Interactions between State and Religious Institutions in the Balkans and MENA region
Synthesis Report

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Acronyms

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BTI	Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index
CoR	Council of Representatives
C/PVE	Counter/Prevent violent extremism
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DIE	Department of Islamic Endowments
FPM	Free Patriotic Movement
EU	European Union
EUAM Iraq	European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq
ICoS	Islamic Community of Serbia
ICiS	Islamic Community in Serbia
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
LF	Lebanese Forces
LLMS	Lebanese League Muslim Scholars
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation

NMI	NATO Mission Iraq
OSE	Office of Sunni Endowment
OSHE	Office of Shia Endowment
SISC	Supreme Islamic Shia Council
SOC	Serbian Orthodox Church
SSJC	Supreme Sunni Judicial Court
VE	Violent extremism
WB	Western Balkans

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1 Introduction

Multiple factors and drivers enabled, fueled and/or shaped violent extremism. This phenomenon operates in a particular country context at a macro, meso and micro level. This report focuses on the meso level perspective of socio-political community dynamics impacting, and impacted by, violent extremism. There is thus a knowledge gap on the role of local communities in the fueling and/or prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism, which this project seeks to address. This report will explore various facets of violent extremism by assessing the role of (or absence/lacunas/dysfunctions of) state and religious authority figures as drivers of violent extremism, and in turn the impact of multi-stakeholder cooperation between religious and state leaders on the strengthening of community resilience.

In the interaction between state and religious institutions, we argue that violent extremism is the result of the complex forms of interaction between the religious environment and the historical and political context of the state. Political parties can promote various forms of political extremist ideology, on one hand; and on the other hand, informal and formal religious institutions and leaders promote a rigorous and even violent vision of religion. These same religious players can also mobilise against the state and its political system or, per contra, play a role in disseminating these ideas. For their part, individuals who slide towards radicalisation and join extremist organisations seize their faith to build a defying discourse and perpetrate violent acts against institutions, groups or individuals. They also use their faith to justify their violence as a means to defend their religious community against a repressive system that they consider unjust, incompetent and incapable to meet popular aspirations. These organisations frame world events and political developments to explain one's personal life experience, driving people to turn to their religion where one can find refuge, regulation of social life, as well as answers to injustice. Religious and/or national collective identity failures can be used by violent extremist groups in targeting dissatisfied or alienated youth. Furthermore, religion or national affiliation can legitimise extremist acts, including violence (Mandaville, Nozell 2017). The study will take into consideration the influence of the collective identity, narratives, moral or legal behaviours, on vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism.

State and religious institutions at both the formal and informal level can play a similar role, and the impact of this role can vary based on the state model. The relationship between both is complex and subject to change based on the political system, constitution and political context. It could be a form of collusion, co-optation, conflict or 'gap-filling'. This could be measured by the influence of this relationship on the collective identity, narratives, or moral or legal behaviours.

The religious sector is vast, deep, and complex. Although we traditionally associate religious influence and authority with public figures who have official titles (bishop, mufti, etc.) or with specific organised institutions (churches, madrasas,), these are not always the most relevant religious interlocutors for a given community. When thinking about effective engagement with religion in any context, it is important to understand the role of religion in that context[1]. Recalibrating the understanding of the religious sector to go beyond formal religious authorities and formal institutions allows one to discern a much more complex religious landscape, populated by a much more complex range of actors and voices.

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[1] See Robert A. Orsi, "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?" Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 42, no. 2 (June 2003): 169–74.

This sector with his complexity is included in the study which covers the WB and MENA regions, by focusing on Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Tunisia, Iraq and Lebanon. Our first step was to conduct a baseline study to understand interactions between state and formal and informal religious institutions and actors, as a driver of community vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the WB and MENA regions[2]. Based on this study we proceeded to our second step whereby we employed a community approach, designing cases study fieldwork and thematic methods. Partners from each country selected two to three field sites in their respective nations as objects of study focusing on municipalities which share common socio-economic features (e.g., divided/polarised social space, high social cleavages, or high levels of economic deprivation) but are impacted differently by the phenomenon of violent extremism. This design work is summarised in a report on field site selection and fieldwork plan D 4.1.

Based on territorial vulnerability and resilience factors, the research studies violent extremism in a complex spatial dimension: territory (local, regional), temporal and institutional. The complexity of belonging to different levels i.e., local, national, regional and international is taken into consideration, however the focus is on the local and national. In this multi-scale approach, we are looking for narratives, and national actors' predation in a religious plurality. The multi-scale approach allowed us to study the unique characteristics of each context; such as the republican model of Tunisia where Sunni Islam in the Maghreb is discussed between state and fundamentalist Islam. The study also looks at how the Tunisian state lost the opportunity to promote a modern version of Islam, in addition to the sectarian model like that which exists in Lebanon, Iraq, BiH and Serbia.

In the WB and MENA regions, so-called fundamentalist Islam has gradually imposed itself by defining new dimensions of social, political and religious normality. As a result, religious practice has become the constructive matrix of the identity and social status of the actors under a certain social control.

Thus, for decades and without being realised, traditional social and political structures have been weakened in favour of a greater hold of religion through indoctrination using religion as a tool for ideological penetration of societies.

In the WB and MENA regions many social transformations have been introduced by political pluralism and the diversification of religious communication channels (community radio, internet, etc.). These phenomena, together with the combined economic crisis, political oppression, demographic explosion and impoverishment of territories, have the potential to fuel the phenomenon of violent extremism. Indeed, these research areas are understood as an area of fragile social experiments/society.

Moreover, the process of dismantling state structures, weakened by the austerity measures imposed by international donors (International World Fund, World Bank), has accelerated the implantation of a contentious religious ideology that takes advantage of the lack of social services. This situation has favoured the rapid development of religiously inspired organisations that provide guidance and social assistance in place of the state. These organisations are imposing a security challenge on states already weakened by severe economic and political conditions, which goes far beyond their defense and security capacities. Since the advent of this new conflictual context, MENA and WB societies as a whole have undergone profound changes. Thus, the peaceful coexistence of diverse and often divergent confessional practices has suddenly been replaced by a culture of contestation with the progressive weakening of the symbolic and cultural values that guaranteed social cohesion.

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[2] For more detail, see D 2.3 Kortam (2020), *Baseline study: interactions between state and religious leaders,* PAVE.

This negative perception of public action and political authority profoundly affects the relationship of citizens with the state. The absence of the state in general and in certain areas in particular, is gradually being filled by religious organisations which are thus seizing the opportunity to establish their influence in the long term. It is therefore clear that the vacuum left by the state, especially in neighborhoods marginalised by public policies, could be exploited by violent extremist groups in their infiltration strategy.

However, we are aware that we should not consider the enrollment of young people in religious structures as merely related to exclusion or the search for social value. This enrollment also stems from a certain social instability experienced by young people exposed to precariousness, unemployment and exclusion, which creates a feeling of frustration among them that very quickly turns into an identity crisis.

Accordingly, we will develop two main sections to explore the interactions between state and religious actors that influence the propensity of their communities to become vulnerable or resilient to patterns of violent extremism: i) drivers of community vulnerability on interactions between the absence, dysfunction or mistrust of legal state and formal and informal religious institutions and actors in studied communities, ii) drivers of community resilience on interactions between the absence, dysfunction or mistrust of legal state and formal and informal religious institutions and actors in studied communities. Before exploring these two sections we present the methodology of the project, the fields of study and some examples on the roots and territories vulnerability drivers of fields study.

1.1 Methodology

Based on each country background (see D2.6), the research is conducted in four sites in BiH, Serbia, Tunisia, Lebanon and two sites in Iraq, as follows:

➢ BiH:
  o Sarajevo
  o Prijedor
  o Brčko district
  o Mostar
➢ Serbia:
  o Belgrade
  o Nis
  o Novi Sad
  o Novi Pazar
➢ Tunisia:
  o Greater Tunis
  o Kef
  o Sidi Bou Zeid
  o Kairouan
➢ Lebanon:
  o Majdel Anjar
  o Saïda

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- o   Shia community
- o   Maronite community
➢ Iraq:
- o   Hamdaniyyeah
- o   Tel Afar

The research method is qualitative, the data collection included semi-structured interviews, archival research, documentary analysis, focus group discussions, ethnographic interviews and media news.

In each country one or two research teams conducted interviews on the national and local level with state representatives, formal religious institutions and leaders, informal religious leaders and institutions, ethnic representatives, civil society stakeholders and key figures. Thirty-three interviews were conducted in Lebanon, sixty-six in Serbia and BiH, fifty-nine in Iraq and thirty in Tunisia.[3]

In a few sites, focus groups were planned but had to be canceled due to COVID-19 restrictions and replaced by additional interviews. A number of interviews had to be conducted online (via Zoom) due to changing circumstances in the field, some respondents were confined and occasional pandemic-related restrictions were imposed in some communities, thereby altering some of the scheduled interviews.

The data collected was analysed using discourse analysis and thematic analysis based on the themes of the interview guide, divided into two main parts: vulnerability and resilience factors. The analysis is done in a cross-cutting manner between the two regions. Thus, in general, each theme addressed is read across the two regions studied (MENA and WB), except if a theme is an important factor of vulnerability or resilience in one region or country and not in the other, in which cases it will be addressed as a particularity. But before turning to the first part on vulnerability factors, we will first discuss the roots of violent extremism linked to the creation of states in these regions. These roots provide fertile ground to encourage vulnerable individuals to move from radicalisation to violent extremism. Secondly, we will give the example of the territorial roots of violent extremism in the city of Majdal Anjar in Lebanon, and the case of the marginalisation of the city of Sandžak by public policies as factors of vulnerability to violent extremism.

1.2   Root Causes of Violent Extremism

The root causes of violent extremism are fundamentally related to the **weakness of the state**, and to its **sectarian or ethnic system**. On the one hand, the states that are the subject of this study displayed recognised failures related to national identity and state building after their foundation and **after the break-up of the Levant in the early 20th century and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s**, of which

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[3] The research report for Serbia was produced by Goran Tepšić and Nemanja Džuverović; the research report for BiH was produced by Sead Turcalo, Jelena Brkić Šmigoc, Mirza Smajić, Veldin Kadić, Muamer Hirkić; The research reports for Lebanon were produced by Rudayna Al-Baalbaky (AUB), and Mohammed Sharqawi & Marie Kortam (FMSH); The research in Iraq was led by Juline Beaujouan & Amjed Rasheed; The reports pertaining to the country case of Tunisia were produced by the University of Sfax team: Faiza Ayed, Zouheir Ben Jannet, Sadok Damak, Samiha Hamdi & Fethi Rekik, in addition to the team of Hmida Ennaifer and Maher Zoghlami in cooperation with Josep García Coll, Hassan Laaguir, and Javier Ruipérez Canales.

Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were a part. Governance is riddled with complexities and **political corruption** in the countries studied, in addition to administrative dysfunction such as the Dayton-induced layers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the **ethno-political or sectarian political division of society** forms political narratives based on a high degree of correspondence between religious, ethnic and national identity.

On the other hand, national, sectarian and ethnic tensions are commonplace, leading to political instability and a cyclical resurgence of unresolved identity issues. Conflicting historical narratives, competitive victimisations and collective grievances, combined with poor economic conditions, widespread corruption and dysfunctional state institutions that fuel ethno-religious polarisation, are key drivers of community vulnerability to radicalisation and violent extremism. To illustrate this, we will look at the examples of Lebanon, Iraq and Serbia.

1.2.1   Lebanon

In the case of Lebanon, the infamous Lebanese civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990 has already shown how unreliable the construction of the Lebanese sectarian regime was as it never led to pacifying the relations between the Lebanese national components. It rather contributed to strengthening a sense of belonging to one's community at the expense of the Lebanese state and its civil institutions. The **sectarian system** did not allow the Lebanese communities to agree on one national narrative. On the contrary, each community produces its own version of the Lebanese national narrative. Thus, since the end of the civil war, the sectarian tensions never stopped and many of these conflicts rhythmed the Lebanese political scene, starting from Taïf agreement in 1990 to our present days in which almost all of the political leaders warn of a potential new civil war. As a consequence, the Lebanese society is still ideologically and politically polarised and suffers from the **legacies of the civil war**, which continue to fuel sectarian polarisation through divergent interpretations of history and the national narrative, selective forms of remembrance and different and contested notions of victimhood. Impoverished citizens were (and are) fed narratives of victimisation of their own religious group through the media which is controlled by the community elites.

These multiple factors and drivers fuel violent extremism in Lebanon at *macro*, *meso and micro* levels. This phenomenon poses questions on the one hand regarding the weakness of the Lebanese state and institutions and, on the other, the compensation that individuals and groups may find in the discourses, practices and institutions, may they be formal or informal[4].

1.2.2   Iraq

In Iraq, following the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent global campaign against terrorism, the regime of Saddam Hussein was overthrown by a US-led coalition in March 2003. Under the influence of the US, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) disbanded the Iraqi army as part of the

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[4] See the Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience in the Balkans and MENA baseline study issued the 26 of September 2020.

policy of debasing the Iraqi state. This policy led to chaos, the **institutional collapse of the state** and left a **power vacuum that was quickly filled by a number of non-state actors, Sunni malcontents, Iraqi and foreign jihadists**.

At the same time, the **legitimacy of the CPA was questioned** by a number of Iraqi religious leaders, including the Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who claimed to have more legitimacy than the coalition-appointed Iraqi Governing Council. The agitation against the US presence in Iraq has been reinforced by the colonial and criminal behaviour of the US in the country.

1.2.3   Serbia

In Serbia there has been a change in legal status four times over the past three decades, from being a federal unit of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (until 1992) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992–2003) to being a member of a state union with Montenegro (2003–2006) and an independent state (since 2006). At the same time, Serbia has been involved, directly or indirectly, in four conflicts: Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991–1995), Bosnia (1992–1995) and Kosovo (1996–1999). In the post-war period, Serbia was confronted with the secession of its southern province of Kosovo (2008), whose independence it still disputes. Serbia is thus struggling with the **legacies of the wars and international isolation of the 1990s** and the **belated democratic and economic transition**, which began in the 2000s after the fall of president Slobodan Milošević.

As Perry (2019) argues, radicalisation in Serbia – and the Western Balkans as a whole – is rooted more in the experience of violence and ethnic cleansing from the wars of the 1990s than in any other factors typical of Western Europe or the United States. Therefore, Serbia and the Western Balkan region are not facing the kind of 'new crisis of violent extremism' that started after the outbreak of the wars in Syria (2011) and Ukraine (2014). Instead, Serbia is facing various manifestations of the **socially embedded 'culture of extremism'** –mainly a consequence of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the events that followed it.

Far-right groups have been present in Serbia since the late 1980s and the beginning of the democratisation and liberalisation of the political and economic system in the former Yugoslavia. The subsequent wars in the 1990s were a catalyst for the formation of the Serbian far right, as they put (extreme) nationalism at the top of the political agenda, making it socially acceptable. The international position of Serbia in the 1990s was another factor that led to **the normalisation of the far right**. Sanctions and isolation, culminating in the 1999 NATO bombings and the subsequent secession of Kosovo, increased xenophobia and created strong anti-Western and anti-globalisation sentiment among the Serbian population. As a result, the Serbian public viewed Western policy as unscrupulous and unjust, which, combined with the country's economic failures, fostered national frustration (self-victimisation) and strengthened far-right nationalism.

Serbia's international isolation also led to the collapse of the state, creating a parastatal (clientelist) system that served to satisfy the basic needs of citizens. This **clientelist system** was based on informal networks, consisting of paramilitary groups, criminals, regime officials, tycoons, football fan groups and other groups that benefited from such a system. After a short period of optimism following the fall of the former president of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milošević (in 2000), a new context of political and economic transition, with its shortcomings (corruption, unemployment, etc.), created an atmosphere

of social and national frustration for the generations that grew up in the 1990s. This created a space for the **transformation of former paramilitary groups into various far-right movements and associations**. Some of them were integrated into official state institutions, mainly in the public security sector. These processes were visible in almost every aspect of life, the most dramatic example being the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003[5]. He was killed by members of this parastatal system (former members of paramilitary groups) who felt threatened by his government's anti-crime programme.

