Cumulative Extremisms in the Balkans and MENA Region Synthesis Report

PAVE Consortium

PAVE Publications

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1   Introduction

This study draws together research across six different countries in the Western Balkans and the Middle East. Focusing on Kosovo, North Macedonia (NMK), Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Lebanon, and Iraq, this report aims to create a synthesis of different empirical insights from a set of field-based studies carried out within the context of the PAVE project. This analysis is based on the country reports provided by the PAVE partners (for reference see individual country reports listed in the reference list). These studies, drawing on interviews, focus group discussions, archive materials, discourse analysis, and expert consultations, document the perceptions of extremism and attitudes regarding community resilience in different contexts.

The reports have sought to highlight instances where reciprocal or cumulative extremisms have been present. Two research questions, in particular, form the backbone of these inquires:

What are the main drivers behind cumulative extremisms?

What are the main drivers of community resilience to violent extremism?

The challenge of extremism varies across the cases. We are able to see some key commonalities regarding drivers of extremism. These include neglect by state authorities, legacies of violence, lack of resources and employment, religious factors, and the role of the media. We are also able to observe commonality in terms of the drivers of community resilience. The research highlights civil society, education, the role of religious institutions, the role of the state, and diaspora as important drivers for resilience against extremism.

2   What is Extremism?

The different field reports in this study focus on the drivers of extremism and drivers of resilience against it. Before we explore these different conditions making extremism possible in the different contexts, we first need to clarify what we mean when we refer to *extremism*. Extremism is difficult to nail down conceptually. In this section, we therefore aim to outline some fundamental conceptual distinctions.

The term extremism has been defined in the PAVE project as "…any ideology that opposes a society's core values and principles" (Halilovic Pastuovic et al. 2021, p. 8). Such core values could include respect for democracy and human rights. Thus, extremism can be thought about as ideologies that take issue with and challenge fundamental principles underlying states and societies, and that aspire to achieve radical change not only in terms of specific policies, but also in the underlying organising idea and structure of societies. Thus, in liberal democratic settings, extremism is commonly understood as "…various forms of racial or religious supremacy, or ideologies that deny basic human rights or democratic principles." (Neumann 2013, 874-875) It is important to point out that what can be perceived as extreme varies from context to context. **Extremism is about the position of a fringe segment versus the moderate core.**

2.1   Different forms of extremism

Extremism varies significantly in terms of the goals pursued. One may ask whether it is reasonable to group so different phenomena under the same umbrella. In the PAVE project, however, we see this as a major benefit: to be able to detect the common threads across very different types of social conflicts, and to borrow insights regarding how community resilience can be maintained. The particular type of extremism that the different countries and regions have experienced are often driven by long historical trajectories, with civilizational, cultural, or religious roots. Extremism does not occur at random, but it is **part of a larger historical contingency**. At the same time, as we shall see in the analysis below, there are also specific conditions and policies that have led extremism to get a grip and develop in certain places and at certain moments in time. While all of the countries studied have experienced extremism, there are also significant variations both within and across cases.

The **organizational manifestation** of extremism also varies across the cases. Extremism sometimes manifests in political parties and official organizations, and other times in looser networks or through more shadowy organizational structures. How extremism varies in this regard is different, not only between the Middle East versus the Western Balkans, but also within these regions, and within these countries.

Extremism has predominately been perceived as pertaining to non-state actors. Yet, governments can provide space for these non-state actors, allowing them to function, even playing into their narratives, thereby making these actors and narratives be perceived as a normal part of the society.

2.2   Violent extremism vs violence-legitimization extremism

Let us start with the distinction between violent extremism and other forms of extremism. The use of violence for extremist causes is, fortunately, rare. For example, in Northern Macedonia, "[v]iolent incidents attributed to Islamic extremists inside NMK, have been few." (NMK, p. 10). The phenomenon which we study here is **broader than the use of violence**. Violent extremism can also be extremist ideologies which provide moral, political, or ideological backing of the use of violence. Extremism here serves as the rationale behind violence. For example, in Serbia, far-right movements were rarely active in violence directly, but "…their narratives legitimise[d] violence against minority groups…" (Serbia, p. 3). Extremism, however, can occur without necessarily being violent, it can be pursued for illiberal political aims – questioning core values of democracy and human rights, for example – without providing support or legitimacy for the use of violence for political and religious ends.

2.3   Reciprocal and cumulative extremism

Extremism does not occur in a vacuum. It may be affected by other developments, including the effect of other forms of extremism. **Extremism on one end of the spectrum may increase the risk of extremism on the other end**. Violent incidents by extremists in one community may be used as a rationale for further radicalization amongst other communities, which may then serve as an additional motivation for further escalating extremism. In this way, different forms of extremism can enter into

a vicious circle where the extremist forces at the fringes of the political space can increase their strength, following, and capacity, by the reciprocal, antagonistic actions of each other.

