritise digital literacy, critical thinking, and awareness to counter extremist narratives effectively and sustainably, respecting individual freedoms.

Recommendations to the EU and international organisations:

On legislation and institutional understanding

- Encourage countries to align their strategies with international standards.
- Advocate against misusing antiterrorism laws to suppress civil and political rights and limit the involvement of social movements and protests.
- Develop training resources for the media to change the narrative around "at-risk" communities, preventing stigmatisation linked to radicalisation and VE.

On institutional hierarchies and inter-sectorial cooperation

- Strengthen regional and sub-regional cooperation to exchange best practices in P/CVE issues.
- Foster collaboration between EU and MENA CSOs to coordinate and share prevention strategies.
- Enhance cross-regional dialogue among local authorities concerning urban security and P/CVE.

On political instability and funding

- Ensure that CSOs face no obstacles in receiving stable funding, with local partners guiding the agenda.
- Establish a multi-stakeholder monitoring body to prevent the misuse of funds and resources for political, religious or ethnic purposes.

On international cooperation and donors' agendas

- Coordinate donor efforts to avoid duplication and assist national governments in mapping P/CVE initiatives.
- Fund research and actions engaging local stakeholders to address specific concerns and challenges in local contexts.

On knowledge production

- Encourage empirical research and data collection in order to gain a deeper understanding of radicalisation and VE.
- Promote a more globally inclusive approach to analysing and addressing radicalisation and VE, involving non-EU researchers from neighbouring regions.

Within the scope of religion as a driver

- Establish a platform to amplify the voices of religious leaders speaking out against hate and misinterpretation of religious texts.
- Provide funding and training for civil servants to understand and manage various religious, spiritual, and philosophical traditions in different sectors.
- Support cooperation initiatives aimed at enhancing social cohesion among diverse religious communities.

Within the scope of economic deprivation as a driver

- Promote contextual research to explore the relationship between economic deprivation and VE at the macro, meso and micro levels.
- Encourage entrepreneurship among youth and women.
- Increase mobility programmes to improve employability for young people in the MENA region.
- Support state capacity for service delivery and quality.

Within the scope of territorial inequalities as a driver

- Create cooperation networks among peripheral regions in EU member states and neighbouring countries (e.g., through city/town twinning campaigns).
- Conduct empirical research to understand the links between urban policies and VE.

Within the scope of digital socialisation as a driver

- Define online illegal hate speech through stakeholder consultations.
- Enable legal action against online illegal hate speech based on the agreed definition.

Within the scope of socio-political issues as a driver

- Promote good governance mechanisms and rule of law in the EU's neighbourhood, providing sustained funding for these initiatives.
- Support research on the impact of the EU's and EU member states' foreign policies in the MENA region.
- Promote research on cross-perceptions and mutual images to assess intercultural relations between the EU and its neighbours.
- Facilitate partnerships between states and youth and women's associations to empower them politically.

Within the scope of education, culture, and leisure opportunities as a driver

- Expand European curricular internship programmes with new partner universities in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Recommendations for civil society actors:

Economic empowerment

- Partner with the private sector and other CSOs to introduce programmes for both early and late childhood on non-traditional career options such as green economy, vocational skills, gaming, AI, etc.
- Encourage entrepreneurship education and provide mentorship, grants, and resources for turning innovative ideas into successful ventures.
- Establish youth-friendly startup incubators to facilitate access to capital for young entrepreneurs and professionals, with a focus on young girls.

Political participation and civic education

- Design and implement programmes to enhance the political literacy of youth, including internships with local government officials and training in mock election campaigns.
- Promote youth participation and collective decision-making within civil society initiatives, supporting local youth-led initiatives and platforms.
- Create safe spaces for open dialogues where youth voices are heard, fostering accountability and critical policy proposal skills.

Working with educational institutions

- Engage in violence reduction efforts within educational institutions, promoting conflict resolution, negotiation skills, and tolerance.

Religious education

- Collaborate with local religious affairs officers to implement youth-focused activities using innovative and participatory methods to promote tolerance and active citizenship through religious values.
- Develop interactive digital content for religious education in cooperation with relevant ministries, national institutions, and local youth to facilitate easy online dissemination.

Digital spaces

- Collaborate with game and app developers to create online tools and platforms that promote peace-building values.
- Develop digital literacy programmes to combat extremist ideologies online, equipping youth with skills to critically evaluate content and resist extremist narratives.

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CONNEKT

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

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

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

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

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 870772