1.3 Territorial Roots: The Case of Majdal Anjar and Sandžak

Majdal Anjar

Majdal Anjar, one of the towns in the Central Bekaa District, located within the Bekaa Governorate in eastern Lebanon, retains a **location** described by the participants in this study and the scholars as 'strategic' between Lebanon and Syria. It is located on the Western slope of the East Lebanon mountain range. Its Lebanese population ranges between 19,000 and 23,000, according to its mayor, while the number of Syrian refugees who have flocked to it since the start of the crisis in Syria in 2011 is estimated between 23,000 and 25,000.[6]

The inhabitants of Majdal Anjar **identified strongly with the political causes of the Syrian people**. The **proximity of Majdal Anjar to the Syrian border** shaped the nature of the economic activity in this area. Its residents work predominantly in the fields of trade and office services for clearing goods exported outside Lebanon after the society there went from being an agricultural society to a commercial one due to its geographical location[7]. The border town is also characterised by the **illegal crossing of residents and goods from Syria to Lebanon and vice versa**. To the north, Majdal Anjar borders the town of Anjar, which served as the headquarters of the Syrian Security and Reconnaissance Service in central Lebanon between 1976 and 2005, after which Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon. Hence Majdal Anjar was within the immediate security zone surrounding these headquarters. Since the end of the civil war in Lebanon, specifically between 1990 and 2014, the names of some of the residents of Majdal Anjar have been linked to a number of local and national security incidents that have coincided with the spread of a religious, Wahhabi-Salafi discourse in Majdal and surrounding towns[8]. The most famous event was the involvement of one of its inhabitants in the **formation of a cell of jihadists** and their subsequent travel to Iraq to participate in the war there after 2003. There was also an attempt by inhabitants of the town to plan an act of violent extremism aimed at the Italian embassy in Lebanon,

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[5] Stojanović, Milica (2021). "Manhunt: Tracking the Fugitive Killers of Serbian PM Zoran Djindjic". Balkan Insight. https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/12/manhunt-tracking-the-fugitive-killers-of-serbian-pm-zoran-djindjic/. Cvijić, Srdjan (2021). "How the Virus of Criminal Authoritarianism Killed Zoran Djindjic". Balkan Insight. https://balkaninsight.com/2021/03/11/how-the-virus-of-criminal-authoritarianism-killed-zoran-djindjic/.
[6] https://www.economist.com/special-report/2016/05/26/caught-by-geography
[7] Interview with lawyer Muhammad Khaled al-Ajmi, a member of Majdal Anjar municipality and a human rights activist
[8] Interview with Nidal Khaled.

and the kidnapping of a number of Estonian tourists. The interviewees also mentioned numerous **exchanges of fire between inhabitants of the town and the security and military forces**, as well as deaths on both sides.

The names of some of the town's inhabitants and residents are mentioned in the statements of the General Directorate of Internal Security Forces of the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities and in the statements of the Guidance Directorate of the Lebanese Army Command of the Ministry of Defence regarding incidents such as "forming cells and participating in terrorist acts", "allegiance to terrorist organisations and participation in the organisation's cells in the execution of security acts, and the manufacture of explosives or links with suicide bombers who have carried out bombing attacks in Lebanon". However, it is difficult to trace and verify the progress and findings of the investigations with those arrested on these charges.

Interviewees agree that the spread of Wahhabi-Salafi ideas in Majdal Anjar began in 1989 with the return to Lebanon of two prominent religious figures from the Islamic University in Medina to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This is a school of religious education, "It does not interfere in politics, and does not antagonise the sovereign", and which refrains from adopting the discourse of political Islam. Among the new issues that have surfaced in the city over these years, through advocacy, education and the creation of religious, educational and social institutions, are "the issue of takfir, religious reference (Marja') and the concept of God's sovereignty (Hakimiyyah), and the importance of avoiding bida'ah (heresies) by referring to the origin of religion or its source and by applying the true religion as it was applied at the time of the Prophet and his companions and removing all impurities. Among these impurities is the failure to consider Islam as an integrated system at the political, economic, judicial, security and societal levels[9]."

Recent years have been marked by significant global, regional and local events that have provided, according to the participants in our study, an opportunity to apply the teachings of the newly spreading Wahhabi Salafi ideology in the city, if not an appropriate historical context for understanding and political participation in world events. Such events include the 9/11 attacks, the Iraq war in 2003, the assassination of Sunni Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005 and the events of May 7, 2008 (see below), and the outbreak of war in Syria following a popular uprising against the current regime.

However, since the years 2013–2014, it seems that a different phase has started in Majdal Anjar. During this period the city has witnessed changes in the security and military approach towards it, in addition to a set of new local dynamics. The media coverage associating the name of the town with violent extremism also decreased while the name of the Arsal town in the North Bekaa District emerged. During 2016 and 2017, a new phase started, characterised by programmed interventions in the field of countering violent extremism. Majdal Anjar launched its own community prevention network at the al-Azhar center in the Bekaa Valley, in the presence of prominent official religious figures and representatives of national and local authorities[10]. The NPC has close links with the al-Azhar Centre and networks with the National PVE Strategy Coordinator and local stakeholders[11].

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[9] Interview with Nidal Khaled.
[10] An official religious educational institution affiliated with Dar El-Fatwa
[11] https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/ar/city/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-
%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/.

Today, a small number of detainees from the town of Majdal Anjar are serving their sentences in Roumieh prison, and some are accused of "intercepting fuel oil tanks destined for Syria during the events that swept through that country[12]". This includes those sentenced for the kidnapping of the Estonians and for other crimes and offenses.

Sandžak

The **conflict between the central government and the Sandžak authorities** began in the 1990s, when the main Bosnian party, the Party of Democratic Action (PDA), opted for the secession of Sandžak (and its integration into Bosnia and Herzegovina) or, alternatively, for it to be granted the status of an autonomous region in Serbia. The Serbian government rejected these demands as an attempted coup. This conflict led to the complete political and economic isolation of Sandžak, which continues to this day. Post-2000 governments have attempted to rectify the position of Sandžak by including its representatives in central state institutions. This led **to internal competition between the Bosniak Sandžak parties for the role of minority partner in the coalition**. In every government since 2000, at least one Bosniak Party has been represented, creating animosity with those excluded. Over time, this conflict has intensified, leading to the radicalisation of the 'left out' parties. Over the years, this form of political manipulation has evolved into a mechanism of ethnic regulation that can radicalise and de-radicalise relations between the Bosniak and Serb communities and between the different Bosniak parties in Sandžak. For example, the PDA, a branch of the Sarajevo-based party of the same name, could be considered a radical ethno-nationalist party, although it has undergone periods of moderation and deradicalisation. The **co-option of the PDA into the Serbian central government** (from 2008 to 2014) led to a moderation of its politics and ideology, only for it to become radicalised again after its return to the opposition in 2014. The PDA also faces two other major Sandžak parties, namely the Sandžak Democratic Party (SDP) and the Justice and Reconciliation Party (JRP). The former has traditionally been loyal to the Serbian government, while the latter pursued a radical political agenda vis-à-vis the government (similar to the PDA's approach) until recently.

Furthermore, Sandžak is **one of the least economically developed regions in Serbia**. For example, in 2016, the unemployment rate in Serbia was 15%, while in Novi Pazar it was 60%. It has a very young population (more than 50% is under 30 years old) with very high poverty rates. The acute problem facing the region is the lack of infrastructure and investment. A study on the attitudes of the young population of Sandžak (predominantly Muslim) shows that 30% of them consider unemployment as the main problem of their community. Almost 60% feel unable to change anything in their community. In comparison, 41% of respondents believe that the state of Serbia is the main party responsible for solving local problems (9% opted for local government). The Bosniak population in Sandžak feels discriminated against and identifies very little or not at all with the Serbian state.

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[12] Interview with lawyer Muhammad Khaled al-Ajmi

2 Drivers and Factors of Vulnerability in Interactions between State and Religious Institutions

In this second part, we will identify and analyse the main drivers and factors of vulnerability in interactions between state and religious institutions. To analyse vulnerability to violent extremism, we will focus on interactions between the absence, dysfunction or mistrust of state and religious formal and informal institutions and actors.

WB and MENA studied countries are shaped by their sectarian citizenship, formal and informal religious institutions and leaders dispute in their area of influence within their sectarian/ethnic group. Religion plays an essential role in the 'culture of extremism', it is a constitutive factor of the nation and the main diacritic between the warring parties. Eight drivers of vulnerability were identified in the five research areas, the majority of them are common to all areas, on different levels, such as multiple faces of extremism, dysfunction of formal religious institutions, economy of the state, the deviation of the political system, and mistrust between citizens and state institutions. A few drivers are the particularity of the MENA region, such as informal religious institutions or leaders, the relegation of women's role, and the state security approach to prevent violent extremism.

These different influences may also shape the nature of relationships between the communities in those societies. When these influences are compatible, the time may be a time of peace. However, when these influences are contradictory, the relationship between these groups is often conflictual. Three examples are elaborated below: i) The case of Serbia between orthodox extremism and Islamist extremism, Lebanon between Sunni and Shia and hate speech among communities.

2.1 The many Faces of Extremism

Instead of characterising violent extremism as political or religious, in our study we assume that violent extremism is sectarian or ethnic, which means it includes a political and religious dimension in the following different countries, communities and groups.

2.1.1 Serbia – Between Far-Right Extremism and Islamist Extremism

In Serbia, religion attracted various foreign fighters during the Bosnian war, for example from Greece and Russia or from Middle Eastern countries, who fought for the Serbian and Bosnian sides respectively. The recruitment of foreign fighters from Serbia by ISIS in Syria or pro-Russian forces in Ukraine could also be seen as an act of religious solidarity and "debt repayment". Serbian extremists, whether Islamists or far right, link their ideological beliefs to religious and warrior narratives. The ideology of Islamist extremism first arrived in Serbia (Sandžak region) mainly due to the presence of jihadists during the Bosnian war (Perry 2019), while **almost all far-right nationalist organisations emphasize religious elements of Serbian identity in their political programmes** (Bakić 2013; Stakić 2015). As Orthodox Christianity is considered the cornerstone of Serbian national identity, almost all radical ethnonationalist organisations and some far-right organisations emphasize religious elements and include

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the values defended by the SOC in their programmes and manifestos. There is little evidence of coop-
eration between SOC representatives and these organisations. However, they often display similar at-
titudes when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights, the status of Kosovo, EU and NATO membership, the role of
Russia, the unification of "Serbian territories", "war heroes", etc. Although the SOC does not officially
support any political organisation, its reluctance to distance itself from and condemn far-right organi-
sations creates an impression of approval and support. The lack of transparency and democratic pro-
cedures within the SOC reinforces the image of a church that supports radical ethno-nationalism and
the extreme right.

Religion influenced the radicalisation process indirectly as well, as it was **fundamental to Serbian and
Bosnian ethno-national identities**. Therefore, **state and religious institutions played a decisive role**
in both cases since their activity, or rather their passivity, produced the main drivers of radicalisation
and extremism in the country. They have facilitated the production of narratives adopted by radical
and extremist organisations through their 'normalisation' and 'mainstreaming' of extremist discourses
and have participated in various political conflicts that have led to socio-economic underdevelopment
and the spread of radical ideologies, inter-religious/inter-ethnic discrimination and hate speech.

Almost 85% of Serbia's population is Orthodox Christian, 4.97% is Catholic Christian and 3.1% is Muslim
(Đurić et al., 2014). Although Serbia is officially a secular state, the SOC is considered a national church.
A law on churches and religious communities adopted in 2006 recognises five traditional churches and
two traditional Muslim religious communities in Serbia (see D2.3).

The Muslim population in Serbia is affected by the **division of the Islamic community, which is repre-
sented by two rival organisations: ICoS and ICiS** (see D2.3). This division is primarily political, and is a
consequence of the ethnic regulation mechanism. The Law on Churches and Religious Communities
adopted in 2006 recognises the Belgrade-based ICoS as the only legal community. After some unsuc-
cessful efforts to unite the two Islamic communities, the ICiS was officially founded in 2007, operating
under the auspices of Sarajevo, while the ICoS operates under Turkish influence and is seen as an at-
tempt to weaken the influence of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sandžak. The ICoS is affiliated with the
PDA, while the ICiS shares leadership with the PJR, and this division persists despite various attempts
to reconcile the two Islamic communities, including Turkish mediation between 2010 and 2014. This
religious and political division has opened up the Sandžak space to outside fundamentalist influences.
It is therefore seen as one of the drivers of the Muslim population's vulnerability to radicalisation and
extremism.

In addition to the lack of dialogue and cooperation between the SOC and the Islamic communities,
another factor of vulnerability is the lack of contact between the two Islamic communities in Serbia.
Although they teach the same version of Islam, ICiS considers ICoS to be a political construct of Bel-
grade and the PDA (at the time when the PDA was part of the central government), aiming to take
control of the entire Islamic community in Serbia.

2.1.2   Shia versus Informal Sunni Extremism in Lebanon

In Lebanon, several events have facilitated the shift from radicalisation to violent extremism between
Sunni and Shia since the eruption of the war in Syria. We will mention two as examples: 1 – the events

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of 7 May 2008, and 2 – the battle of al-Qusayr and the declared involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian
war on 19 May 2013.

May 7 Events and al-Assir Phenomenon

After a political crisis which lasted for 18 months, conflict erupted in Beirut on May 7, 2008 pitting pro-
government forces led mainly by the Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party and the Leba-
nese Forces Party (**the March 14 bloc**), against Hezbollah, the Amal movement and their allies (**March
8 bloc**). What sparked the fighting was a government decision to shut down Hezbollah's telecommu-
nication network which was declared illegal and the dismissal of the director of security of Beirut's
airport who was accused of being close to Hezbollah.

Sheikh Maher Hammoud is a well-known Sunni sheikh who is also an important ally to Hezbollah within
the Sunni community, the brother of the leader of the Future Movement in Saïda, and the President
of the International Federation of Resistance Scholars. He justifies the reaction of Hezbollah by stating
that the party defended itself, but he also regrets the lack of dialogue and understanding that led to
the events of May 7: "It could have been remedied by some dialogue, with some communication, with
a little more awareness, because at a certain stage you do not understand, I mean, they [Sunnis] do
not understand what Hezbollah did, except that it is from a sectarian standpoint, and I am certain that
it is not, but I want the public to understand […] Hezbollah is definitely defending itself against a con-
spiracy that was prepared by the Cabinet on the issue of internal communications and airport security,
and so on. Hezbollah's reaction was a logical and limited reaction, and there were no human losses
except in some rare cases […] But the media are mostly bought by the parties that want insurrection
in Lebanon." As a result, he concludes: "The majority of the public understood that this was an attack
on the Sunnis… It was self-defense and the result was better for the country and the nation as whole."

Within two days of fighting, Hezbollah took control of many neighborhoods in Beirut. The fighting be-
tween both sides, in overlapping Sunni and Shia neighborhoods of Beirut, spread to other parts of the
country, especially to the north. On May 15, the Arab League intervened and called on both sides to
end the fighting. On May 21, the two belligerent parties were invited to meet in Doha to reach a cease-
fire, putting an end to the political crisis. According to a United Nations report published in June 2008,
the fighting left nearly 70 dead, including civilians, and more than 180 injured.

What was interesting during the events of May 7, 2008, was the decision of the Lebanese army not to
intervene in the fighting. As was the case during the civil war and post-Taïf conflicts between two dif-
ferent communities, the reason was to prevent the division of the army along sectarian lines. Another
reason often cited for the army's decision not to intervene in the fighting was the presidential ambi-
tions of the army commander Michel Suleiman. To achieve this goal, the latter also needed the support
of the March 8 bloc and their Syrian allies. This decision prompted the resignation of 120 Sunni officers
due to the army's "laissez-faire" attitude during the conflict. However, all of these officers subse-
quently reneged on their resignations, except one, Colonel Hammoud, whom we interviewed. The lat-
ter gave us his version pertaining to the events of May 7, 2008, and spoke about how many officers
left the army when Hezbollah entered Beirut because the army decided not to intervene: "At the time,
more than 120 officers resigned, and Michel Suleiman was afraid because he was preparing to become
President of the Republic. He would become president because of his silence on the blood that had
been shed […] he was silent and considered that we were sabotaging his plans."

It was during the events of May 7 that a rising Sunni figure emerged. The Sunni community found a new hero in the person of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. According to Sheikh Amora: "Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir was brought up in an Islamic group and was with the Tablighi Front and with the Tablighi Jamaat, and it was a marvelous experience on the active religious diplomatic scale."