In Serbia, while there is no reciprocal extremism between Islamist extremism and far-right extremism, there is a reciprocal extremism in the inter-ethnic relationships: the ethno-nationalistic extremism of Serbs and Bosniaks are interacting through a **reciprocal dynamic** – where extremist voices in the two communities enforce the perception, fear, and world-view of the other side. Likewise, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, situations where "…one form of extremism feeds and encourages the emergence of another cannot be ignored…" (BiH, p. 2). In fact, "…extremism is usually fed and maintained by other extremism…" (BiH, p. 2). The reciprocal dynamics of extremism have also been identified through the fieldwork in Kosovo, where it is observed that "…*one form of extremism may boost the other*." (Kosovo, italics in original, focus group, p. 8) Thus, actions by an extremist movement can lead to a greater degree of extremism on the other end of the spectrum, **decreasing the space for the moderate middle**. "Kosovo, without a doubt, is an important case in point of how religiously inspired and ethno-political extremisms feed off and magnify each other…" (Kosovo, p. 7). In Kosovo, "…religious extremism adds to ethno-political extremism in order to strengthen the demarcation along ethnic lines between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo (i.e., Albanians are Albanians and Muslims, Serbs are Serbs and Orthodox)." However, it should be noted, not all cases included here experience the dynamics of cumulative extremism. For example, in North Macedonia: "Religious extremism among ethnic Albanians hasn't generated any opposite dynamics among Orthodox ethnic Macedonians; *in that sense it is hard to substantiate any dynamics of cumulative religious extremism in NMK.*" (NMK, italics in original, p. 20). The North Macedonian case study refers to "**overlapping extremisms**" which "…have been present in both communities." Here the political and religious dimensions have been seen to be connected (NMK, p. 13).

Cumulative extremism could be visible in the Iraqi context. The US-led military invasion of Iraq, its following program of de-Baathification, and the overall mismanagement of the post-invasion occupation triggered both the development of further radicalization and formation of Shia militias, as well as Sunni-Jihadist groups. Several of the Sunni communities in post-Saddam Iraq felt marginalized and developed grievances not only against the American invaders, but also against the Shia-dominated governments. This paved the way for jihadist groups to establish themselves more firmly in Iraq. The establishment of these jihadist groups in Iraq, mobilizing on both a theological (Salafi-jihadist) and sectarian identity (drawing on Sunni grievances against Shias) basis, illustrates cumulative extremism. As pointed out in the case report, "[a]s opposed to the previous experience in Afghanistan, the Iraqi theatre **brought an element of sectarianism to jihad**." (Iraq, p. 5). Thus, sectarianism between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq can been seen as both a cause and a consequence of jihadist extremism.

The **magnitude and actuality of extremism also vary across the cases**. Although all included countries have had problems with extremism, the severity and acuteness of extremism differed. In Iraq, the Islamic State even launched attacks during the time-period of study. In contrast, North Macedonia managed to escape a full-fledged civil war through the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001). Still, there are issues of concern relating to inter-ethnic trust between the Albanian and the Macedonian communities. There has been little religious extremism amongst ethnic Macedonians, but still there are organizations that seek to frame their political programs partly in religiously inspired terminology and imaginary. In North Macedonia, regarding extremism affecting ethnic Macedonians, "…the most

obvious manifestation and carrier have been various fringe, far-right political parties that appeared after the 2001 conflict." (NMK, p. 11) Islamist extremism was concentrated to the Muslim Albanian minority, and there have been few violent incidents by Islamist extremists in North Macedonia. Violence of Islamist extremism has predominately been acted out beyond North Macedonia, through the supply of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria. In fact, such foreign fighters "…remain the most important manifestation of Islamic radicalization and violent extremism in NMK." (NMK, p. 10).

In Lebanon, the situation created by the increasing hegemony of the Shiite militia-cum-political party Hezbollah has been a key driver for the development of identity-based tensions and extremism along sectarian lines in the country. Sectarian extremism in Lebanon has manifested itself in violent episodes and incidents (Lebanon, p. 7).

3   Drivers of Extremism

In this part, we will discuss the perceived and key commonly identified factors behind extremism. As discussed above, while all cases have been analyzed in terms of drivers to extremism, there is variation regarding how the extremism has manifested itself in the particular cases. Hence, while we here look for commonalities, as well as differences, we should also bear in mind that the different reports, to some extent, have focused on different forms of extremism spanning, for example, far-right extremism, ethno-political extremism, Islamist extremism, or other forms of religious extremism.

3.1   Lack of resources and employment

From all the field works, **economic factors** were invariably identified as underlying drivers of extremism. Economic grievances, lack of resources for key segments of a population, or unequal distribution of economic resources are perceived, across the different contexts, as explanatory factors behind the emergence and development of various forms of extremism. The way in which these economic factors play out in order to create fertile ground for the growth of extremism is not identical across the different cases, however.

In Kosovo, the economic deprivation of the Serbian and Albanian communities provides the backbone for extremism. Extremist ideologies were seen as more perceptible in situations where communities are unsatisfied with the status quo and feel that they are hindered to pursue their full potential. Extremist ideologies hold out **the prospect for a radically different type of society**, which can be appealing when economic situations are dire. In particular, the **lack of employment opportunities** was seen as an important driver of extremism (Kosovo, pp. 10,12). This pertains especially to the youth of the Serbian and Albanian communities, where lack of job experiences and the possibility to earn own wages, create vulnerabilities among young people to become radicalized.

