

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience

Policy Brief for Lebanon



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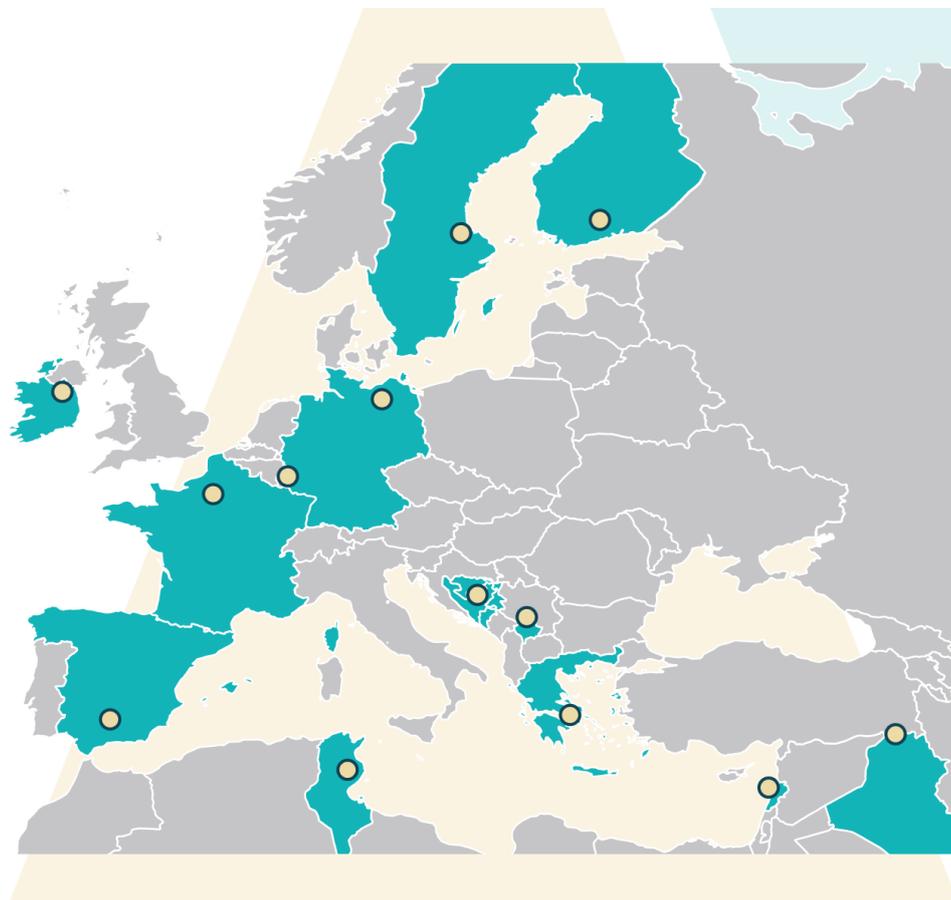


Introduction to the PAVE project

The PAVE research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on three thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; and the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation.





Introduction to PAVE research in Lebanon

Three PAVE research teams examined drivers of vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in various communities in Lebanon, applying a holistic and complementary approach with the aim of enhancing the evidence base on violent extremism and developing effective preventive measures and policy recommendations.

The Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH) in Paris led the thematic cluster on interactions between state and religious institutions/leaders. The FMSH team conducted interviews with religious, political and civil society leaders in two religious communities in Lebanon: Sunnis and Maronites. In the Sunni community in Saida, the FMSH team addressed the question of violent extremism on a territorial level by exploring the role of local institutional actors, formal and informal religious actors and stakeholders as drivers of vulnerability to violent extremism. Their role as drivers of resilience and the way in which they coordinated their efforts to prevent violent extremism were also examined. In the Maronite community, the FMSH team addressed the question of violent extremism on a discursive level. The team's work focuses on the rhetoric of the Maronite Patriarchy and political cadres belonging to the Free Patriotic Movement and its direct sectarian adversary, the Lebanese Forces, and the interaction between these Maronite parties and the Patriarch.

A second research team from the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) focused its fieldwork on the town of Majdal Anjar, which became known for various Wahhabi-Salafi-related security issues between 1990 and 2014. The AUB team also examined the role of Shi'a religious and political leaders in fostering violent extremism and media discourse in Lebanon. The team's research report examines the interaction between formal and informal religious institutions on the one hand, and state institutions on the other hand, both at the national and local level, in the delicate context of a power sharing system. The study assesses how these interactions fuel and enable violent extremism in Lebanon or shield the community from its occurrence. It also examines the role of different actors and stakeholders in this process.