Sheikh Amora says he witnessed the transformation of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. According to Sheikh Amora it was not the Syrian revolution but the May 7 events, when Hezbollah troops entered and controlled the Lebanese capital that motivated Sheikh al-Assir. These events have also culminated in the creation of what was called the **Lebanese League of Muslim Scholars (LLMS)** according to Sheikh Amora, who took part in its creation. He says Islamist forces have agreed on the importance of preventing the events in Beirut from spreading to Saïda. He adds that the engagement of Hezbollah alongside the Syrian army during the Syrian crisis in 2013 proved them right.

Sheikh Maher Hammoud who is known in the Sunni religious milieu for being close to Hezbollah, agrees on the fact that the events of May 7 were the main reasons leading Sheikh al-Assir towards extremism. For Sheikh Maher Hammoud it was when al-Assir started to meddle in Lebanese political affairs that he started to give the May 7 events a sectarian interpretation. However, al-Assir excluded Maronites and Christians as a whole from his sectarian rhetoric and focused only on Shia and specifically on Hezbollah. Many young enthusiastic Sunnis sympathised with al-Assir's movement. According to Sheikh Hammoud, most of these young men were illiterate, which facilitated their recruitment. He adds that international intelligence services have also played their part in the rise of al-Assir's group, notably Qatar and some rich zealots. Sheikh Hammoud blames the sectarian political system for allowing sectarian interpretation and its extremist repercussions, and for the acts of armed violence in the streets.

Al-Qusayr battle, May 19, 2013

Hezbollah's decision and declared commitment to the Syrian war on 19 May 2013, alongside the regular forces in Syria, had wide repercussions on the Lebanese scene, which subsequently experienced bouts of political and sectarian violence**. Sunni Lebanese have supported the Syrian opposition to varying degrees**. In addition, some border areas close to the conflict zones in Syria saw the recruitment of a number of fighters for ideological or political reasons, while **Hezbollah supported the Syrian regime in an organised military manner**. This exacerbated the rift between the Sunni and Shia communities in Lebanon. As a result of this engagement, several armed confrontations and series of attacks took place in Lebanon.

Two attacks targeted the al-Taqwa and al-Salam mosques in Tripoli (North Lebanon) on 23 August 2013, killing 45 people and injuring more than 500, two bombings that targeted Al-Taqwa and Al-Salam mosques in Tripoli (Northern Lebanon) on August 23rd, 2013, killing 45 and wounding more than 500, are a response to the intensification of events and the discourse of violent Sunni extremism. Hezbollah describes its actions as resistance and refuses to call itself a violent extremist organisation. In his speech on 15 May 2009, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the events of May 7, the Secretary General of Hezbollah announced that this day is a glorious day because the practices of Hezbollah have succeeded in defending the weapons and protecting Lebanon from the danger of sectarian strife and civil war. By providing cultural and moral justifications, these Shia Hezbollah activists are presented as part of the paradigm of resistance and not of violent extremism.

They defend the culture of resistance, which is portrayed as a way of life superior to others and specific to the Shia community and to anyone who chooses to be loyal to Shia political actors. Morally, the Shia

political actors and officials **present themselves as the party responsible for protecting Lebanon from the danger of an imminent sectarian conflict** (imminent threat). For example, in the case of the battle of al-Qusayr, the Shia political discourse portrays the intervention as a heroic mission to save the region from an "international and regional plan" aimed at dividing and bringing imminent harm to the region and targeting the axis supporting the resistance. This speech portrays Hezbollah's continued involvement in violence (fighting alongside the Syrian regime) as an unintended issue "not desired by the party's leadership, cadres, fighters or supporters". However according to this rationale, the party is executing a plan for which many will be grateful one day. Its goal is to preserve "the unity of peoples and nations". The obituary statements of Hezbollah fighters in Syria mention that they are "martyrs of the jihadi duty." Thus, Shia political actors have framed the fighting in Syria as a religious duty that is not subject to material and political discussion and have elevated it to "Divine". The balance between Shia and Sunni religious-political communities was maintained after the end of the Lebanese civil war until the assassination of PM Rafic al-Hariri in 2005. Ever since that date, Sunni politicians consider that the position of the Shia community was strengthened and favoured over the Sunni community in Lebanon. As a consequence, **some Sunni groups felt their community was disadvantaged in the face of the rise to power of Hezbollah**, the most powerful Shia party. They were not satisfied with the role played by Dar al-Fatwa[13] and other Sunni formal institutions that they perceive as weak, or worse, in collusion with Hezbollah. This leads to a **birth of informal religious institutions and religious leaders**.

2.1.3   Hate Speech: Maronites in Lebanon

Since the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) became the first Christian party in Lebanon and its founder acceded to the office of President of the Republic, it adopted a strategy of rapprochement with Syria and began to adopt the same rhetoric as the other right-wing Maronite parties. The FPM which has a new leader since 2016, Gebran Bassil, President Michel Aoun's son-in-law, participates in the **polarisation of the Christian electoral base**. When Gebran Bassil succeeded President Aoun as the head of the FPM, he started adopting a **radical and sometimes racist speech for electoral ends targeting Syrian refugees** who fled to Lebanon.

For instance, in January 2019, he published a tweet saying that the presence of Syrians in Lebanon is exhausting for the Lebanese economy. In February 2019, he accused the Syrian refugees of threatening the existence of Lebanon and stated that they would put Europe under an increased danger of terrorism should they stay. On May 5, 2019, another tweet in this series of striking tweets said that more than 600 Syrian children were born in al-Bora Hospital compared to only 30 Lebanese births. In a tweet dated May 8, 2019, he said that Lebanon, which is the "land of prophets and saints, cannot be the land of refugees, the displaced and the corrupt". Bassil continues to call for the return of Syrian refugees to their country and **accuses them of being responsible for the current Lebanese crises**. In 2019, when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs, he called for prioritising the employment of Lebanese over other nationalities. FPM members seized this occasion and protested in front of Syrian-owned stores, singing the Lebanese national anthem and demanding priority of employment for the Lebanese. These claims did not stop at the level of party members but rather extended to the media outlets. For instance, on the occasion of the start of the school year, OTV channel published in September 2019 a cartoon in

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[13] For more information on Dar al-Fatwa, see https://www.darelfatwa.gov.lb/.

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one of its programmes showing Lebanese schoolchildren unable to enter their school due to over-crowding because of the presence of refugee and foreigner children. The cartoon asked the reader: "have you ever seen a Lebanese more generous than that?" The channel apologised for broadcasting this cartoon and has removed it from its website.[14]

The populist strategy of Bassil was clear for his political counterparts who belong to the Muslim communities but also for his direct Maronite adversary, the Lebanese Forces Party (LF) who accuse him of adopting their rhetoric to win their electorate. This **populist rhetoric brings back to mind the rhetoric of the Maronite militias during the civil war**, known for their hostility towards Muslims, Palestinians and Syrians at the time. In the political and media spheres, Gebran Bassil has become a subject of mockery by his counterparts who consider that he uses this rhetoric to succeed his father-in-law as the head of state.

By adopting the **discourse on Christian rights**, the strategy of the FPM is the same as the Christian opposition parties: that demands for the sharing of political power emerge as a popular demand, from a community that would feel aggrieved or threatened to lose its "political advantages" against Lebanese Muslims, against Palestinian refugees or more recently Syrian refugees and mostly Muslims, who would contest the Christian "advantage", overturn the demographic balance and thus the Lebanese political equation. By adopting such a strategy, the FPM, like the other parties, transforms sectarianism into the means through which to access to citizenship in Lebanon, and confuses between Christian and Lebanese interests in its discourse. Michel Abou Nejem for instance explained to us the importance of these claims for the political strategy of the FPM: "the nature of the political regime in Lebanon … and the marginalisation of the Christian component between 1990 and 2005 imposed that we ask for equality in the system. If you want to reach government, you need to talk about these matters." Michel Abou Nejem is a journalist and an FPM member, responsible for the political relations at the office of the vice president for political affairs, May Khreish. He says he is one of the oldest activists of the FPM but comes from a house that belonged to the Phalange Party, specifically the "Bashir Gemayel current" as he says. He joined the FPM because of its "new ideas and the nationalist dimension and the reparation of the faults that occurred during the war", adding: "for example, the issue of the relationship between the Christians and Israel. It [FPM] is a Lebanese party which is against the Syrian occupation but which does not ask for help from Israel and, in the meantime, it supports historical reparations, secularism and citizenship…"

The relationship between the Maronite parties and the patriarchy and its impact on the radicalisation of the discourse and the legitimisation of this discourse in the Maronite Street is mainly based on the issue of restoring Christian rights. Marie Najem defends this form of speech adopted by her party and justifies it by saying that it was a **question of rebalancing power-sharing between the Lebanese sects**, after the imbalance created by the Taïf accord: "in the meantime, other Christian parties and personalities agreed on that foreign powers, like Syria or whatever, will name their ministers or directors …

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[14]https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1285056-%D8%BA%D8%B6%D8%A8-
%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%85-
%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-
%D9%8A%D8%B7%D9%81%D8%AD-
%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9, consulted on November 29, 2021.

they did not come with the will of the Christians- … This is how the country is made. We did not do it this way but the regime is like this. We are only applying it so we are now in a position that obliges us to defend the Christians… But we agreed to take this approach because we could take some rights back through it. We achieved a real fifty-fifty representation in the government, we achieved an electoral law giving us a better representation, and sure the price to pay was the loss of secular street [people]…" She adds: "We, as a political component, have a duty to advocate for the restoration of rights." She admits that the rhetoric used by her party is sometimes radical but explains that it is meant to attract the Christian electorate. However, she says that this rhetoric does not resemble the credo of the FPM and the principles that they, as militants, have been raised on. In addition, she explains that this rhetoric used by the FPM is strategic because it prevents the Maronite social base from falling into the arms of the LF whom she accuses of wanting to bring the country back to the time of civil war.

Partisan celebrations are often the best times chosen by the Lebanese parties to spread their political messages against their opponents. For example, on the commemoration of October 13, 1990 (when Aoun was forced to take refuge in the French embassy under fire of the Syrian army), the FPM uses images of the battles against the Syrian army and the LF at the end of the Civil War and keeps recalling the bloody past of the leader of the LF in order to discredit him within the Maronite community. It also draws the parallels between the LF leader's past and his incompetence to recover the rights of Christians today. This discourse helps to keep these memories alive in the minds of FPM members.

As shown earlier, **the Maronite Church also acts as a political actor** in Lebanon. To this end, it conveys a memory narrative built on the rhetoric of the Christian militias during the civil war against the Palestinians. For instance, Monseigneur Mazloum says: "what led us to the civil war? Wasn't it the attempt by the Palestinians to transform Lebanon into an alternative homeland, which is the plan of the US, Kissinger and Israel to serve the latter's interests? What made Christians go to war? When they saw there was a campaign supported by every means and from most of the states in the world so that the Palestinians occupy Lebanon, and that Lebanon becomes a Palestinian state, that the Palestinians become Lebanese citizens and stay in Lebanon, and those who do not agree, they can leave… Those who did not agree were the Christians, which is normal, which pushed them to leave and therefore the war was against the Christians to entice them to leave…"

Sejaan Quazi was a member of the Phalanges Party and left the party to join the Lebanese Forces. He is a close advisor to the Patriarch since he is a member of the Bkerkeh Strategic Commission. He also claims that his only firm belief is the school of thought of Bashir Gemayel, particularly that which relates to a free Lebanon. During our interview Quazi uses the issue of Syrian refugees in the present days to settle his scores with the presence of the Palestinians in the past: "we cannot accept them, because of **demographic balance** in the Lebanese society, and we cannot give them a worthy life […] There is no solution apart from two, either they return to Palestine and this is impossible because the right to return does not exist anymore, and right to return is actually a choice, if you read it. And the other solution is that there are countries with lands that are a million times bigger than Lebanon and with financial capabilities a billion times bigger. So, these countries can share the Palestinians […] I can assure you that if I give the Palestinians who live in Lebanon the Lebanese passport, they will directly leave."

Regarding the current economic crisis, he adds: "when I was minister of Labour the Palestinians wanted to work. But I couldn't afford issuing work licenses at a time when I had a 25% unemployment rate. Could I send bread to my neighbors if even my children don't have bread to eat? I cannot give you a

permit to work when there is not even work for Lebanese people. I granted them certain things and allowed them to create institutions to employ Palestinians and this was against the law, but it was to allow them to find work. We are not against accommodation, but if you had a house with a job and schooling, etc., then, you wouldn't leave the country."

In this context of violent extremism, religious institutions emerge as drivers of vulnerability.

2.2 Dysfunction of Formal Religious Institutions

The formal religious institutions subject to the study are religious government institutions, mosques, Koranic schools and Islamic studies centers.

Mosques participate in the dissemination of a rigorist and even violent vision of religion through the preaching of charismatic sheikhs and Koranic schools. There is a **hardening of the religious discourse** which does not only affect the cultural aspects. Thus, listening to these messages and preaching plays an important role in the way young people learn about the actions of extremist groups and becoming attracted to such groups. Violence is then seen as a means of pressure and affirmation in the face of a state perceived as a mere repressive entity, and religion as the only instrument of social regulation.

Governmental religious institutions are sometimes seen as an extension of the government and therefore aligned with its competence to address the needs of the population in other areas. If the Tunisian government controls religious institutions but does not provide good programmes in terms of infrastructure, education, training programmes for imams, then **believers look for "more legitimate" religious support from foreign organisations**. In the case of Lebanon, after the failure of the Lebanese state to provide prosperity, security, belonging, national narrative and equal citizenship for all citizens, community members find only their own sects as legitimate representatives of their religious and political rights.

2.2.1 Lebanon

In sectarian systems like in Lebanon, **the government allows religious education in private and public schools but does not pay the teachers' salaries**. This is where the Endowment or Waqf comes in, an institution economically independent of the state that relies on donations and owns its own real estate. **The Waqf is responsible for hiring and paying teachers for religious education in religious and public schools, and for paying salaries to imams**. It does not receive any allowances from the state. The idea of deducting the salaries of the main administrative body of Dar El-Fatwa (the Mufti of the Republic and the Muftis of the Regions) from the Lebanese state budget, specifically from the budget of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, spent through the Ministry of Finance, ensures the "principle of continuity of public service". The State's fiscal policies work in the interest of official religious institutions, as Law No. 210 of 26 May 2000 exempts all recognised denominations in Lebanon and their affiliated legal entities from taxes and duties, and cancels all related texts. Parliament approved this measure at the time. The law stipulates that each legally recognised sect and each legal person

affiliated to it by virtue of the law, prior to the publication of this law, shall benefit from the exemption of all taxes, fees and direct and indirect allowances legally enjoyed by public institutions[15].

According to the Social Decree in article 18 the Mufti of the Republic is considered as the religious head of Muslims in Lebanon. Islamic schools are under the rule of the ministry of education. The ministry of education allows them the right to work but they stay independent and can choose their own curricula, according to article 9 of the Constitution, says Sheikh Abu Zeid. **The Sunni community does not have a supreme authority akin to that which exists in Catholicism, the Orthodox Church or Shia Islam**. The power within the Sunni community is not pyramidal. Therefore, the relationship with the Mufti of the Republic is only administrative, according to Sheikh Abu Zeid. However, many clerics received their education from sheikhs who are not officers of the Sharia Court nor employed in a mosque following the DIE or Dar al-Fatwa. These clerics do not relate to the Mufti of the Republic and yet they are not united and their voices and actions may conflict.

In Lebanon**, history teaching is a political issue**. Paul J. Yoder[16] says: "Education has served as a vital means of controlling and disseminating information." (2015, p. 140)

Yoder argues that history teaching has been used as a means against national social cohesion and integration and thus against the idea of a single national narrative. For him, there are three main factors that are responsible for this weakness. Firstly, the uninterrupted presence of denominational schools since the existence of the Ottoman Empire (Abouchedid and Nasser, 2000; Bashshur, 2005). According to Frayha (2003) and Jalbout (2015), 60% of students attend private religious schools that are run by Lebanese sectarian communities (Yoder, 2015; Abouchedid and Nasser, 2000; Bahous, Nabhani & Rabo, 2013). Therefore, the loyalty of these schools is directed towards their own sectarian groups (Abouchedid and Nasser, 2000; Bashshur, 2005) rather than the Lebanese state. Second, the inability of the state to produce, impose and disseminate a national curriculum, which was one of the main tasks of the Educational Centre for Research and Development after the Ta'if Accords (Frayha, 2003; Volk, 2008). Thirdly, the interference of political parties on the history subject curriculum contributes to the political impasse.