> "Well, in general, I think that in Kosovo, the material situation is quite important in terms of susceptibility to radicalization. […] In general, the poorer the communities, not only the more difficult the material situation, the more susceptible they are, especially in this case, I mean

religious fanaticism, any but also religious and national extremism, so it would be one of the main factors. (Public-Official, 2021)" (Kosovo, p. 10)

Economic factors are also identified as a key driver behind extremism in North Macedonia: "Economic factors like poverty and unemployment, particularly youth unemployment that is a major issue… […] …have been mentioned by almost every interviewee as they socially marginalize whole sections of the population, making people vulnerable to radical/extremist ideas." (NMK, p. 25) In North Macedonia, "*…extremism is a function of malgovernance as manifested through state capture, corruption and lack of justice.*" (NMK, italics in original, p. 22). Given the pervasiveness of **party corruption, nepotism, and inadequate governance**, one interviewee in Skopje pointedly remarks: "*…the real question is… why there is not more extremism in the Balkans*?" (NMK, italics in original, interview, p. 23)

Along similar lines, **economic underdevelopment** and unemployment (especially for youth) in the **Muslim-dominated Sandžak region** in Serbia is perceived as a factor behind the growing foothold of external radical Islamist actors (Serbia, pp. 8-9). Likewise, in North Macedonia, the economically deprived community of Kumanovo saw more tendencies of extremism compared to the community of Tetovo, which has a strong local economy and culture of entrepreneurship (NMK, p. 28).

As pointed out in case of Iraq, "[i]t is the *lack* **of strong socio-economic policies** that fosters corruption and nepotism while failing to meet the demands of citizens and tackle poverty." (pp. 8-9, Iraq), laying the ground for violent extremism. In the case of Lebanon, it is noted that influential factors include "…unemployment, corruption, weakness of religious education, social marginalization and exclusion, weakness of the state and its inability to provide either basic services or an inclusive sense of citizenship. All of these factors have diverted people's belonging and allegiance from the national state to narrow identity politics based on religion/sect..." (Lebanon, p. 3).

Taken together, one of the key factors behind violent extremism, which has been found in many of the field studies, is the lack of economic development. It is in situations where the economic development is underperforming that extremist ideologies can establish themselves – people are motivated to find **alternatives to the current order**. This is not to say that economic factors are sufficient as an explanation, but they are definitely part of the story of how violent extremism develops and flourish in societies.

3.2   Legacies of violence

Several of the reports emphasize their country's violent histories as factors and highlight how these legacies have created opportunities for the growth of violent extremism. Dealing with the contentious trajectories of societies with a **contemporary history of warfare and ethnic strife** is observed as a key factor underlying extremism. Absent processes of setting the historical track record right as well as efforts to reconcile fundamentally different perspectives on what the wars were about, who was responsible for any atrocities committed, who were the main victims, and who was to blame, and so on, the societies remain **stuck in rigid and polarized narratives** that inhibit inter-ethnic collaboration and interaction. Extremist perspectives can fester on these open wounds of wars.

For example, the Serbian and Bosniak communities in Serbia have radically different narratives of the civil war in the 1990s and both communities cultivate perceptions centered around their own group's

sense of being the main victims of that war. This sense of **victimization** provides an underlying rationale behind extremist perspectives, and serves as a main obstacle for inter-ethnic relationships. The memories of the war linger on and partly contaminate the possibilities for communication and collaboration across ethnic lines. Religious education is divided and interreligious education is rare. Parties, organizations, and movements organized along ethnic lines keep the sense of victimhood alive in their communities.

In Serbia, Islamist and far-right extremism both have their roots in the 1990s war, through victimization, collective grievances, and the **consequences of the introduction of foreign (jihadist) fighters and the creation of paramilitary (ethnonationalist) groups**. The contemporary history is always present. For example, the atrocities in Srebrenica of July 1995 – when Serbian forces targeted Bosniak civilians – remains a point of deep controversy. As found in the field work, the "…[c]ategorisation of Srebrenica (July 1995) as genocide and its denial produces a strong impetus for radical/extreme attitudes." (Serbia, p. 6)

The legacies of the war, the sense of victimhood, and the **unprocessed memories** regarding the war and its atrocities, deeply affect the society in Kosovo. As one of the interviewees expressed: "The bad thing in Kosovo is that we have not dealt with the war trauma." (Kosovo, civil society activist, p. 9) **Competing and incompatible narratives** about the war in Kosovo is seen as an underlying factor behind extremism. By denying war-crimes or holding simplistic and self-serving narratives of their own side as the only victims and the other side as the perpetrators, the situation is locked into conditions not conducive for mutual understanding and inter-ethnic collaboration. As stated in the Kosovo report: "…denial of the war crimes exacerbates among the Albanian community resentment and hate against the Serbian community in the country." (Kosovo, p. 9)

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legacy of war is one of the most fundamental issues driving the processes of radicalization and extremism. "The causes of extremism in BiH can be traced back to the war period, as well as to subsequent incorrect and incomplete addressing of the legacy of war… […] …feeding the existing and contributing to new forms of extremism." (BiH, p. 2) The political landscape formed by the war of the 1990s incentivized political actors to maintain narratives of victimhood, ethnic polarization, and divides. Actors, such as political parties and organizations, including football fan clubs, mobilizing along ethnically defined lines, have been able to grow in a **constitutional framework that forms the basis for ethnic divisions**.

In North Macedonia, the ethnic fragmentation and division along inter-ethnic lines is one of the legacies of the war. The country is described in the field work as one of a "**frozen conflict**", and a "divided society" (NMK, p. 21). Islamist extremism in the case of Kumanovo could spread because of the "trauma of the 2001 conflict" (NMK, p. 9). The legacy of the war is still very present. Political parties continue to use "…nationalist narratives/rhetoric that 'target' other ethnic communi[ties]…" (NMK, p. 25). The lack of national cohesion and unity between the ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in North Macedonia was identified as a challenge and a factor behind extremism. This **pattern is re-produced in the educational system**, which separates two different ethnic communities. The **language barrier** – where people from the two communities do not know each other's language and need to use English as a bridge in order to communicate – is further evidence of this segregation on the basis of ethnicity (NMK, p. 39).