A third team from the Berghof Foundation in Beirut examined drivers of vulnerability and resilience fuelling online and offline radicalisation. To that end, the team conducted field research in two towns in the Beqaa region: Majdal Anjar, which has witnessed violent extremism for more than two decades, and Kherbet Rouha, a neighbouring town that shares similar socio-economic conditions, sectarian distribution and geographic location but has not recorded any violent extremist engagement. Using a comparative approach and relying on 60 field interviews and two focus group discussions in both towns, the study found that, in the time period between 2010 and 2020, online radicalisation complemented and then completely overtook offline radicalisation tools. Telegram channels (which contained chat rooms with extremist groups, books and other material) and Facebook and YouTube videos replaced Television and physical meetings. The study findings also pointed to the importance of taking into consideration the multi-level, entangled and complex nature of vulnerability and resilience factors. In the case of Majdal Anjar, the key vulnerability factors specific to the local communities included the border location with Syria, together with the dominant ideology of the time, compounded by turbulent political and sectarian conflicts that favoured religious justification to attract public engagement. In Kherbet Rouha, a high literacy rate and sound leadership were identified as major resilience factors against violent extremism.



1. Recommendations for the government

- Develop a **unified and inclusive religious curriculum** to be adopted across private and public schools.
- Unify **history education** and curriculum in an inclusive and multi-partial manner.
- Strengthen the role of the Ministry of Education and Culture in fighting delinquency and establishing **reintegration programmes for the youth**.
- Establish a clear separation between the religious institutions' religious and political roles in order to rebuild **trust between religious institutions and local communities**, thereby allowing religious institutions to take a proactive role in PVE.
- Strengthen **security sector institutions**, the **rule of law** and adherence to **human rights**.
- Adopt **preventive security approaches** towards VE and terrorism instead of hard security measures.
- Adopt a **tiered approach to extremism** that differentiates between violent and non-violent behaviour to allow for targeted interventions.
- Build bridges between the security institutions and local communities in order to develop **bottom-up deradicalisation and community prevention approaches**.
- Engage in an **inclusive dialogue** with different segments of the local community, including those from other (often seen as 'radical') religious backgrounds.
- Create a legal framework for the **recognition of and compensation for victims** of violent extremism as a way to rebuild social cohesion.
- Foster de-confessionalisation of the Lebanese sectarian system as a way to **create a common national identity**, strengthen the state and weaken the clientelist system and reduce the exploitation of religion for political ends.
- Adopt comprehensive **development plans to improve living conditions and provide job opportunities** as key resilience factors against violent extremism.
- Ensure the **independence of the judiciary and reform judicial practices**, particularly referring cases of extremism to the corresponding civil/criminal courts instead of military courts.
- Adopt **prison reforms** which promote rehabilitation practices instead of purely punitive measures, and provide religious, psychological and social reintegration services to prevent recidivism.
- Develop a **compensation scheme for detainees** who were imprisoned for long periods of time and were eventually found innocent.
- Criminalise **sectarian offences**.
- Strengthen the role of **municipalities** and their outreach to local communities.
- Strengthen the **role and outreach of official religious institutions** whose absence leaves a gap in religious leadership, often filled by radicalisation entrepreneurs spreading extremist narratives.
- Strengthen **oversight and scrutiny of satellite TV channels operating in Western countries** that spread extremist sectarian rhetoric, including Islamophobia.



2. Recommendations for the international community

- Foster **regional security dialogue initiatives**.
- Refrain from exploiting the internal political dynamics of MENA countries as battlefields for **proxy wars**.
- Create **coordination channels with Western authorities** for combating online radicalisation platforms, while acknowledging that this may have little effect due to the alliances between some Western authorities and Arab regimes.
- Conduct further studies on the **influx of VE narratives and fighters from the EU into the MENA region**.
- Support the achievement of **justice and proper state-building** in the Arab states and refrain from supporting corrupt and dictatorial regimes.
- Support the implementation of the Ta'if Agreement, whose main provision is the **abolition of political sectarianism**.
- **Support grassroots civil society initiatives** (including but not limited to PVE) and **provide training and employment opportunities to the youth, women and marginalised groups** within society in order to create space for the production of alternative and non-sectarian elites.
- Acknowledge the role of **religious institutions** as key actors in PVE initiatives.



3. Recommendations for civil society

- **Promote community engagement** in social, cultural and religious life as an important resilience factor.
- Engage religious institutions, initiatives and leaders who provide **alternative spiritual or religious narratives**.
- Promote the **participation of women** in administrative bodies, schools and civil society organisations, including in PVE initiatives.
- Create **safe community dialogue channels** where people from different sectarian backgrounds can come together and openly discuss sectarian and religious misconceptions and find common ground for joint political action.
- Engage and invest in religious intellectuals (and their networks) in the Beqaa and other regions whose **progressive religious views** are often marginalised due to community pressure or concerns about personal safety.



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