In his analysis, Bashshur (2005) adds another factor that predates the **educational system** and leads to undermining the creation of a single national narrative. Indeed, the sectarian way of teaching history relies on the passing on of a sectarian memory, and thus a sectarian narrative. In this research, this heritage is not only present in schools but before that in families, neighborhoods, towns, etc., all of which have a story to tell about their relations with other sectarian communities and thus participate in the passing on of a memory of animosity towards other components of the Lebanese social fabric.

In the Lebanese context, the legacy of relations between sectarian communities exists in all layers of society. Therefore, our research does not understand education in its narrow sense, but rather in the broad sense that every interaction is an opportunity for education and a space for memory transfer. Therefore, the phenomenon of "**conflicting historical narratives**" (Bashshur, 2005) goes beyond

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[15]https://legal-agenda.com/%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AD-
%D8%A8%D8%A5%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A1-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A7%D8%AA-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B7/

[16] Paul J. Yoder, "Lebanon: A Case of History Education in a Sectarian Society", *Journal of International Social Studies*, Vol. 5, No1, 2015, 140-149, (p. 140).

schools in the Lebanese sectarian system, which is based in its recent history of conflicts between Lebanese sects.

The importance of private primary and secondary schools is remarkable in Lebanon, with almost 60% of students attending them. The main vulnerability of this education system is the **lack of a national narrative** to be taught in formal (schools) and informal (museums, etc.) education. The state does not produce a national curriculum and it is common for political parties to interfere with the History subject curriculum taught in public schools. As a result, the message students receive from this system is that it is through your community that you will achieve leadership, not through national institutions, making the sectarian nature of the education system a factor of vulnerability.

The problems of religious education in Lebanon are multiple, which is a driver of the community's vulnerability. A group of educational institutions (religious institutes) are affiliated to Dar El-Fatwa, such as the Islamic University of Beirut – the Sharia College, which is affiliated to the Mufti of the Republic, who is its supreme president, in addition to the al-Azhar institutes (Azhar al-Beqaa, al-Azhar Akkar and the branches of al-Azhar in Mount Lebanon), which are religious high schools where the student obtains a secondary Sharia certificate that qualifies him/her to enter any Sharia Faculty in Lebanon or abroad and is subject to the special education system (Ministry of Education). However, all schools that offer primary or intermediate education are affiliated with Dar El-Fatwa, unlike the unofficial religious institutions.

In Lebanon, the authority of Dar El-Fatwa over mosques, imams and preachers is limited. Dar El-Fatwa sends out written Friday sermons or sends outlines recommending adherence to them, but nothing obliges the preacher or even a person designated by Dar El-Fatwa with the text of the sermon or with the topics he raises from the pulpit[17]. The scholars, preachers and imams were originally affiliated with the main Dar El-Fatwa in Beirut, but in order to organise their relationships and their work administratively and logistically, they are appointed to the Dar El-Fatwa of the region concerned. Majdal Anjar has more than 18 mosques, most of which belong to the Endowments Directorate (Awqaf)[18]. However, the sheikhs who follow the Salafism of Sheikh Adnan Umama run 8 to 10 mosques among them.

At the local level, it is clear that there is nothing to prevent the mosque preacher from addressing any political, social, economic or even security events. It is up to the Friday preacher to address these issues from his perspective and to lead the faithful[19]. We find that the interaction and presence of worshippers are stronger in mosques that choose to engage with and take a clear stance on political developments and security incidents. There are no mosques in Majdal Anjar outside the framework of the Islamic Endowments (Awqaf), but **the influence of Dar El-Fatwa or the Endowments (Awqaf) Directorate on the discourse in the mosques is marginal**. There are no training workshops for imams, so the influence of Dar El-Fatwa on religious discourse, its quality and direction, is almost non-existent, and thus this is a source of vulnerability when it comes to countering violent extremism.

In addition, Dar El-Fatwa loses its ability to "control religious discourse" and its impact on all preachers affiliated to the Islamic endowments (Awqaf), as it does not provide financial support to the preacher and the sheikh. These sign contracts with the endowments (Awqaf) with symbolic salaries. To improve the salary of Imams and Sheikhs, people of the city cooperate to pay the imam or preacher.

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[17] An interview with Khaldoun Oraimit from Dar El-Fatwa in Beirut

[18] http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=5795.

[19] An interview with Sheikh Abdul Haq Kharroub of Dar El-Fatwa in Majdal Anjar

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In conclusion, Dar El-Fatwa, through the General Directorate of Endowments, does not exercise any real and absolute authority on the opening or closing of mosques. For example, the followers of the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology in Majdal Anjar built their first mosque with the cover, protection and pressure of the representatives of the Syrian security regime in Lebanon in the early 1990s, despite the fact that Dar El-Fatwa did not support and even explicitly opposed this[20]. Furthermore, although Dar El-Fatwa has the power to ask the police to close down a mosque because the imam or preacher has disseminated hate speech or incited violent extremism or hostility towards the state, it never exercises this power[21].

2.2.2   Tunisia

Al-Zaytouna University is an internationally respected center for Islamic studies, but **most imams and preachers in Tunisia are not trained to university level**. Members of the Ministry of Religious Affairs consulted for this study noted the bloated nature of public institutions as illustrated by the budget allocation and the way in which most of the funds of these institutions are used to pay salaries, leaving programming and training with few resources. These reasons, together with the emergence of distance education, have become a vulnerability factor for the emergence of informal religious training institutions. An example is the Imam Malik University for Sharia Sciences, an institution established with the idea of disseminating the Sharia sciences, the Koran and the Sunnah, which has sometimes been associated with Wahhabism. Its director points out that the school teaches sheikhs following the Maliki School of jurisprudence and the teachings of al-Zaytouna University and presents a different understanding of Wahhabi teachings presenting Wahhabi Salafism as ignorant of the original texts. It also indicates how, although it is completely independent of the Tunisian state, Imam Malik University supports national security. The institution is also open to research, debate and discussion with other Islamic academic centers and scholars. It thus represents an unofficial alternative outside of government control.

In the same vein, **the legitimacy and trustworthiness of official institutions of religious education** are still at stake and require attention to specific issues. In the case of al-Zaytouna, some of the most urgent needs were noted as involving a revision of the curriculum and the creation of a shared vision among professors who can unequivocally represent the institution. In addition, religious academic institutions should offer employability prospects (which could be achieved through specific training in preaching, teaching, legal issues, etc.) to compete with informal training options available online (such as Imam Malik University). Finally, governmental interference in Islamic academic, cultural and legal work (such as the Suspended Islamic Council or the Fatwa Court), could become an obstacle to the proper development of religious culture and education, as scholars and students point out, and would endanger the legitimacy of the institution. Suggestions for improvement include the systematisation of Islamic education from the lower levels of education, which would protect young people and university students from esoteric and extremist interpretations of Islam from an early age (e.g. by creating specific Sharia science routes in secondary schools).

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[20] Nidal Khaled
[21] Abdul Haq Kharroub

2.2.3   Iraq

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

In addition to peace initiatives, the research findings point to a serious lack of cooperation in the areas of education and religious life. The lack of a collaborative approach and bridges between the two sets of institutions prevents the implementation of two key elements that can fuel violent extremism:

i) **Curriculum reform**: religious authorities only advise on what should be included, but are not involved in preparing the curriculum.

ii) The **control of the religious discourse by local imams**, especially during the Friday sermon which gathers a large audience.

2.2.4   Serbia

The last three decades in Serbia have been marked by profound political and social changes, including reforms in the education sector that have not been very successful, leaving Serbia with only 11% of the population with higher education. **Reforms in primary and secondary education** led to comprehensive changes in the prescribed curriculum. They have **emphasized nationalistic interpretations of past historical events** while introducing many **stereotypes about other ethnic and minority groups** in the country and the region, thus reinforcing an exclusionary mindset among young people. In addition, religious education ("veronauka") in primary and secondary schools is problematic. Religious education is an optional course, and students can choose between this course and civic education. This is a

vulnerability factor because it **segregates students according to their religion** (Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim) and is **controlled by religious communities** (curriculum, textbooks, teachers). On top of this, there is no interreligious communication or interreligious education programme in the Serbian education system.

Both Islamic communities have their maktabs (primary education) and madrasas (secondary/higher education) for training clergy (imams). Some of them continue their education in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia or Algeria. Schools run by Islamic communities in Serbia are not recognised as important factors of radicalisation as they mainly teach a moderate version of Islam.

In addition, education in Sandžak is affected by segregation policies, whereby Serb and Bosniak pupils attend separate classes (based on language preferences and ethnic/religious affiliation). This inevitably results in various forms of separation and segregation in everyday life (outside the classroom), with little or no interethnic contact.

The issue of parajaamats in Serbia was never of major importance. Some Salafi masjids were parajaamats, but some of them were organised by the ICiS. One parajaamat that used to recruit members of the Roma population for the Syrian civil war was also discovered in the Belgrade suburb of Zemun. In 2017, Serbian authorities demolished a religious building in Zemun, which officially belonged to ICiS, explaining that it did not have a building permit. It is not yet known whether the real reason for the demolition of this improvised mosque was its use for the recruitment of Islamist fighters. Today, there are only a few parajamaats, and they are mostly marginalised.

2.3   Informal Religious Institutions

The restitution of religious institutions as political actors, **representatives and referents of the religious community places them in a kind of competition for legitimacy**. Several factors seem to be relevant in this struggle. On the one hand, governmental institutions see themselves seeking a balance between maintaining contact with the religious needs of the population and controlling the emergence and expansion of fringe movements. Paradigmatic cases such as Tunisia, where the state has traditionally controlled all things religious in order to prevent the emergence of extremist groups, represent the counter-productivity of this model. When religious government institutions are seen as political rather than religious, people look for alternatives in informal religious institutions. Furthermore, the **strict supervision and preventive security policies** applied by some governments, such as Tunisia and Lebanon, align state religious institutions with a governmental agenda that is distant from the people. This delegitimises these institutions as religious referents and opens the way for the emergence and spread of alternative informal institutions.

In Lebanon, the governmental subordination of Dar al-Fatwa and the mufti in the context of the Syrian uprising led to the emergence of the **Lebanese League of Muslim Scholars** in 2013 formed by independent Sheikhs and members of the Jamaa-al-Islamiya, Salafis and some disillusioned clerics from Dar al-Fatwa (Lefèvre 2015)[22]. Although it is a **hybrid informal institution** in that it has a minority of sheikhs

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[22] Lefèvre, Raphaël. 2015. *Lebanon's Dar al-Fatwa and the Search for Moderation*. Carnegie Middle East Center. Retrieved 24 June 2020. https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/01/05/lebanon-s-dar-al-fatwa-and-search-for-moderation-pub-57627.

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who follow Dar El-Fatwa as members, it has become the strongest voice to **challenge the authority of the mufti and Dar El-Fatwa**. It represents the most important informal institution among Sunni religious institutions and its principal role is **to fill the vacuum left by formal institutions** and to act as a Sunni authority. Informal institutions like the LLMS are independent from both official and religious institutions. We must stress here that informal sheikhs are not necessarily affiliated to LLMS. Thus, sheikhs could convey an even more radical discourse than the LLMS in their mosques.

The Council of Muslim Scholars mainly includes religious leaders who follow the Wahhabi-Salafi ideology or the Salafi ideology, or who belong to or are close to the Jamaa' Islamiya (branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon), as well as independent personalities whose political positions correspond to the Council's approach.

Some participants believe that the Association has been able, in a short period of time, to accumulate a balance of legitimacy through its **provocative attitudes against the "dominant discourse"** and to take steps towards a "peaceful balance" between the Lebanese parties in the crucial issues pertaining to Sunnis[23]. Participants attribute this to its liberation from the low political ceiling imposed on Dar El-Fatwa due to its administrative and political reality. Interviewees believe that the Association of Muslim Scholars, through its leaders and scholars who enjoy a 'charismatic' leadership and 'revolutionary' approach, responds to a sense of grievance. This is in contrast to what appears to be the case with traditional official religious leaders who derive their legitimacy from the bureaucracy to which they belong. These members have quickly **attracted large segments of the Sunni community by adopting a discourse that claims to respond to their sense of victimisation**, at a time when the Sunni political sect appeared to be experiencing a crisis of command and (lack of) bold leadership[24]. The informal religious representatives in our study added that the affairs of the Supreme Council of Islamic Sharia should be left in the hands of the 'clerics' and not be managed by political leaders or even businessmen. Here, the divide between informal religious leaders and the official religious establishment emerges in the context of the criticism of the overlapping relationship between Dar El-Fatwa and official political actors.

As a result, trust in official religious institutions and leaders has collapsed in favour of the LLMS and its leaders. The league started to fill the political vacuum left by Dar al-Fatwa by opposing the Syrian regime and its allies in Lebanon, namely Hezbollah and the Amal movement. For example, LLMS[25] issued a press release on 5 November 2021, calling for an end to the indictment issued by the military court against dozens of young men from Arab tribes in the town of Khalde who belong to the Sunni community, including minors. The statement accuses the court of issuing sectarian and political judgments as it turns a blind eye and covers up crimes committed by members of other communities it does not name. It accuses the military court of being a tool in the service (without naming it) of Hezbollah, and

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[23] An interview with lawyer Mohammed Sablouh and an interview with Sheikh Adnan Umama

[24] http://carnegiemyc.araj/2015/01/05/rabobkhatkhakh.

[25] On August 1, armed clashes broke out between Hezbollah supporters and a rival group in Khalde, south of Beirut. the clashes took place during the funeral of a member of Hezbollah, Ali Chebli, who was killed on the night of July 31, during a wedding, by a member of the Sunni Arab tribes of Khaldeh. The shooter is the brother of an individual who was killed during an episode of sectarian violence in the city in 2020. During the funeral march the next day, at least five people, including three Hezbollah supporters, were killed and an unknown number of people were injured. Lebanese security forces have deployed to the area in an effort to restore order, warning that the army will open fire on any armed individual in the area.

of being responsible for generating extremism because it adopts double standards and goes so far as to question the legitimacy of this court and its patriotism.

Sheikh Khalil al-Solh is an imam who preaches in Dar al-Arqam Mosque, one of the mosques in Saïda. He is also known as an activist in humanitarian work throughout the mosque. He is affiliated to the Association of Muslim Scholars and the Islamic Group. He is not registered with Dar al-Fatwa. Instead, he is known to be a prominent member of the LLMS. He also took part in the revolution of October 17, 2019.

He argues: "LLMS was established as a result of the injustice that the Sunni community is subject to in this country, Lebanon, and it rose to defend their rights and to be the voice of the oppressed among them, especially, in brackets, most of the oppressed, imprisoned, and those accused of extremism and accused of terrorism."

Although he was disillusioned with Dar al-Fatwa, he states: "The picture has to be corrected. We have always stated that we are not against Dar al-Fatwa. We are not taking its role."

For some scholars, **the question of financing informal Sunni institutions is crucial** to hold a credible voice and being legitimate in defending the Sunni community. As mentioned earlier, he casts doubt on the role of the league by questioning its funding from Qatar: "It has been a while that they did not show up, why? Because Qatar asked them to stay quiet? [...][26]." For him, as for many other Sunni leaders, be they formal or informal, the question of funds is important in creating Islamic informal institutions which claim that their principal concern is to be the voice of the oppressed Sunnis in Lebanon. Since he describes the league as being controlled by Qatar and its political interests in the region, he and other Sunni scholars cannot put their full trust in the league, as he stated. These conflicting interests participate in the creation of the Sunni extremism that the informal leaders will be using as their best political card to play in a country divided along sectarian affiliations.

On the other hand, Sheikh Ahmad Amoura, secretary and member of the LLMS, argues that it was Hezbollah's support for the Syrian regime that led some Sunni leaders to create the league: "With the entry of Hezbollah into Syria, we organised a meeting in support of the Syrian revolution in Beirut. It was called the 'Meeting of Scholars'. It was not yet an institution." Then a conference in support of the Syrian revolution was held in Turkey, and the Lebanese sheikhs said: "When we return to Lebanon, we have to do something."

This political discourse attracts members of the Sunni community as it is perceived as bold and frank and thus meets collective expectations. The legitimacy of the league is built on this strategy. According to Sheikh Khalil al-Solh, the League is mainly interested in public affairs. During our interview, he mentioned the political and economic crises Lebanon has been facing since 2019: "When people are in crisis like today… Patriarch [al-Rai] spoke a lot about the crisis we are facing today. Many people started asking: 'Where is our Mufti, why is he not speaking?' So **the league has derived its legitimacy from its popular presence and its identification with the popular mood**, unlike Dar al-Fatwa."