The legacy of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) has also affected the development of extremism in the country. The sectarian tensions have remained unresolved and lie underneath the development of extremism and sectarianism (Lebanon, p. 3).

The repercussions of the US-led invasion of Iraq led to a state collapse and a power vacuum, which created the opportunity structure for violent extremist groups. Radical groups were able to exploit the situation and fill the void when the state lost its space. As found in the field work:

> *"…it is the absence of the State that is in part responsible for the rise of cumulative extremism. It is the <u>lack</u> of a common identity under Iraqi citizenship that fosters groupness boundaries and social mistrust. It is the <u>lack</u> of functioning institutions that prevent the reform of school curricula and inter-dialogue. […] It is the <u>lack</u> of a powerful army that gives way to external inference sponsoring violence and sectarian policies."* (Iraq, emphasis originally in italics, here underscored, pp. 8-9)

The legacies of war also take on **regional dimensions**. For example, extremism in Kosovo cannot be understood without taking the larger regional picture into account. The strained Kosovo-Serbia interstate relationships serve as the backbone of the societal developments in Kosovo, in fact, "…**absence of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia** is a major source of instability and tension in the Western Balkans" (Kosovo, p. 5). This was observed also in the case of Serbia, where the issue of Kosovo and the issue of Republic of Srpska have been key focal points for mobilization (Serbia, p. 6).

The regional context and the shifting power dynamics at the regional level have also had repercussions for Shia-Sunni relations in Lebanon. Thus, in addition to an overall fragile situation coupled with socio-political dynamics, "…Lebanese politics have (sic) become a proxy battleground…" for regional powers (Lebanon, p. 3). Hence, expressions of extremism and the overall risk of sectarian violence needs to be understood against the backdrop of this regional context. Regional and global events – the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the growing Iranian influence in the region, the shift in balance of power to the disadvantage of Sunni communities, **increasing tension between Iran and the Gulf-countries** (with Lebanon to some extent squeezed in the middle of this regional power struggle), the military invasion and the subsequent mismanagement of Iraq, as well as the Sunni-based popular civil uprisings of 2011 ("Arab Spring"), and the Gulf crisis with the boycott against Qatar – all contributed to the turbulent regional order from which Lebanon suffered negative repercussions. Indeed, the regional developments had impact on the domestic situation in the country:

> *"Lebanon, whose sectarian composition expresses its intersections and regional loyalties, was among the most vulnerable countries in the region when it came to all these changes in drivers, alliances and emerging conflicts in the region."* (Lebanon, p. 8)

Similarly, the regional dynamics also affected the Iraqi situation. In Iraq, the governments of, or groups in, the neighboring countries of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria used Iraq as a proxy battle-field in order to advance their own interest, fueling the sectarian tensions within the country by arming and mobilizing co-religionists. As pointedly noted, "…regional neighbours and strategic partners have deeply entrenched interests in Iraq." (Iraq, p. 7)

Thus, the past is present in most of the countries we studied here. Therefore, the development of violent extremism cannot be understood in each case without situating it into the local historical

context, characterized by war and interethnic or sectarian violence. The fact that this recent past has not been properly dealt with, that no joint recognition of what happened, let alone mutual reconciliation, have been achieved, creates an underlying tension that extremist groups and actors are not late to exploit.

3.3 Religious factors

Religious factors are highlighted as important drivers of violent extremism across many of the cases studied. **Religious actors** – organizations, clergy, and leaders – **play a role in upholding group-identities** that oftentimes are defined in hostility to an opposite 'Other'. Religion is often not seen as an inherent problem, but rather it is the way in which **religious resources are instrumentalized for political purposes** which is perceived to be the driving force behind violent extremism. Political actors use and exploit religious sentiments, frameworks, and images in order to mobilize support for their political programs.

For example, in Serbia, this is shown by how the Serbian Orthodox Church has not explicitly and credibly distanced itself from radical voices within the Serbian community, who have used religious symbols, language and imagery for political purposes. It is also shown in how external religious actors have been exploiting internal divisions. For example, the **Islamic community in Serbia has been divided organizationally** (between a Belgrade-centric and a Sarajevo-centric), and external Islamist actors have exploited this division in order to gain access and traction in the Sandžak region. At the same time, inter-religious collaboration, demonstrated in the malfunctioning Interfaith Council in Serbia, has not been developed (Serbia, p. 7). **Inter-faith dialogue is not prioritized** among religious communities.

Religions cut across state borders. **Religious identities are fundamentally transnational identities** that create ties between co-religionists of different faith traditions. These can, and have been, exploited to serve the purposes of those propagating religious extremism. For example, religious extremism, as seen from both the perspectives of Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, originate externally from Kosovo and have been "…externally imported to Kosovo" (Kosovo, p. 8), including from the Middle East. Religious civil society organizations, some of them funded by external actors, have been able to work underneath the radar in Kosovo and contributed to a radicalization of segments of the population (Kosovo, p. 8).

Religion is more at risk of being used by others when followers have superficial understandings of the central tenets of their own religious tradition and lack deeper religious experiences and knowledge. The term "**religious illiteracy**" (Appleby 2000) has been used in previous research to describe situations where parties do not have a sufficient level of understanding about religious issues. In some of the field work, this has been found to be a problem. This especially applies to young people, who may not have knowledge about the theological or doctrinal issues, as well as the religious practices and traditions, which can make communities vulnerable to being exploited by external religious actors. An individual's religious motivation may not necessarily correspond with depth of religious knowledge. In fact, the ability to interpret and understand the nuances and perspectives of one's own religious tradition may require considerable knowledge and experience, something they may be lacking. For

example, the recruitment of foreign fighters from Kosovo who travelled to Syria was reportedly made possible by a lack of religious knowledge among those being recruited (Kosovo, p. 10).

Religious actors have a major influence in Lebanon. As pointed out by the field report, "Lebanon's main weakness to extremism lies within its very constitution that gives rights to religious institutions to practice without any oversight." (Lebanon, p 3). This includes exemptions from tax obligations for religious institutions, the "weakness of religious education" (Lebanon, pp. 3-4), and the way "…religious leaders behave as supra-state actors and defend their positions in the sectarian system." (Lebanon, p. 4) The **constitutional framework** that provides privileges for religious institutions has created a fragmented country, lacking national cohesion. Religious actors have pursued their own group's self-interest, rather than to contribute to the building of a functioning Lebanese society, and thereby laid the basis for growing sectarianism and openness for extremism.

3.4 The role of the state

The state may be a factor behind extremism not only by neglect and underperformance, as already discussed, but also by more **actively (even if indirectly) supporting the narratives and organizational basis for extremist movements**. For example, in Serbia, far-right nationalism has gained from the "benevolence" of the Serbian state (Serbia, p. 1). Criminal networks overlap with far-right organizations, and sometimes political organizations or football supporter clubs, provide a façade for smugglers and other forms of criminal activities. It may therefore be in the political and economic interest of the governments to maintain these organizations. According to the report, far-right nationalism has been normalized in Serbia, by the actions of the state (Serbia, pp. 7-8). The **government applies a one-sided approach to different forms of extremism**: the P/CVE strategy in Serbia does not reflect the duality of extremism the country experiences, but rather focuses solely on preventing and countering *Islamist* violent extremism. Indeed, the government strategy "…completely leaves out the issue of far-right extremism." (Serbia, p. 6) A further example of this can be seen in how different types of foreign fighters have been treated. Muslim jihadist volunteers supported Bosniaks during the civil war, whilst Serbia received various types of Russian support. Muslim Bosniaks who have traveled to Syria to fight for the Islamic State, as well as Serbians who have travelled to Ukraine to fight for pro-Russian forces, have therefore done so with a sense of a moral obligation of "repayment of debt". However, the returnees have been treated very differently. The pro-Russian Serbians in Ukraine have received far less attention (and also less judicial implications), compared to those who fought against Assad in Syria (Serbia, pp. 5, 7).

Likewise, in North Macedonia it was observed that the **mainstream political parties acted in a manner that helped to create conditions for extremism**. There was "…actual encouragement and cooperation with extremist groups and figures…" (NMK, p. 24), and a presence of "[p]olitical parties that flirt with this more political Islam…" (NMK, interview, p. 24). Moreover, the **absence of the state** provided opportunities for external actors to disseminate violent extremism. The "state weakness" (NMK, p. 9) is identified as a factor behind the spread of Islamist extremism, where external actors were able to capitalize on periods of state instability and step into the vacuum when the state was largely absent: "…penetration of these teachings that are coming from the Gulf countries that somehow saw a fertile ground here because of the chaos…" (NMK, interview, p. 10).

The sectarian politics of Iraqi governments was a driver behind violent extremism in the form of the Islamic State (IS). IS was tolerated and even welcomed by some Sunni segments of the population, because of their frustration with the Shia-dominated government in Bagdad and its sectarian politics. By the **politization of sectarian identities**, the Sunni minority of Iraq was alienated. Inter-ethnic and inter-sectarian tensions affected the national cohesion: "...the country has been unable to foster a common Iraqi identity that would bridge identity individualities." (Iraq, p. 7)

In Lebanon, the government's security apparatus can be seen as one of the drivers behind extremism in the country. Far from being applied in a balanced and neutral way, the **politization of the security services** and the **unequal application of the law** led to further sectarian tensions:

> *"...the imbalance in the application of the law fairly among all societal components, made law enforcement agencies one of the tools of incitement to violence between Sunnis and Shiites..."* (Lebanon, p. 10)

3.5 Media

Across several of the cases, the role of media is seen as an important factor in driving extremism. In North Macedonia, "[s]ocial media and the abuse of the internet, through misinformation and fake news..." are identified as an "...important driver of radicalization and extremism..." Hence, **the internet** space can be used by actors to spread **false information** and **contribute to misperceptions** (NMK, p. 26). In Serbia, the ties between the ruling party and the far-right organizations have meant that the state has allowed these radical organizations space in the media landscape, which in turn has led to the "...further **'normalization' of their narratives in the public discourse** and the establishment of new organizations of similar ideological affiliation..." (Serbia, p.8). To counter such radicalization, the Serbia report suggests providing for **educational reforms** that would help **enhance media literacy and critical thinking** among the youth (Serbia, p. 14) In Kosovo, media has been perceived of as an **elitist space**, which has promoted "...liberal voices to the detriment of what can be termed conservative voices, and this sometimes seems to incite radicalization." (Kosovo, p. 10) Hence, while it is seen as a driver of extremism, it is also a factor that can make communities more resilient to extremisms. As the Kosovo study reports:

> *"Religious leaders in the community emphasize the need to work closely together with elementary and secondary school to organize relevant debates about critical thinking, online media, and disinformation."* (Kosovo, p. 11)

Similarly, the Bosnia and Herzegovina study points to the need for public condemnations of hostile narratives, but at the same time recognizes that the "...religious communities do not have enough media presence to communicate reconciliation messages more clearly." (BiH, p. 7) In sum, media, including social media and fake news, is seen as an arena that can serve as a driver of extremism, but if used well could serve to make communities more resilient to the same. This aspect is also discussed as part of education below.