As its leaders are not linked to political power, **they are free to express a political opinion that may be contrary to the official government position**.

In both the Tunisian and Lebanese cases, this strong governmental control of the official religious bodies has led to the emergence of alternative religious institutions. In the case of Tunisia, for example, some believe that the strict control of religion has left the religious field empty of its essence, thus

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[26] Interview, with Male stakeholder, Saïda,

losing its immunity to violent extremism. In a way, **strict governmental control marked the collapse of Tunisian Islam and its traditional schools** (Ashari, Maliki and Sunni Sufism). In the cases of Lebanon and Iraq, where governments are more flexible in controlling religious life, **informal religious institutions emerge as political actors that negotiate directly with the state, or create a porous environment in which religious, legal and political organisations are difficult to differentiate**, as is the case in Lebanon. As a result, communities see these religious organisations as the only legitimate representation and source of guidance in navigating the **sectarian turmoil**. None of the religious representatives at the national level have any formal or official status in the sense that they are not included in the state system[27]. However, these religious representatives, such as the Shia Marjaiyyah, the LLMS, or the Christian patriarchs, are officially considered important actors in the post-2003 context in Iraq that emphasizes the equitable representation of all ethno-religious communities in the political system and state apparatus. As such, these **informal religious leaders play a crucial supportive and legitimising role**. They also enjoy a high level of trust and legitimacy from members of civil society and political representatives who participated in the study in Nineveh. The role of the informal entity that has evolved since the establishment of the new constitution in 2005 is undoubtedly the Marjaiyyah under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Indeed, in the early days of post-Saddam Iraq, al-Sistani's office was instrumental in the formation of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a Shia coalition dominated by Islamist factions, while the Grand Ayatollah closely followed the constitutional process. While displaying neutral political views and keeping his clerical network disengaged from politics, al-Sistani reportedly held frequent meetings with top Iraqi and foreign political and religious representatives. Over time, al-Sistani asserted his role and authority. In 2014, after explicitly withdrawing his support for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, al-Sistani called on all Iraqis to stand up and defend their country and holy sites. Both at the grassroots and political levels, al-Sistani's positions were heard and acted upon. Throughout the war against the IS, he issued a number of fatwas and announcements, all of which were widely reported in the Iraqi press and helped to boost the morale of the rank and file of the Iraqi armed forces. His unwavering dedication to Iraq was noted and when the country was officially liberated in 2017, al-Sistani was personally thanked and congratulated by Iraqi political leaders. According to al-Qarawee (2018), in just over a decade after the demise of Saddam Hussein, the Marjaiyyah "has effectively become an **extra-constitutional authority that monitors and morally guides worldly politics, and intervenes when such politics fail to protect the social order or deal with imminent threats**". This has laid the foundation for a **shared space of governance** – particularly for the Shia religious sites and shrine cities of Najaf, Karbala, Kazimiyya and Samarra – that **challenges "the old formal-informal and secular-religious dichotomies"** (Ibid). In other words, while the Marjaiyyah and al-Sistani are non-state actors, their **constant interactions with the political order and their legitimising role have gradually formalised their status** in Iraq. This formalisation process has been facilitated by the absence of strong and reliable formal institutions, which remain contested inside and outside Iraq.

Due to poor governance and the failure of the rule of law, **these institutions can transmit messages that do not correspond to the interests of the state and thus participate in radicalisation**. The conflicting political climate based on the permanent sectarian and ideological divide does not help deradicalisation and instead facilitates the recruitment of extremists into proxy wars at home and abroad.

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[27] There are exceptions when individuals hold two mandates – one religious and one political –simultaneously.

2.4   Relegation of Women's Roles

Gender representation was one of the main challenges facing our work during the phase of data collection. A vulnerability factor for violent extremism is the **lack of representation of women in the decision-making processes of formal religious institutions**. In addition, political engagement is also limited. In Lebanon, for example, women's participation in politics is not sufficient to bring about substantial change. Only six women won seats in the Lebanese Parliament in 2018, out of 128. Of these six, only one is Sunni. Nevertheless, women are more present in the administrative bodies of the official religious establishment and in the educational institutions affiliated with Dar al-Fatwa. In the education sector, **women constitute the largest proportion of teaching staff in schools in the Central Bekaa**, due to the traditional tendency of women in this region to work as teachers. For example, a woman heads the al-Manahil school owned by Sheikh Adnan Umama.

The case of Tunisia is not much different. No women were reported to hold high positions in religious institutions. They are present in religious educational institutions, such as al-Zaytouna University, both as students and as teachers. In Iraq the research team encountered two main challenges during the phase of data collection. On the one hand, **Iraqi society is traditionally patriarchal, and women are not given the space, freedom, and safety to freely express their opinions in family circles as well as within broader society**. On the other, there is limited space for women in Hamdaniyyah and Nineveh[28] Province in general to express themselves, whether at the public or private level. Finally, data collectors found women to be generally unwilling to participate in the study, either because of their lack of knowledge on the topic of VE or their concerns over the sensitivity of the topic. Despite numerous challenges, the objective set in the final field report to feature a representation rate of 35% to 40% by the end of the stage of data collection was reached.

In religious institutions, women are involved in affairs that concern primarily women. Given the traditional role of men in the highest religious positions across the spectrum – in all religions present in Iraq, Lebanon, Serbia, BiH and generally across the world – women naturally have a limited role in religious institutions and the PVE work these institutions carry out. For instance, several in-depth studies conducted on the participation of women in peacebuilding state that women remain critically underrepresented in formal peace committees in Nineveh Province (Johansen et al. 2020, 40), but also in the Committee for Coexistence and Community Peace at the government level (Iraqi Women Network 2019, 8).

2.5   Economy of the State and Religious Institutions

By analysing the economic organisation of religious life in the five countries studied, we distinguish three different models. First, **Tunisia** has a **highly centralised** organisation of political and religious affairs. **Iraq has a decentralised system** of financing and management of religious institutions. **Lebanon, BiH and Serbia represent a semi-centralised** system in which the government finances and controls part of the religious organisations. The cross-cutting between the three models is relevant for

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[28] Some Sunni Shabak consider themselves as Kurds, while others see themselves as a standalone minority. For the sake of clarity and based on RefWorld (2021) OTT classifies them as an ethnic minority.

studying the effects that more or less government intervention in religious life may have on the emergence of violent extremism.

2.5.1   Tunisia

Regarding the economic factors in Tunisia, we note that **the government is responsible for all religious institutions**, either through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Mufti or, indirectly, the Ministry of Higher Education. This means that all salaries of teachers, members of these public religious institutions and mosques are covered by the state. One of the vulnerabilities of this system is the **lack of funds for programming**. This is particularly relevant in Tunisia where there is a clear lack of resources, especially in the areas of education and religious education. This is despite the large number of civil servants. The Minister of Religious Affairs pointed in interviews to the limitations to good programming, mainly through a highly bureaucratised system, which allocates 93% of the Ministry's budget to salaries, leaving little for programming. The lack of funding for schools in general and religious schools in particular results in infrastructure needs, a lack of teachers and outdated curricula. These needs are accentuated in inland Tunisia compared to the coast, which is at the root of some of the major socio-economic differences between these two regions.

The combination of centralised management of religious affairs with institutional neglect has become a vulnerability for violent extremism. On the one hand, it imposes a tightly controlled system by the government (to be discussed in detail later) where certain manifestations are not allowed. On the other hand, government institutions do not provide good services. This has left a vacuum that private religious institutions (often sponsored by dubious foreign funds) have tried to fill. It is perhaps no coincidence that a region like Kairouan, plagued by unemployment and lack of opportunities, has become the cradle of Ansar al-Sharia. A paradigmatic example of the risk that the proliferation of uncontrolled private religious institutions can pose is seen in the sexual abuse and radicalisation scandals of the Regueb Koranic school (Zayat, 2019).

2.5.2   Iraq

Iraq represents the opposite extreme of the Tunisian centralised model. After the fall of Saddam's regime, the new Iraqi system seems to be trying to keep the government as far away from religious institutions as possible. This strategy, which might seem to be designed to avoid sectarian tensions, has not been as effective as expected, as we will observe throughout this report. **In the Iraqi system, the three main endowments (communal, Shia and Sunni) organise and finance religious life in the country**. These **endowments are financed by a government budget and specific allocations** (e.g. for the care of shrines by holy shrine organisations), as well as by **private donations**. Therefore, they are not formally or economically affiliated to the state and can manage their funds independently. The **independence enjoyed by religious endowments** in Iraq blurs the boundaries between what could be considered formal and informal institutions. On the one hand, it has extended the power of these endowments and sacred shrines to the point where **they negotiate directly with the state as regional political actor**s, which can lead to sectarian tensions if they become too powerful. In this vein, the

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state's lack of knowledge of the source of funding and its lack of involvement in programming has allowed external powers to fund and manage some of the programmes developed by these endowments (such as the expansion of the Imam Hussein holy shrine, which was funded by Iran and implemented by Iranian companies). This is seen as a vulnerability of the system, as it allows foreign interests to exercise soft power and play a political role in Iraq's already complex arena, which can potentially foster the emergence of violent extremism.

2.5.3   Lebanon

Government funding is limited to salaries, while the ability of Dar El-Fatwa to establish projects, mosques and schools depends on donations, that is, on the "endowment (Waqf) condition" i.e., what the donor wants, so it is not possible to disburse a donation that was allocated to the Zakat Fund, for example, to support any endowment (Waqf) project[29]. Thus, **Dar El-Fatwa does not control how donors' funds are spent and used**, as it deems appropriate and necessary for the public interest, including preventing violent extremism. There is a decentralisation of funding for each body affiliated with Dar El-Fatwa. Consequently, there is no unified budget, and this is what makes funding a source of vulnerability. The **allowances for imams and mosque preachers as well as religious teachers are very low,** which opened the way for informal religious institutions and figures to polarise these in a discourse far from that of Dar El-Fatwa and the Mufti of the Republic.

However, remunerations of sheikhs and religious education teachers are not covered by the government but by the endowments. The latter are independent organisations that have their own real estate for mosques and religious schools and whose main funding comes from donations. This decentralised system of donations to the Lebanese Waqf, or endowment fund, does not allow for control over how these funds are spent. This could be problematic in terms of monitoring the use of these resources.

The budget of Dar al-Fatwa, which includes the salaries of its employees, is cut from the state budget of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and includes the salaries and allowances of the Mufti of the Republic, the Muftis of the Regions, and the salaries of the Sharia judges. Therefore, there is no special budget for Dar al-Fatwa, its employees receive their salaries through the Ministry of Finance like any other state employee.

This leads to their full inclusion in the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which prevents them from having full independence in case of political conflict with the Prime Minister. **The Head of Government can administratively suspend the salaries of an official religious employee as a disciplinary measure.**

Thus, the Mufti, like the Supreme Council of Islamic Sharia, is, on the one hand, subject to political authority, hierarchically and financially, and is also partially elected by that political authority, and the election of the Mufti is subject to internal and external political consensus, which makes the relationship tense and incompatible with informal religious institutions, and casts doubt on the ability of Dar al-Fatwa to counter violent extremism. **Dar al-Fatwa is financially accountable to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers**, as the salaries of the leadership positions within it are deducted from its budget. However, this does not apply to the budget for religious education provided by the institution

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[29] Interview with Khaldoun Oraimit

to Sunni Muslims, nor for capacity building of imams affiliated with it. Therefore, instead of reflecting the stability and improvement of the reality of Dar al-Fatwa's relationship with the constituencies it represents, it reflects the vulnerability and further weakening of its supposed role in the process of building community resilience against the discourse and actions of violent extremism or otherwise.

The financial situation of Dar al-Fatwa is one of the main factors of vulnerability of the community, as mentioned. This weakness is not limited to the size of Dar al-Fatwa's budget, but extends to Dar al-Fatwa's financial affiliation with the state and by extension to the components of political authority and Dar al-Fatwa's ability to manage its finances. The impact of the financial reality of Dar al-Fatwa and the funding resources of its institutions is evident, particularly in the areas of religious education and the system of imams and preachers in mosques.

The Islamic and Christian Religious Endowments (Awqaf) cover the expenses of religious education in public schools. The General Directorate of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) of Dar al-Fatwa is responsible for religious education in public schools with a Sunni majority, as well as in public schools that are not affiliated to religious institutions, as it performs this task as part of its religious activities. It has to be accredited in public schools, and delegated education is obligatory, in theory, by the endowment (Waqf) decision.

The General Directorate of Islamic Endowments covers 345 schools in different governorates. Dar al-Fatwa does not own any religious or ordinary schools – unlike the informal religious institutions – and does not have the capacity to cover the needs of public schools in Muslim majority areas due to their financial incapacity.

Public schools in the Lebanese Republic provide one hour of religious instruction per week to each class, for which the Directorate of Endowments (Awqaf) appoints a teacher from among those who have obtained a secondary or university education in accordance with the Sharia and pays him his salary[30]. Religious education teachers in schools receive lower allowances for the hour of teaching, depending on donations (**a religious education teacher is not considered a government employee like other teachers in the school**). Some of these seconded teachers are not specialised in education. They are mostly graduates of faculties of Islamic studies, Sharia or literature, and are contracted by the hour. They do not teach full time because of their low salaries and their need to do extra work in order to earn a decent income[31].

The Directorate of Endowments (Awqaf) theoretically supervises the teaching of the subject, while the administration of these schools does not perceive its role as being related to the monitoring and rhythm of the activity of the religious education teacher, since its administrative reference is outside the Ministry of Education. Consequently, there is no pedagogical evaluation of the results of the subject, as well as the absence of control on the part of the above-mentioned directorate due to its weak financial capacities, which reflects negatively on its performance in religious education and on its capacity to fill the gap that exists specifically in the regions, as there is no budget for religious education, except what the Directorate of Endowments (Awqaf) decides to deduct to each region. The curriculum provided by the Awqaf is based on the book of Sheikh Muhammad Bakhsh, a book that was introduced

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[30] Nasser al-Solh.
[31] Nasser al-Solh.

in the early 1960s, and requires updating and a new methodology[32]. Interviewees describe the teachers assigned to the programme determined by the Directorate of Endowment (Awqaf) as "relatives", and they consider that there is an infiltration of the religious institution by some religious party groups and political organisations. Some have become members of religious political organisations such as the Islamic Group, al-Ahbash (the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects) and some other organisations, which contradicts the essence of the advocacy that Dar El-Fatwa is conducting.

Dar al-Fatwa does not have the power to prohibit the opening of educational institutions affiliated to informal religious authorities. Ministers of education grant licenses according to their political leanings and without reference to the Mufti, who "has no interest in establishing informal religious institutes and institutions, whether extremist or not". As a result, **Dar al-Fatwa appears to be a vulnerable competitor in the field of religious education**, as different political and Islamic groups – including those funded by countries or individuals abroad – establish their institutions, schools and universities with the approval of the political system and without Dar al-Fatwa having any opinion or authority in the matter. Dar al-Fatwa believes that the exploitation of the flexible structure of the state by political parties launching religious schools and institutes threatens the culture of citizenship in light of sectarian and religious diversity and calls for the limitation of Islamic religious education to the official religious body in order to establish a state-able society.

This great diversity of religious schools and their curricula is evident in the locality of Majdal Anjar. The number of students in the "al-Manahil" school, which is affiliated to the Wahhabi Salafi sheikh Adnan Umama, who are at the kindergarten – primary and intermediate levels, is about 500 students, and they constitute about 11% of the city's students, numbering about 4,000 students, distributed among 7 schools inside and outside the city[33].

The Lebanese constitution legalises religious institutions and endowments. The financial support that these institutions receive allows them to be independent and to play their role in organising the daily lives of the people without interference from the state. As the state has failed to penetrate all levels of society because it has failed to tackle poverty, modernise its electoral system and bypass sectarian affiliation, these institutions have replaced the roles of the state and can therefore act without being hindered by state interference.

2.5.4 Serbia

In terms of the economy and finance, Serbia is a perfect example of a **failed economic transition**, which has led to endemic unemployment, created a strong and deep division between the winners and losers of the transition ('haves' and 'have-nots') and induced a strong sense of deprivation among the latter. The feeling (or perception) of inequality is a powerful motivating factor for those who see themselves as being left behind in the current economic system. This is most often the case for members of extreme right-wing groups. The inability of the state to provide for the welfare of a significant part of its population is compensated by the **parastatal system**, **which is based on illegal activities mainly linked to far-right extremism. Right-wing extremist organisations and football fan groups are often used as**

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[32] Nasser al-Solh.
[33] Nidal Khaled

a cover for criminal activities, acting as 'mediators' between criminal and political groups. Illegal funds are also used **to finance foreign fighters in Eastern Ukraine**. The state finances part of the SOC's activities and makes significant fiscal contributions. It is particularly important to remember that the SOC was the largest landowner in Serbia before the Second World War and that most of its properties were confiscated by the post-war socialist regime. The SOC is traditionally considered the national institution with the largest public support (together with the Serbian army) and as an important political actor in Serbia and the Western Balkans region.

Both Islamic communities are funded by the Serbian government but also receive financial donations from other countries. Turkey supports ICoS financially, while **ICiS receives donations from countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates**. The Sandžak Salafis have also received support from **Saudi charities**, such as al-Furqan, and from the **Bosnian diaspora** in Sweden, Austria and the UK. Both Islamic communities are still very dependent on the support of the Bosnian diaspora, which could be a vulnerability factor as the diaspora has played a role in the recruitment of foreign fighters. However, it could also be a factor of resilience, as the Bosnian population is generally well integrated into Western societies, which promotes social rapprochement between Sandžak and the West.

2.6 Deviation of the Political System

The interaction between religious institutions, political authorities and state institutions could be a driver of community resilience or vulnerability depending on the change of political era or the fluctuation of 'sectarian opinion'. The Lebanese example shows how the sectarian element also plays a key role in the legitimacy of state religious institutions. In the studied cases, community groups that are not represented in parliament or at the governmental level, that are outside the existing power-sharing system and do not benefit from it or are internally and financially linked to it are predisposed to be attracted to the discourse of informal religious institutions and leaders with more extreme tendencies.

2.6.1 Western Balkans

The parastatal system has been rejuvenated since 2012 following the election victory of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), which is mainly led by former members of the Serbian Radical Party (linked to paramilitary groups that were active during the wars of the 1990s). Today, the SPP is constantly playing the nationalist card and courting far-right groups in Serbia. Over the past nine years, especially since 2014, when Aleksandar Vučić became Prime Minister (in 2017 he became President of the Republic of Serbia), the **SPP has collaborated, officially and unofficially, with various far-right groups**. During this period, some of the most prominent far-right leaders, such as Miša Vacić (Srpska desnica) and Arnaud Goullion (Solidarity Kosovo), were given official positions in the government. Prominent members of the SPP have been seen working with **football fan groups,** which have been nationalist strongholds since the early 1990s, and **powerful criminal enterprises**, raising many doubts about possible collaboration between the state and the mafia. In addition, senior officials do not hesitate to support the work of far-right organisations such as Levijatan, which is openly hostile to migrants and minority groups

and has a far-right ideology. Members of this group have even managed to join the ranks of the army and the police, which is another indicator that far-right groups are supported by the state to carry out their work and spread nationalist ideology in the state security apparatus. Therefore, the lack of legitimacy and the inability of the state to provide services to its citizens, as well as a strong parastatal system, is the main vulnerability factor with regard to right-wing extremism in Serbia.

In BiH, cooperation between religious and political/state institutions in the prevention of extremism is not at a satisfactory level. This interaction is divided into two tracks: cooperation at the state level and cooperation at the local community level. Most of the interviewees pointed out that this relationship does not exist at the state level, or even if it exists to some extent, it is not visible to the public. On the other hand, some interviewees tended to argue that some types of collaboration at the local community level still exist but could be more constructive and fruitful. Therefore, **there does not seem to be a systematic and clear approach to cooperation between religious and political/state institutions to counter religious and political extremism**, which is an important factor of vulnerability**. Where cooperation does exist, it takes place on an ad hoc basis**, usually in response to sporadic outbreaks of manifestations of extremism, and most often takes the form of public condemnation.

There are several reasons for the weak interaction between religious and political/state institutions in the fight against religious and political extremism. First of all, there is a general apathy in society towards the issue of religious and political extremism. Furthermore, the permeation of ethno-political concepts within the religious matrix leaves room for misinterpretation of these types of cooperation in public discourse.

If it occurs, the **interaction is most often homogeneous as it occurs between the party or parties that belong predominantly to an ethnic group and a religious institution representing that ethnic group.** This collaboration is sometimes more or less visible, and sometimes formal or informal. However, this kind of joint effort, although desirable, does not have a horizontal dimension that would include the interaction of political parties of one ethnic group with a religious institution representing another group. In this sense, there may even be a risk that these types of relationships (although certainly desirable) will have an opposite effect because of the interpenetration of religion in political life. In other words, the **cooperation of a political party with a religious institution representing its ethnic group may create a potential fear among other ethnic groups or political representatives of their own groups, as it could be perceived as cooperation directed against them**. Although this interpretation may seem biased, it is quite realistic in the BiH context due to the recent past – mainly the nature of the 1992–1995 war and the role of religious institutions in this context. It should be kept in mind that any form of vertical cooperation within the same community (as described above) in a heterogeneous, multicultural and religious society can lead to some form of social exclusion, especially in view of BiH's history. On the other hand, there are also positive examples of cooperation between religious institutions, as in the case of the BiH Interreligious Council, which was born out of this partnership.

2.6.2   MENA

The devastating episodes of sectarian violence in Lebanon during the civil war and in recent Iraqi history have led both countries to devise **power-sharing models** for the state in order to avoid further sectarian tensions and violent extremism. However, the effectiveness of these models is questionable.

In the case of Iraq, for example, the so-called Muhasasa system introduced proportionality provisions for all the different ethno-religious groups in the different government bodies. This system has been severely criticised and reformed several times since 2010, due to the disproportionate power of the Shias. The current situation is not much better. Each community holds on to its share of power. Among the respondents, the system is definitely perceived as an exclusionary factor. Sixty percent of the respondents held this conviction, but almost all the religious and civil society leaders interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the system, as it is used as a means to monopolise power on the basis of identity or affiliation, rather than ability or competence.

The situation in Lebanon is quite similar with regard to the power-sharing system. Moreover, **as in Iraq, Lebanese institutions are weak, which provides a perfect framework for religious institutions and their political counterparts to act as supra-state entities that provide security, livelihoods and political representation for their communities**. Thus, the importance of these sectarian institutions for the different communities has made political and religious polarisation the main driver of radicalisation in Lebanon. In fact, whenever there is a political crisis, religious institutions use religious references to mobilise members of their communities and act as their representatives. What happened in 2016 provides an example, as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Maronite Patriarch Bechara al-Rai met to discuss the presidential vacuum in the country after years without a president. Thus, the power-sharing system allows for this porosity between the three powers of the state plus the religious government institutions. Dar al-Fatwa, for example, openly declared that bringing former Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab (of the Sunni "Future" party) to justice over the port explosion was "a bureaucratic and discretionary decision"[34]. In summary, **the power-sharing system seems to be a kind of political continuation of the civil war in the political arena**. **Polarisation based on identity, rather than on political positions, leads to clientelism, nepotism and corruption.** This, undoubtedly, increases the vulnerability to VE of young people facing sectarian barriers to employment and active citizenship.

2.7 Mistrust between Citizens, State Institutions and CSOs

The level of **legitimacy** is a necessary attribute for any political system to exercise power, and it is based on two aspects. The first formality will be represented by the constitutionality of the authority, i.e., its creation and exercise according to the rules of the constitution. The second is represented by the conviction and satisfaction of the members of the society. This determinant contains multiple levels of legitimacy models. **The absence of constitutional legitimacy based on the legitimacy of achievement and social and spatial justice can lead to a loss of confidence or crisis in the discourse of the state**, its institutions and its public policies, especially if they are sectarian or social. This option produces revolt and discriminated classes and groups excluded from the benefits of development, equitable distribution of resources and access to social services and infrastructure. This contributes to the intensifying radicalism and growing forms of violence and radicalisation. It leads to the migration of youth to extremist or radical environments, attracted by social justice at regional and local level.

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[34] An interview with the National Coordinator for Preventing Violent Extremism, Rubina Abu Zainab.

Public disappointment with government policies is also at the root of the VE. The lack of change that can be perceived by vulnerable populations discredits the role of government and prolongs a sense of neglect. This was observed in Iraq, where poverty and development failure are key factors in VE, as they fuel the process of radicalisation and engagement in illegal and violent activities. Interviewees in Hamdaniyyah and Tal Afar stated that improving public services and living standards would decrease the prospects for VE in Iraq. A similar view is drawn from Tunisia, where people expected great changes after the revolution and were hit by an unfair development model that prioritises coastal areas over inland Tunisia. This sense of disappointment and neglect has spread throughout the political system and parties, allowing new marginal and extremist movements to enter the political arena.

In **Serbia**, the Sandžak community is polarised inter-ethnically (between Bosniaks and Serbs), intra-ethnically (between different Bosnian political parties) and religiously (between two Islamic communities). Distrust of Serbian institutions is excessively high in Sandžak. The 2016 survey showed that Bosniaks had less trust in state institutions than members of other ethnic groups: the police (32%, compared to 39% at the national level), the judiciary (15%, 20%), the army (36%, 56%), religious institutions (54%, 42%), CSOs (39%, 15%) and local authorities (21%, 15%). The gap between the nationals (all citizens of Serbia) and the Bosniaks is striking with regard to trust in the army (20% gap) and CSOs (24%). Religious institutions and CSOs are by far the most trusted organisations among Bosniaks.

The unequal representation of minority groups in local and state institutions is another concern. The population ratio in Novi Pazar is 80-20% in favour of Bosniaks, while representation in local institutions (police, judiciary, fire brigade, health services, etc.) is about 80-20% in favour of the Serb minority. Similarly, in the National Assembly, national minorities, which represent about 20% of the total population of Serbia, have only 7% of the seats.

The problem is also illustrated by the **different treatment of pro-Russian and anti-Assad foreign fighters**. So far, the Serbian judiciary has prosecuted four Serbian fighters returning from ISIS-controlled territories, and three others have been tried in absentia – all of whom were convicted of terrorism-related offenses and sentenced to years in prison. At the same time, fighters returning from Ukraine have been treated very differently, with almost all receiving suspended sentences rather than prison terms. While not uncommon from a comparative legal perspective, this type of behaviour has political and social consequences, as it indicates that some crimes are 'less bad than others' if committed by a particular group. This **unequal treatment can become a breeding ground for the mutual radicalisation** of those who see this type of practice as yet another instrument for the continuation of the 'culture wars' against Islam and Muslims in Serbia and the region.

The reality of most civil society initiatives in the MENA region is that they are very often funded and organised by foreign organisations. This has been seen as a significant element of risk, as **the development of these programmes can be perceived as political interference and the use of PVE work as a means to promote other political agendas**. In the same vein, international organisations have developed many P/CVE projects in Lebanon. In addition to the distrust that these organisations may generate in some areas, interviewees noted another possible obstacle to the real effectiveness of these programmes: a **culture among NGOs that aims to please the donor, rather than focus on real change**. This was particularly important in Iraq, where the role of international (mainly the US) NGOs working on PVE was controversial, especially for members of the Shia community. A paradigmatic example of how this happened was the US Peace Communication Center Conference that took place on September 21 in Erbil. The organisation hid under the umbrella of a peace-building initiative regarding the

promotion of normalised diplomatic relations with the state of Israel. Research conducted in the region immediately after the event proved that the event reinforced fear and distrust of international P/CVE initiatives within the community and the government. The mistrust that communities may have towards the government due to the possible political, legal and social inconsistencies explained above can become a major obstacle to the development of PVE initiatives and the engagement of local communities in them.

At least 74% of the initiatives aimed at reducing VE are funded by external actors, while half of them (51.8%) are implemented by at least one local CSO and less than 30% are solely implemented by an Iraqi organisation. As a result, PVE initiatives in Nineveh Province **greatly lack local ownership**. This might impact the legitimacy of these initiatives, especially those that are funded by foreign governments and organisations.

Moreover, **the strong presence of external actors in issues of VE in Nineveh Province illustrates the lack of a comprehensive policy of the Iraqi government.** An additional challenge is the lack of knowledge of grassroots communities about PVE initiatives. While 27 initiatives are listed above, grassroots participants struggle to name specific initiatives and only have minimal awareness of efforts by civil society organisations towards peace in their area.

2.8   State Security Approach to Counter/Prevent Violent Extremism

The complexities of the judicial system make it possible to detect vulnerability factors among the different studies examined. In this sense, a first risk factor detected relates to the corruption of legal affairs or the **lack of separation between the three powers of the state**. A good example of this is observed in Iraq, where during the government of Nuri al-Maliki (2006–2014) there was political interference in judicial affairs. In several cases, the judiciary was used to foster VE by issuing warrant arrests against Sunni political figures based on terrorism charges. While Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi (in office since May 2020) has managed to depoliticise the court to a good extent, the Iraqi judiciary system remains generally weak. In this regard, the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) has reported that "while trial proceedings were efficient and well organised in IS-related hearings, basic fair trial criteria of terrorism-related cases were violated" (Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index [BTI], 2022). As a result, the judiciary is weak and lacks authority in the eyes of the public, which has made it easy for detainees to escape prison sentences, while false charges are processed and innocent people go to prison.

This corruption of judicial affairs is also present in the Lebanese legal system. According to the interviewees, it is common for security forces, the army, political and religious leaders to exchange favours by releasing certain detainees, especially when judicial proceedings are conducted without legal safeguards (see section on security above for more details). This general perception of a **corrupt legal system where prison sentences are decided by political/religious leaders and used as bargaining chips** in their negotiations, adds to the perception of non-legitimacy towards the state. Respondents in Lebanon stated that major judicial reforms were needed, including the closure of primary courts and the creation of specialised courts to try violent extremism[35].

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[35] Interview with Mohammed Sablouh.

A second factor is that the role that security institutions have played on violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa has been ambivalent. Wherever sectarianism has been a problem, public security actors have been seen by some groups as armed representatives of the other sect. This has led to security concerns among the different communities, which in the case of Lebanon and Iraq has led to each community having at least one armed branch. We have already mentioned the testimonies of Sunni Muslims in Saïda about their fear of rival armed groups such as Hezbollah, which wields political and military power even though it is part of the Lebanese cabinet. The control that this organisation has over certain areas of Lebanon, as well as the freedom to conduct its intelligence and military activities and its collaboration with the Lebanese army in certain operations (see the example above concerning the operation in Arsal) are at the root of the grievances and fear felt by many members of the Sunni community.

Due to a lack of resources, the state tries to counter violent extremism through a security strategy, without preventing it through a socio-political approach. However, sometimes the security forces are not strong enough to maintain stability. This may be the case in Lebanon, where extremist movements take advantage of the weak legitimacy of the army and use an atmosphere of political, social and economic unrest to establish their influence. **These movements ultimately pose as the sole guarantors of their communities' security in the face of sectarian violence**, ignoring the rule of law and defying a state too weak to respond. Thus, this constant perception of instability and insecurity makes communities vulnerable to extremist discourses that justify the use of violence. The Lebanese authorities' approach to violent extremism is a vicious circle. In her article, Marie Kortam (2016) argues that the Lebanese army's main strategy to stop violent episodes is to implement security plans. She adds that the political and militarised conditions in Lebanon and the region can provoke the start of fighting. But it is only the intervention of the Lebanese army that would end any fighting. However, the involvement of the army is not possible without a political decision (Kortam 2016). Adopting the security approach and resorting to religious leaders to combat sectarian tensions and manifestations of violent extremism is counterproductive and may cause members of the Sunni community to turn their backs on their religious leaders.

In the case of Tunisia, for example, the strict security approach adopted by the government in the first decade of the 2000s has, according to some, encouraged the emergence and proliferation of violent extremist groups in the country. Some interviewees note that it was the atmosphere of **police repression** that drove them to join Salafi organisations rather than their faith. Similarly, Lebanese internal security forces have arrested hundreds of Sunni Muslims as potential terrorists on the basis of contact documents issued by the army or subjugation warrants issued by General Security (i.e. they have been imprisoned without trial). The Lebanese government has stated that it will invalidate most of these documents, but this has not happened so far. Another relevant risk factor related to security policies could be the adoption of preventive security approaches. In Iraq, some argue that the al-Maliki government has **used the excuse of terrorism to systematically incarcerate Sunni political opponents**. Two other risk factors have emerged as a result of this preventive security approach in Lebanon and Tunisia. On the one hand, **respect for human rights and fair trials has not always been guaranteed**[36]. Some of the interviewees in Lebanon pointed out that legal safeguards are not afforded to detainees in police custody, as they are sometimes forced to report without their lawyer, confess under torture

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[36] Interview with lawyer Mohammad Khaled al-Ajmi.