4   Drivers of Community Resilience

We now turn to discuss the abilities of communities to resist attempts to radicalize them. This section focuses on the drivers of community resilience against violent extremism. An important aspect of the PAVE project is to study, not only violent extremism and the factors that drive it to grow, but also the counter-forces that seek to decrease the scope for violent extremism. It is, from the PAVE-project's perspective, important not to limit this to the individual level, but rather focus on the larger community level. Resilience in this context thus refers to the ability of a community to absorb the shocks of any negative development that may lead to the emergence or deepening of violent extremism, but also the ability of communities to resist and bounce back after destructive events and developments.

One way of exploring resilience would be to examine the inverse of the factors increasing the risk of extremism identified above. Yet, while such discussions also feature in the field reports, we here predominately focus on another way of analyzing the concept of community resilience. It is rather to identify which factors lead to countering-effects, balancing against the factors that may increase the risk propensity of a community in terms of violent extremism.

4.1   Civil society

Several of the country studies refer to the role played by civil society actors in enhancing resilience against extremism and violent extremism. As discussed above, in some cases different non-governmental organizations have under some conditions contributed to extremism. However, across the different field studies, **civil society actors are found to play important roles in contributing to the resilience of communities against extremism**. For example, in North Macedonia, civil society was "…unanimously recognized as having played a role in CVE efforts, particularly in the context of promoting good inter-ethnic relations and social inclusion…" (NMK, p. 31). Similarly, in Kosovo civil society is perceived to have "…an important role in de-radicalization and reintegration efforts." (Kosovo, p. 5) In particular, NGOs and other grassroots organizations have been able to facilitate "…contact and dialogue between community groups…" and enhance "…social cohesion by challenging discourses that are based on dehumanising the other." The organized activities have frequently involved youth actors, and sometimes involved women and girls (Kosovo, pp. 13-14).

In Serbia, civil society has taken on the role of "**substitute service providers**" and CSOs have been working both to empower youth and to build trust between youth and police. **Women have also played a central role** in this context. The civil society sphere has "…recognised the importance of women as agents of prevention since they are the majority of P/CVE activists." (Serbia, p. 10) There are also other accounts that qualify or further nuance the role of civil society in community resilience. In the Lebanese context, "civil initiatives" have brought together actors from different sides in an effort to reduce tensions. However, these seem to be **more effective at the local level than at the regional or national level** (Lebanon, p. 14). Moreover, while civil society – domestic as well as international actors – has been active in Bosnia and Herzegovina in various ways and contributed to community resilience, it is also emphasized that it "…remains unclear what its real reach is, given the lack of a systematic approach to strengthening resilience that would overcome vulnerability factors." (p. 9) In fact, the Bosnia and Herzegovina country report speaks of an "untapped potential" in this regard,

pointing to **the need for a more systematic approach** towards education as well as political and religious institutions (BiH, p. 9).

Related, civil society, as well as other actors including families or various networks can help to build social ties. **Social bonding and bridging** have been identified as important for community resilience in some of the countries studied. In Kosovo, such connections both within and across communities have been found to be of significance for resilience to extremism (Kosovo, p.13). Likewise, the fieldwork in Serbia shows that processes of social bonding and bridging are important for resilience against Islamist extremism. In Serbia this has been especially relevant in the Sandžak area where the different communities – Bosniak as well as Serbian communities – have a long experience from living side by side and share a commitment against extremism (Serbia, p. 12).

Civil society organizations can thus be seen as critical in countering violent extremism. An important role for civil society organizations to assist in various types of **bottom-up peacebuilding approaches**, including to facilitate dialogue, and initiate processes of symbolic reconciliation or practical co-habitation. CSOs were identified as important actors that serve to **promote cooperation** through various projects and provide spaces for interaction across inter-ethnic divides. This occurs, for example, through **empowering relatively marginalized segments of society** (including girls and women), raising community awareness, organizing debates, and initiating skill training programs.

4.2 Educational sector

Several country reports discuss education as one area that could feature as important in building community resilience against extremism, but it is also brought out as a factor where there is significant room for improvement (see also the discussion above on drivers of extremism). In North Macedonia, education was reported as "…**indispensable in promoting critical thinking, respect and awareness of cultural differences, and fighting stereotypes**…" (NMK, p. 29). Local community councils, for example, working with the prevention of violent extremism, worked actively to educate people as a way to build a larger degree of resilience against extremism. In other country reports that highlighted education, the emphasis was rather on the *potential role* that education could play. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the **education is reported to be ethnically fragmented**, "…which has resulted in the permeation of curricula with different ethno-political narratives." (BiH, p. 8). In Kosovo, education is seen as one of the factors can help strengthen community resilience. According to an interviewee: "Education plays an important role in building a society that is resilient to various forms of violent extremism…" (Kosovo, interview, p. 13). It is further noted:

> "**Media education** as well as education by thinking critically are among the challenges that our education system is facing and which, if strengthened, would prevent the spread of radical religious elements..." (Kosovo, interview, p.13).

Thus, the lack of critical thinking, inadequate media education, and lack of religious knowledge, make communities, and particular the young in the communities, vulnerable to extremism. It is pointed out: "It becomes clear that media, education, and information are the main reoccurring topics that pose a potential danger to community resilience." (Kosovo, p. 15)

In Serbia, education is identified as a vulnerability, but the different religious communities have also cooperated on religious education. For example, the religious communities held "…a common position toward the Ministry of Education with the request to formally equalize the status of religious education…" (Serbia, pp. 10-11). In Lebanon, religious education is mentioned as a potential weakness (Lebanon, p. 3), rather than being discussed as important for community resilience. Overall, education is seen as important for resilience, but several of the country reports see significant room for improvement in this area.

4.3   Religious institutions

Religious actors are in unique positions to increase the resilience of local communities and build deeper connections within and between communities. Actors of faith can serve to appeal to a wider sense of moral conscious and call individuals and groups to act with restraint. Therefore, religious actors have particularly important resources to decrease the vulnerability of communities to attempts by extremist movements to radicalize them. By its wide and deep institutions, often **present at the local level and throughout societies**, as well as with **commitments to core values of peace, dignity and respect** (as present in all faith traditions), the religious actors can reach out to the wider population and act as a way to counter attempts to radicalization.

In North Macedonia, the **inter-faith dialogue** between Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders, clergy, and communities, in order to create better understanding, and acceptance of each other (NMK, p. 30) is an interesting example of this. Indeed, "[b]oth religious communities – the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) and the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) – have been engaged in activities promoting interfaith tolerance and co-existence…" (NMK, p. 30).

In Serbia, religious leaders increased the resilience by pushing back against attempts of radicalization, condemning openly intolerance and acts of violence (Serbia, p. 11). Multi-ethnic societies have not only experienced episodes of violence, but also (longer) periods of peaceful interaction, living side-by-side with a working **tolerance towards each other**. In Serbia, "…religious communities traditionally express tolerance and respect toward each other." (Serbia, p. 10) Even absent formal institutions for collaboration across religious lines, religious communities have expressed messages of tolerance and co-existence, and sometimes found common cause in making demands against the state (Serbia, p. 10).

In Lebanon, the religious institutions have to some extent served as a constraining factor when inter-religious ties have been strained. Thus, it is observed that:

> *"For all sects, the formal religious institution in Lebanon plays the role of tutelage of the political system and public order. This formal institution is committed to preventing a burst among the sectarian components. Therefore, it adopts a moderate discourse that constitutes a driver for societal resilience and the ability to absorb the violent shocks that the Lebanese society is exposed to."* (Lebanon, p. 13)

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, respondents referred to religious institutions as actors that potentially could be of importance in strengthening community resilience. At the same time, however, there is potential for religious institutions to take on a much more extensive role in this regard. Indeed,

according to the interviewees, religious actors "…could make an even greater contribution to resilience in various ways, and significantly increase the resilience potential of our society." (BiH, p. 9)

4.4   The role of the state

The state and its various government structures, at the national and local level, have across the cases made efforts to work for community resilience to varying degrees. These efforts have not necessarily been successful. In Iraq, prior to 2003, when there were instances of preachers being involved in sectarian discourse, "…it is believed that only the state could have acted against the preacher; the state being the only actor of resilience at that time." (Iraq, p. 4) At the same time, the Iraq case suggests, as discussed prior, that it is the "…absence of the State that is in part responsible for the rise of cumulative extremism." (Iraq, p. 8). In Iraq, the state did not fulfil its potential for resilience against violent extremism. Even if local communities sometimes tried to reject and question sectarian discourses, they were unable to do so, partly because of the **lack of political leadership**, to contain the spread of violent extremism.

Moreover, when governments support (directly or indirectly) extremist movements, those **governments also have a potential leverage which they could use to prevent violence**. Governments can utilize their ties with extremist movements and contain their worst excesses. In Serbia, with regards to far-right movements, "…[t]he government can influence their course of action and prevent them from committing violent acts." (Serbia, p. 11). In addition, in the Bosnia and Herzegovina case, the respondents "…recognized the role and importance that political/state institutions could have in strengthening community resilience." Yet, political actors have also engaged in discourse that can "undermine resilience". Hence, their ability to strengthen resilience has been limited (BiH, p. 9). It has been observed in the case of North Macedonia that the actions and rhetoric of political institutions can serve to slow the development of violent extremism. For example, when some parties sought to incite ethnic hostility "…ethnic Albanian political parties, avoided responding to the provocations…", which thereby served to diffuse the tensions (NMK, p. 21).

In terms of governance, North Macedonia has moved in the direction of consociationalism since the signing of the Ohrid framework agreement. **Inclusive party politics and power sharing among ethnic communities, at the national and local level, serve to strengthen principles of democracy** (NMK, p. 27) In North Macedonia, the local authorities have also been involved in efforts that seek to mitigate violent extremism, for example through the establishment of **local prevention councils** (NMK, pp.19, 29).

4.5   The diaspora community

Another factor that was brought up as important for community resilience was the role of diaspora groups. In Serbia, the Bosnian diaspora has reportedly "…contributed to building the community resilience to Islamist extremism…". Diaspora groups from the Sandžak community in Serbia have served as a bridge between Muslim and European communities, by showing **powerful role-models** of being successful in a liberal-democratic setting, a counter-argument to radical, conservative Islamist

narratives of alienation and discord between the Muslim and the European civilizations and state-models (Serbia, p. 12).