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or are even refused the right to be seen by a doctor[37]. In general, it seems according to the expert interviewees, that the Lebanese authorities confuse religious extremism with violent extremism, while the link between the two is not always so clear.

The second risk factor concerns the **spread of violent extremism in prisons**. Indeed, the Tunisian government has incarcerated approximately 7,000 people over the past decade, which has created an ideal environment for the spread of Salafism. The Tunisian authorities eventually realised their mistake and changed their security policy, which could lead to significant changes towards a more resilient security approach.

In the case of Lebanon, where mass imprisonment of Sunnis has taken place in some areas such as Saïda, prisons have also become hotbeds of radicalisation. One interviewee, a sheikh, noted that "the embryos of extremism are nurtured and raised in the bowels of prisons" in Lebanon. Other interviewees also stressed the negative effects of this situation not only on the prisoners but also on their families. Bad reputation, shame and humiliation have generally followed detention and led to homelessness and poverty for their families, which in some cases has greatly increased the vulnerability of the detainees' families to end up joining VE groups. Defendants and their families are exposed to stigma, shame and humiliation. One of the main factors of humiliation is the exposure of their families to poverty, because once they are incarcerated, "Their families become homeless and their children beg for food," explains Mohammad Sablouh. As a result, these people become easy prey for extremist groups. Sablouh, who is a civil rights activist and lawyer for a number of imprisoned Islamists who have been held in pre-trial detention for years, says: "When freedom is threatened by dictatorship, corruption, injustice and impoverishment, then this injustice creates an environment for violent extremism." This arrest of Sunni Islamist extremists accused of carrying out terrorist attacks on Lebanese soil by the Lebanese intelligence services avoid any contestation among the leaders of the Sunni community. This allows the security forces to do what they want, on the one hand, and on the other hand, not to address the problem of violent extremism in a comprehensive approach, which increases the involvement in violent extremism. According to Mohamad Sablouh: "Not all those who are accused of terrorism and have gone to prison in Lebanon are really terrorists […] The state has carried out mass arrests and exposed those arrested to torture in order to make them confess by force. There are many examples of people who have died during interrogation."

What explains the number of arrests, according to Mohamad Sablouh, is the **confusion in the Lebanese judicial system between the fight against religious extremism and the fight against terrorism**, while the link between religious extremism and the rise of violence is not always proven.

Sablouh considers that by sending people to prison, the Lebanese security forces turn people into extremists and violent extremists. The preventive security strategy adopted by the Lebanese judiciary and implemented by the security forces to fight terrorism preventively could yield opposite results. Sablouh says that many former prisoners who have finished their stay in prison have been re-arrested several times. Some are held for several days, tortured and released again.

Hala Hamze, another lawyer handling many of these cases, explains that what gives the state authorities this power is the document '303' which "allows the army to arrest people even if they have been in prison and have finished their sentence … with document 303, the state can arrest them whenever

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[37] Interview with Mohammed Sablouh.

it wants. They can then be arrested and tortured and they can also issue false charges against them to keep them in detention…".

Hala Hamze questions the state's willingness to combat extremism. She says: "Article 47 is the article that leads to the truth, whether this person has really committed this crime or not, and therefore he will have a fair trial and if he has not committed any crime, he will be released before being incarcerated for many years […]. But the state still prevents the application of Article 47, and the security forces prevent lawyers from assisting their clients […] the intelligence services of the army, public security or the department of information do not allow lawyers to assist their clients during interrogations, even if the law allows it." She added: "There are also logistics that the state itself does not allow, such as recording the interrogation with a camera to know the truth." These violations prevent the truth from being revealed and therefore do not allow for taking the fight to extremism, but rather exacerbate extremism because of the damage they cause", as she concludes: "**When a person is convicted, their file is registered in court and they can no longer find a job or get a visa**; therefore, it leads them not necessarily to extremism but to violations of the law."

However, official and unofficial sheikhs are aware of the consequences of such abuse and are meeting on the need to address it to avoid pushing more young people into violent extremism. Some sheikhs know what they are talking about because they are **former detainees**. In their stories they gave us an insight into the torture they endured in Lebanese prisons. As Sheikh Khalil Solh says: "The embryos of extremism are nurtured and raised in the womb of prisons."

Hassan Qotb explains how he manages to tackle these abuses: "We actually follow the problems that security personnel are involved in, in terms of false accusations and arbitrary arrests. Today I am being unreasonably assaulted or arbitrarily arrested. Arbitrary arrest elicits reactions, whether it's from the detainee himself or someone around him … this constant intimidation pushes people towards extremism, that's what we work on with some people…"

Sheikh Hammoud says that some officers may make false accusations against young men. Many of the sheikhs we met say that the acts of violence are therefore motivated by a need to respond to the injustice experienced by those who were slandered by the Lebanese security forces, went to prison and were tortured there.

Preventive detention in the case of terrorism can last for years. Sablouh told us that in some cases, people can spend up to five, sometimes six and seven years in prison without being guilty. He added: "When people are found guilty, they are sent to the same prison, to the same building." As a result, those who are convicted as terrorists by the courts end up being mixed with the accused. Those who are cleared become more extremist once they are released, says Sablouh. He adds: "We are raising a generation filled with hatred against the institutions of the state" because of the mistreatment their fathers and brothers receive in prison, but also because of the consequences of their imprisonment that their families have to face. After the arrest of fighters led by Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, who took part in clashes against Hezbollah forces in Saïda, several of these detainees have still not been tried. This **injustice is fueled by a discourse of victimisation** on the part of certain Islamist groups. Sheikh Maher Hammoud says: "It has been seven years and there are people who still have not appeared before the judge, while their participation (in terrorist acts) may be minimal." Considering that violent radicalism is spreading due to wrong policies, he urges public institutions to study each case separately in order to better counter violent extremism.

2.9 Conclusion

In this section we have identified and analysed the main drivers and vulnerabilities in the interaction between state and religious institutions. This interaction has taken many forms. At this stage, we can rather state that the **interrelation between the political and the religious field is evident in the sectarian system where sectarian affiliation mainly dictates political agendas**.

However, the understanding between state institutions and formal religious institutions has widened the gap between the latter and their confessional groups who may look to informal religious institutions for better and stronger representation against the other sect.

The interference of formal and informal religious leaders and institutions is also evident. These leaders and institutions do not hesitate to express their political views and take positions in the many conflicts. Some of their recent positions are based on and informed by the historical positioning of their communities during the civil war. However, the conflicts of the past, i.e. between sects, seem to be replaced by a more recent and colder conflict. This is what most of our interlocutors agreed on and it is something that most politicians and media are aware of, convey and feed, especially in Lebanon.

Violent extremism is the result of the complex forms of interaction between the religious environment and the historical and political context of the Lebanese state. Sunni formal and informal institutions and leaders could propagate a rigorous and even violent vision of Islam. They could also mobilise against the state and its political system or, per contra, play a role in disseminating these ideas. For their part, individuals who slip towards radicalisation and join extremist organisations seize their faith to build a defying discourse and perpetrate violent acts (against state institutions and Lebanese citizens). They also use their faith to justify their violence as means to defend their religious community against a repressive system that they consider unjust, incompetent and incapable of meeting popular aspirations. These organisations frame world events and political developments to explain one's personal life experience, driving people to turn to their religion where one can find refuge, social regulations, as well as answers to injustice. **Religious and/or national collective identity failures can be used by violent extremist groups in targeting dissatisfied or alienated youth**. Furthermore, religion or national affiliation can legitimise extremist acts, including violence (Mandaville, Nozell 2017).

To sum up, violence of the state and political system in the studied countries plays a role in the spread of violent extremism. This is **determined and shaped by the levels of fragility of modern state institutions, legitimacy, political structure of the state and public policies of the state, by its capacity to build fair and integrated public policies and by the level of democracy in the country.** Indeed, the state tends to eradicate all political opponents or moderate religious tendencies, and chooses to erase the sources of popular and reformist religiosity and to combat its social and political manifestations. Finally, the polarisation of the state's identity and the political and social forces have been drawn into the struggle for the ideological content of the state and its religious function. The extent of contradictions in the structure of the state is determined when the state is under the control of sects, clans or families, or is hostage to an elitist interest compound in which power and centers of influence struggle for power and wealth, in order to protect its wealth and control policymaking. This can generate a divisive political framework between centers of influence within the state itself, or a conflict between the regime apparatus and its security, military and civilian institutions.

In addition to these levels, several factors such as the absence of the state, the fragility of state institutions, the absence of the rule of law, the prevailing institutional anomie, social and political exclusion

and corruption encourage men and women to join extremist groups. Their vulnerability to a sense of victimisation in an unjust state reinforces the factors that lead them to radicalisation and violent extremism. Among political vulnerabilities, the polarisation of ethnic and religious groups due to their political interests and the sharing of power between the state and religious institutions lead to a **dysfunctional justice system**. Ethnic and sectarian groups also suffer from the **lack of a unified narrative addressing the national story**. The increasing radicalisation of marginalised areas and groups is also due to **unequal access to the education system and social and economic development**, which fuels their vulnerability. As the state is unable to meet the expectations of its citizens, the power of religious institutions has increased and the dysfunctional relationship between the state and religious institutions has grown.

3 Drivers and Factors of Resilience in Interactions between State and Religious Institutions

This part will focus on different forms of relationships between the state, formal and informal religious institutions and actors (e.g. city councils, education, police, imams and Islamic authorities, clerics and Christian authorities), seeking to identify the types of common (or complementary) narratives and co-operation that are more likely to foster community resilience to violent extremism. Three drivers of resilience emerge from the field work in cross-cutting analysis: i) co-optation between state and formal and informal religious institutions, ii) interreligious dialogue, iii) civil society programmes.

3.1 Co-optation between State, Networks and Religious Formal/Informal Institutions and Leaders

The importance of political/state institutions is reflected in the possibility of preventive but also punitive action in cases preceding or following the expression of some form of violent extremism. In addition to the Ministry of Security, which is responsible for all strategic plans to prevent and suppress extremism, security agencies, ministries of the interior, ministries of education, social work and mental health centers also play a central role.

Another key factor in community resilience is the role of political, parastatal and religious leaders in condemning acts of violence and intolerance. Political and religious leaders of both communities (Christian and Islamic) have unanimously denounced all those who have gone to fight in foreign conflicts or who have committed similar acts.

3.1.1 BiH

According to the data provided by the research participants, in BiH the state approach is preventive but incomprehensive and not based on preventive security. Political institutions adopt legal solutions

for monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan for Prevention and Fight against Terrorism at the level of the Federation of BiH. A cross-sectoral approach to the prevention and management of extremism exists in Brčko, while in Prijedor the "Community Security Forum" has been organised, with one of its activities being the prevention of all forms of violence. The Forum also encouraged cooperation between political parties, and even tried to achieve some harmonisation of the activities of different associations.

According to the majority of the interviewees, the primary prevention of extremism in all religious institutions and religions is the **promotion of basic human values**. Cooperation between different religious groups has been institutionalised through the **Interreligious Council**, which is recognised by most respondents as an important actor in the prevention of extremism. Although many problems cannot be solved at the institutional level, the interviewees consider the existence of such an institution as a "good symbolic thing". Thus, visits to the places of suffering are presented as a positive example of preventive action against political and religious extremism in BiH.

Another positive example of the interaction of religious institutions at the local level is the joint celebration of Eid in Prijedor "with the children of St Sava's secondary school. It was an excellent opportunity to meet each other, and it was covered by the media[38]."

It is also important to list positive actions and practices within each of the communities. Thus, according to the respondents, the Islamic community's engagement happens through **youth-oriented actions to prevent religious extremism**, as well as in **substantial work with imams on the prevention of religious extremism**.[39] In addition, an "**inclusion policy**" has been significantly implemented towards those members and communities that deviate somewhat from the official interpretation of Islam in BiH (for which the Islamic Community of BiH is responsible). According to the interviewees, the effects of the inclusion policies "have made these people understand that exclusivity leads nowhere, while society has understood that they are not terrorists[40]".

On the other hand, the interviewees mentioned the Catholic School Centres project as one of the most important actions of the Catholic Church in preventing politically and religiously motivated extremism. It was described as: "the most successful project in the creation of Catholic schools where employees are dedicated to the adoption of human qualities. The first centre was founded in 1994 and all students, regardless of their religion, participated. The Catholic Church worked mainly through education and emphasized the idea of loving one's own and respecting others.[41]"

In BiH, in the education sector, the implementation of **universal preventive interventions as part of regular school activities** was mentioned, as well as the monitoring of factors that represent a risk to positive development – to which a significant number of schools are responding. "In school we have different programmes, and the most recognizable one is 'Caring for children – shared responsibility and obligation.' In the education sector, everything is organised on an individual basis, from school to school. We include social work centers, the police and health centers. Each elder monitors any changes in his class and writes in the student's file. We hold a meeting of the multi-sectoral team members and draw up an individual care plan for working with the students. We are always looking for a way to reach out to the students. We design workshops, and we send them somewhere… So far it has been

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[38] Male representative from a religious institution in Prijedor.
[39] Male representative from a religious institution in Prijedor.
[40] Male representative from a religious institution in Brčko.
[41] Male representative from a religious institution in Sarajevo.

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successful, and we are happy with the direction we are taking. It is rare that a student goes unnoticed in such circumstances. We also include the parents and all the stakeholders who are relevant to the student.[42]"

In addition, **activities to promote the values of cooperation, tolerance and coexistence** are carried out. As one of the interviewees stated: "As a teacher, I try to respect the specificities of the place where I live. I am a political scientist, and I am a biased person. I try to make sure that young people have the widest range of perspectives on a given topic through different viewpoints. For example, we have al-most no relationship with Džemal Bijedić University [based in Mostar but on the Bosnian side, with which the Croatian side does not cooperate], while we regularly cooperate with the University of Sa-rajevo and the University of Banja Luka. There were mutual exchanges and visits of both students and professors. I must admit that it was an interesting experience and I was not indifferent to such events. I was constantly trying to find myself in circles where new networks and ideas are formed.[43]"

The most difficult part of the research was to gather information about the functioning of the **security sector**, but the interviewees stated that prevention is mainly done through the implementation of legal provisions that deal with this sector. Interviewees also stated that in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina there is an **Action Plan for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism (2020–2025)**, which **includes clear guidelines on how community actors can contribute to the prevention of ex-tremism**. Examples of good practice include cross-sectoral cooperation and access to prevention in the Brčko District, where security forces also play an important role in prevention. "Every year we organise a summer police school, where we try to teach young people about security and give them skills that show them their role in security – to understand that every citizen is important for security.[44]" In this community there is also a 'school policeman' who, according to our interviewees, contributes to the prevention of extremism.

3.1.2 Serbia

In Serbia, **parastatal control of right-wing extremist activities also serves, paradoxically, as a resili-ence factor**. The government can influence these activities and prevent the groups concerned from committing violent acts. In this way, the government can control their expressions of violence ('local-ised violence'). This form of control is most visible in the **relationship between the government and football fan groups**, where there have been no significant outbreaks of rioting and violence since 2012. The SPP has very good relations with football fan groups, with its leader being a member of one of them, which has allowed it to integrate these groups into a parastatal network controlled by the cur-rent Serbian regime. Although the regime has used football fan groups for various political and criminal purposes, it has managed to reduce violence among them.

On the other hand, **Serbia's legal system recognises national minorities and guarantees their rights**. For example, minority parties do not need to reach a 3% threshold to be represented in the national parliament, and they have the right to form national councils as governing bodies (e.g., the Bosniak

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[42] Female representative from the school in Prijedor.
[43] Male representative from the education sector in Mostar.
[44] Male representative from the police sector in Brčko.

National Council). In Sandžak, however, this institutional system is dominated by a parastatal clientelist network. The social links between local communities and the central government depend on the position of local leaders in this network.

The **regime co-opts Sandžak political leaders into its clientelist network**, providing them with funds and other benefits that allow them to develop and maintain their local clientelist networks in Sandžak. Most Salafis have been de-radicalised and moderated by their integration into these networks. Therefore, **informal networks and practices play a key role in the P/CVE as they provide political and religious leaders with the means to control radicalised individuals and groups.**

On the other hand, all interviewees agree that **the role of religious institutions is extremely important** and can have positive effects in preventing extremism. In contrast, the role of political institutions is much less visible in preventing extremism, but it strongly influences the formation of interpersonal and interethnic relations – and even nationalistic narratives in some cases.