5 A Gender Perspective on Extremism and Resilience

Neither extremism nor resilience play out similarly for men and women. It is essential, to understand the full picture, to pay particular attention to the gender dimension when analyzing factors behind both extremism and resilience. While analyzing the factors from a gendered perspective in a comprehensive manner goes beyond the scope of this analysis, it is still important to identify some of the key aspects that come with a gendered analysis.

Previous research demonstrates a **close connection between gender inequality and political violence in different forms** (e.g. Melander 2005, Caprioli 2005). Patriarchal values such as an honor ideology has been shown to be important for explaining why men more frequently become engaged in political violence (Bjarnegård, Brounéus, and Melander 2017).

Violent extremism within the countries studied has predominately been carried out by men. Men dominate within the political, ethnic, sectarian, and religious organizations and networks that carry the ideological project of extremism. While women are as affected by the negative developments associated with violent extremism as men, the **ideological entrepreneurs of violent extremism are commonly men**.

Patriarchal values have been **dominant in the various forms of extremism**. In fact, it is one of the common denominators regardless of whether we discuss ethno-nationalism, far-right extremism, or Islamist extremism – they all build on core assumptions of patriarchy and of the importance to maintain male dominance over women.

How drivers of extremism affect the likelihood of extremism can also be affected by gender-dimensions. For example, as discussed, economic factors are drivers of violent extremism. This also comes with a particular gendered perspective. For example, **dependence and unequal access to resources and opportunities have made women more vulnerable**, and often dependent on their spouses. Some women have therefore been forced to move to conflict zones, for example Syria, when their men have been recruited as foreign fighters. Moreover, **women's disempowerment can also be seen in the sphere of the religious sector**. While often forming the majority of active followers, women rarely play central roles in leadership within religious organizations. As pointed out in the case of Lebanon, it is "…crucial to highlight that the electoral system of religious representation is commonly restricted to the male-influenced elite" (Lebanon, p. 4), illustrating how gender inequalities play out in the institutional frameworks of the country.

More generally, **women often play an important role as part of civil society** (Nilsson and Svensson 2020). This is also noted across these field studies. As illustrated, it is often women in the civil society organizations that are working to strengthen community resilience. For example, in Serbia, women make up the majority of those involved as members of organizations involved in prevention efforts, and in fact, "[f]emale civil activists lead not just Belgrade-based but also Sandžak-based organizations." (Serbia, p. 10)

Several of the reports point out, as is done in the case of Northern Macedonia the "…key role women can play in community resilience" (NMK, p. 22). Similarly in Kosovo, it has been noted that "[w]omen in general, and mothers in particular, are agents of change in the community. They notice the early elements of radicalization and violent extremism in children." (Kosovo, p. 13).

Yet, **women do also participate as active agents in violent extremism**, although commonly in different ways than men. The patriarchal nature of the society in Kosovo was identified as an enabling condition for women's participation in extremist organizations and movements (Kosovo, p. 12).

It is thus clear that disempowerment of women, structural patterns of patriarchy, and explicit or implicit assumptions about male dominance is part of the explanations for extremism. Violent extremism cannot be understood without including a gendered analysis. As the analysis above suggests, gender equality is of importance for decreasing the risk of extremism, as well as increasing society's resilience against it.

6 Conclusions and Paths forward

Drawing this report to an end, we want to point out a few observations that stems from the field work in the six countries in the Middle East and Western Balkans examined here.

There have been different manifestations of cumulative and reciprocal extremisms in the studied cases. In terms of reciprocal extremism, we can see that **ethno-nationalist, identity-based extremist movements in fragmented societies can trigger each other towards further radicalization**. Actions by individuals, leaders, and organizations on one end of the spectrum can increase the support for extremist movements on the other. Reciprocal dynamics between different types of extremism is less visible within the studies. Whereas reciprocal extremism in Western Europe has been exemplified through Islamist versus far-right extremism, this dynamic has not been the dominant pattern in the cases explored here.

In terms of cumulative extremism, we can see that extremist movements can tap into different social cleavages. The fact that the field work across different empirical cases found strong support for economic factors as drivers of extremism, may be evidence of how extremists build (even if not explicitly) on **class-based inequalities as a source of mobilization**. Furthermore, the Salafi-jihadist movements in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon have both mobilized on a **religious-theological** basis, and a **sectarian** basis, where these two overlap and are **difficult to disentangle**. The extremist movements also mobilize on a gendered basis, with the extremist ideologies explored here (ethno-nationalist, sectarian, far-right) invariably building on **patriarchal ideas and structures**. Thus, there could be said to be a gendered form of cumulative extremism.

Despite the quite different manifestations and types of violent extremism in the various countries, it is noteworthy to see the convergence of identified drivers across the different empirical field studies. Thus, the main explanations for violent extremism – including a lack of resources, unresolved legacies of violence and war, government mismanagement, and the policies of religious institutions – are remarkably similar across the cases. Thus, **even if extremism shows itself through very different**

forms, the driving factors behind extremism are similar. Likewise, the factors behind community resilience also share many similarities across cases.

We have seen that there are different types of actors who matter for the communities' ability to be resilient against violent extremism. **Civil society, religious actors, governments, the educational sector, and the international diaspora** seem to be the key actors that can determine whether communities are able to withstand attempts to radicalize individuals within them.

Placing the communities (at the meso level) at the center of attention, we think, is a valuable way to approach violent extremism, moving away from a dichotomy in previous research between structural macro-level factors and micro-level factors focusing on individuals. The field research this synthesis report draws on illustrates that exploring violent extremism through the prism of communities is a fruitful approach. The PAVE project can thereby, hopefully, pave the way for future research along these lines.

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