The state has also begun to engage in deradicalisation programmes for returnees from Syria and Ukraine. The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia (Administration for Cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities) has prepared **deradicalisation programmes** in cooperation with representatives of religious communities in Serbia. These programmes are to be implemented at local, national and regional levels. Although this is only the beginning of the Serbian state's involvement in deradicalisation activities, it should be recognised as a driver of community resilience. Nevertheless, the Serbian government has partially addressed the issues of radicalisation and extremism in the National Strategy for the Prevention and Fight against Terrorism, adopted in 2017. This **strategy focuses only on the issue of Islamist terrorism and does not address other forms of violent extremism** and radicalisation. It completely ignores the issue of right-wing extremism. Apart from this strategy, the official discourse of the Serbian government rarely mentions the issues of radicalisation and extremism, including their prevention and combating. The issue of P/CVE does not appear at all in the Serbian public discourse.

As regards the economy and finance, recent years have seen an **increase in the transfer of funds from the central government to local authorities in Sandžak and in investment in regional infrastructure**. This is also linked to the co-option of Sandžak political leaders into the clientelist network of the current regime in Serbia. The **government also funds the two Islamic communities, allowing them to be financially and operationally independent** of donations and support from foreign foundations of dubious reputation. Nevertheless, both Islamic communities are still very dependent on the support of the Bosnian diaspora, which could be a vulnerability factor as the diaspora has played a role in the recruitment of foreign fighters. However, it could also be a factor of resilience, as the Bosnian population is generally well integrated into Western societies, which promotes social rapprochement between Sandžak and the West.

In the area of education, the state financially supports religious education in all religious communities in Serbia, both at primary and secondary level. This support extends to other aspects of their regular activities, including the development of the infrastructure of religious communities. This type of **'equal opportunities' policy presents the state as an impartial and equal supporter of all religious communities** in Serbia.

Although there is generally a lack of dialogue and communication between religious communities in Serbia, the issue of religious education is one on which they generally reach a consensus. The **latest example is the cooperation of all religious communities on the reform of religious education**. The

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SOC brought together representatives of all communities (including the two Islamic communities) to discuss the position of religious education in the Serbian education system. Initiatives such as this could help further intra- and interreligious dialogue, as the SOC managed to bring together representatives of the two rival Islamic communities in Serbia, which is a rare occurrence.

Similarly, religious education in maktabs and madrasas is a factor of resilience rather than vulnerability. **Both Islamic communities adhere to the moderate Hanafi school of Islam and tend to check the radical influences of preachers trained in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States**. As a result, the community has been able to moderate the influence of the Salafis in Sandžak and not the other way around.

3.1.3   Lebanon

Dar al-Fatwa sees itself as the religious authority of Sunni Muslims in Lebanon, as opposed to its political counterpart, i.e. the political authority of Sunnis represented by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. However, the Mufti of the Republic is the one who follows and supports the choices of the Prime Minister, and therefore, the interaction between Dar al-Fatwa and state institutions as a driver of community resilience or vulnerability is an evolving issue.

The relationship between Dar al-Fatwa and the presidency of the Council of Ministers can be a resilience factor at the national level in Lebanon when the Sunni prime minister decides to follow a conciliatory policy with the opponents of the rest of the sects and the political spectrum.

Dar al-Fatwa, like the rest of the official religious institutions, plays a permanent role in preserving the existing political system and plays an auxiliary role in not changing it or undermining its symbols. Hence these official religious institutions are part of the structure that forms the political system in Lebanon. This is highlighted in the "vision" that Dar al-Fatwa presents on its official website: "Dar al-Fatwa, by virtue of its national position and role, actively participates with the other Islamic and Christian religious authorities in addressing the major issues of the country, preserving national unity and holding spiritual summits that strengthen cooperation and harmony among all Lebanese.[45]" This creates, at the heart of the Lebanese political system, an **understanding of the preservation of the country's overall stability and the promotion of civil peace between its sectarian and political components through a thoughtful and measured discourse. It prioritises this issue over Dar al-Fatwa's effort to be an inclusive entity for all non-official Sunni political and religious actors**.

Dar al-Fatwa does not categorically deviate from these constants when the "Sunni consensus" is not reached regarding the figure designated to lead the government, and the person designated for the mandate is supported by the opposing political team, i.e., Hezbollah and the Christian and Sunni political parties allied to it. We note that **Dar al-Fatwa does not deviate from its traditional role in forming the position of the presidency of the religious pillar of the Council of Ministers, regardless of who holds the position of the second presidency.** Dar al-Fatwa refrained from receiving former Prime Minister Hassan Diab for a period of several months and then reversed its decision when it considered that the decision to bring in the interim Prime Minister Diab, in the Beirut port case was a bureaucratic and

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[45]https://www.darelfatwa.gov.lb/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%a4%d9%8a%d8%a9-
%d9%88%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%b3%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a9/

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discretionary decision[46]. Thus, Dar al-Fatwa granted President Diab sectarian resilience and aligned itself with the position of Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, who insists on adopting the constitutional and legal mechanisms in place in the "Supreme Council for the Judgment of Presidents and Ministers" instead of pursuing the judicial process in the case of the Beirut port explosion in the year 2020.

At the local level, the **municipality of Majdal Anjar**, headed by Saeed Yassin, has extensive relations with many officers, but these relations do not cover serious security issues. **The local authorities (the municipal council and mayors) play a leading role as the security services have opened up to the idea of establishing communication channels with local actors**. The adoption of this approach started after 2016[47]. Before that, there was no communication with the security services, with sheikhs, municipalities and mayors, or with Dar al-Fatwa. Furthermore, the achievements of Sheikh Khalil al-Mays (who died 29 July 2021), a Lebanese Muslim scholar who held the position of Mufti of the Bekaa governorate, were highlighted by his success in building large institutions such as the al-Azhar Foundation in the Bekaa. His **leadership skills** helped give these institutions a strong presence and legitimacy, as well as his ability to communicate with unofficial religious leaders, including Sheikh Adnan Umama[48].

In his inaugural speech, Mufti Derian pledged to fight "extremism and terrorism"[49], and has been active in such efforts by organising an **Islamic-Christian summit** in Beirut, and participating in a high-level conference on counter-terrorism in Cairo in December 2014.

The relationship between Dar al-Fatwa and the clergy and informal religious institutions is characterised by aspects of community resilience at the local and national levels, as participants from the informal religious leaders category **described the role of informal bodies such as the LLMS as 'integrative'** while these institutions do not form any competition with Dar al-Fatwa. Umama said: "We established the LLMS to restore balance in the country, and so that it would not be under the domination of one sect over another. We did not want to divide the Sunnis, so we went directly to Dar al-Fatwa, and we told them that we would establish this authority because sometimes they [Dar al-Fatwa] have a low political ceiling" on certain issues. He added: "sometimes they have resentment about certain statements." Perhaps this **"integrative" dynamic between the official and unofficial religious spheres** is most evident in issues of internal identity, as opposed to security issues and regional dimensions. The two institutions jointly opposed a draft resolution stipulating that Friday should not be a public holiday, and that Saturday and Sunday should be considered a weekly days off in Lebanon. The Mufti received a delegation from the LLMS in Lebanon which included about 150 sheikhs from different Lebanese

[46]https://ali-
waa.com.lb/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%B4%D9%8A%D9%81
-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D
9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%AE%D8%B7-
%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%B1-
%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA/

[47] Interview with lawyer Mohammad Sablouh and an interview with a security source in the Ministry of Interior.
[48] Nidal Khaled.
[49] https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/01/05/ar-pub-57635

governorates, according to a statement issued by Derian media office. The meeting demanded that Friday should be an additional holiday, not Saturday, in addition to Sunday.

Participants were unanimous in saying that in the critical security moments in Majdal Anjar, all official and unofficial religious institutions, in addition to the local official authorities of the municipality and the mayor, were united in favour of preventing things from deteriorating into violent extremism against the security services, due to the specificity of Majdal Anjar in the sense that all the actors there are its inhabitants.

Since 2017 sheikhs have participated in numerous workshops in Majdal Anjar dealing with countering violent extremism. These are workshops involving NGOs, the municipality and religious institutions. **Majdal Anjar preachers participate in some courses that promote the discourse of countering violent extremism**, **organised by institutions such as civil society associations, universities, and experts** (Interaction between religious figures and civil society). Sheikh Adnan Umama is one of the prominent sheikhs in the town. Since he headed the LLMS in a previous period, he has supporters of the Islamic ideology, and being one of the town's people, he contributed and helped with the rest of the sheikhs and the existing activities in alleviating congestion in the town, especially in 2012-2013 and through the Municipal Council with its president Sami Ibrahim Al-Ajmi. A committee was formed to follow up on the files of the city's wanted youth, including retired Major General Hussein Abdel-Khaleq, Sheikh Mohammed Abdel-Rahman, Sheikh Adnan Umama and the city's mayors. This committee handed over a number of wanted young men with files, most of whom were innocent, and they were tried and released. This reduced tension that existed and clarified the true image of Majdal Anjar and its open-minded youth, which is why Sheikh Adnan was among the supporters[50].

One possible element of resilience observed in this sense is the **ability of informal, grassroots religious institutions to mediate between armed groups and the government in order to defuse violence**. The unrest in Lebanon's border towns in 2014 is a good example. The trust of inhabitants in informal religious leaders could be a resilience driver. **Interaction between the LLMS, the government presidency and the army command in 2014 led to a ceasefire in the border town of Arsal in the northern Bekaa, between members of the 'Islamic State' (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) and Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra), and the Lebanese army and the forces supporting it**. The head of the LLMS at the time, Salem al-Rafi'i, visited Prime Minister Tammam Salam and convinced him of the importance of the army not fighting Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS members infiltrating Arsal, as this would endanger around 120 Syrian refugees. Salam managed to persuade the army chief to give the commission 24 hours to conduct negotiations in which the fighters would withdraw from Lebanese territory and ensure the protection of civilians. The LLMS considers these negotiations as one of its most significant achievements[51].

All branches operate in the Central Bekaa in general coordination with the heads of the central security services in Beirut. All detainees in Majdal Anjar were brought before the military court[52].

The overlap between official religious spheres and state institutions involves women, even to a small extent, in decision-making within the official religious apparatus. For example, the name of the "Future Parliamentary Bloc" MP Bahia Hariri was mentioned in the Mufti's electoral body in the decision

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[50] Interview with lawyer Mohammad Khaled al-Ajmi.
[51] Adnan Umama.
[52] Interview with lawyer Mohammad Khaled al-Ajmi.

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of Prime Minister Tammam Salam to invite the Islamic Electoral Council during August 2014. Despite its progressiveness, **women's influence on decision-making within the official religious institution is almost non-existent, and women's participation in political life faces challenges**, as only six women won seats in the Lebanese Parliament out of 128 elected in 2018, only one of whom is from the Sunni sect. At the local level, women are not represented at the local authority level, so it is not possible to assess or understand their role in the process of building community resilience to counter violent extremism, or conversely, through the interaction between religious and formal institutions.

3.1.4 Iraq

Another **resilience factor related to religious organisations is the role they can play in not authorising or otherwise delegitimising armed groups or their leaders**. For example, in Iraq, the Iraqi Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako publicly disassociated the church from the PMF's Babylon Brigade (a brigade composed of Christians), after the brigade was accused of committing crimes against Sunni populations in the Nineveh Plain. He also called on all Iraqi Christians to stay away from any armed faction claiming to represent Christians.

In addition, the **pseudo-political role of religious leaders in states such as Lebanon and Iraq can also play a key role in interfaith solidarity initiatives that can prevent the escalation of violence**. A good example of this was seen in the 2019 Iraqi protests, led by the Shia Endowment. Foreign Christian leaders supported the protests and Patriarch Sako of Iraq canceled Christmas celebrations in Iraq in solidarity with the protesters.

Finally, in line with the previous case, **religious leaders can play a clear resilience role by being at the forefront of nonviolent protests and publicly rejecting the use of violence by their own followers**. During the October 2019 protests in Iraq, the government responded violently to the protesters. Shia leader al-Sistani and other Shia scholars have focused on endorsing the legitimate and peaceful protests and condemning violence, while urging the government to carry out necessary reforms (Beaoujouan, 2020; Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2020).

Finally, another relevant element of resilience was seen in Iraq with the **introduction of laws recognising the victims of violent extremism**. The Yazidi Women Survivors Bill, which recognises the atrocities perpetrated by Da'esh against Yazidi, Turkmen, Christian and Shabak women and girls, is a good example. Recognition of the victims of violent extremism could be relevant in the attempt to highlight the catastrophic consequences of VE and to socially exclude those who support it.

3.1.5 Tunisia

On the other hand, **formal religious institutions cannot always act in time after a period of crisis, especially in centralised systems such as Tunisia**. In the centralised model, the government controls religious affairs in general, including the management of religious schools. In the case of Tunisia, **al-Zaytouna University (an institution under the Ministry of Higher Education) is responsible for the creation of all knowledge related to Islam in Tunisia**. This includes the development of religious education programmes in primary and secondary schools as well as the training of graduates in Islamic

studies. The unification of Islamic knowledge creation in a respected and recognised institution such as al-Zaytouna University was noted by interviewees as an element of resilience against violent extremism, as it **illustrates how a serious academic institution can have legitimacy in the religious community**. Nevertheless, officials acknowledged **significant weaknesses in the knowledge transfer channels** for disseminating this knowledge among the Tunisian population. Some elements of vulnerability were mentioned, related to the reality of public schools and religious schools which, as noted above, are often under-resourced and understaffed.

After the revolution and the spread of jihadist-Salafi groups in Tunisia, the government showed an interest in studying how religion plays out in the country. The Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies studied the Salafi-jihadist phenomenon between 2012 and 2014. The government consulted researchers on religion in Tunisia and a report on the religious reality on the ground was published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in cooperation with the government in 2014. This interest of official religious institutions in examining the Tunisian reality, however, seemed insufficient in terms of real political progress or prevention of the emergence of violent extremist groups.

After the Tunisian revolution, the government reduced its interference in religious issues, although it still applied a strategy of marginalisation/monopoly through the security forces (they banned certain religious movements and expressions). As already observed, this context of loss of ground for official religious discourse has allowed new informal religious organisations, including violent extremist organisations, to spread easily. The Ministry of Religious Affairs has tried to reclaim its space by rehabilitating discourse in mosques, implementing new freedom-friendly policies, disconnecting the Ministry of Religious Affairs from the Ministry of Interior, and issuing new laws in agreement with other ministries. However, the jihadist-Salafi movement was already a reality. A former Minister of Religious Affairs pointed out that even today, there is limited coordination between the Ministry and other religious components: al-Iftaa, al-Zaytouna University or the Supreme Islamic Council.

This co-optation could be translated by the rule of law and human rights. The fieldwork in Tunisia highlighted a possible notable **success of judicial policies in the fight against violent extremism**. After the designation of Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist organisation in March 2013, the detention of its leaders and the banning of any public expression of support for the organisation, interviewees noted a significant decrease in popular support for the organisation in Tunisia. This was also confirmed by former Tunisian Salafis who explained how, after the ban, the path of violent extremist organisations such as Ansar al-Sharia became frustrating and impractical in terms of achieving their goals. In this sense, the **criminalisation of violent extremist organisations can lead to disillusionment amongst some of their members who may not be as interested in underground activism and the risks it entails**.

3.2   Interreligious and Trans-ethnic Dialogue

Although Serbia has a history of interethnic and interreligious conflicts, religious communities traditionally show tolerance and respect for each other. They do not have institutionalised cooperation and dialogue, but often adopt a common position towards the state, especially when it comes to officially regulating the status of religious communities. Furthermore, social bonding within communities and social rapprochement between communities play a key role in building community resilience in Serbia, particularly in Sandžak. The community plays a vital role in the lives of individuals, providing them with

a moral sense of right and wrong. The **Bosniak and Serb communities in Sandžak strongly condemn all forms of extremism and, although they are mostly separate, they are very tolerant towards each other.** These communities have a **long history of co-existence**, while **interethnic incidents have been mainly imported from outside**. Although there is an institutional framework for encouraging cooperation between religious communities through the Administration for cooperation with Churches and Religious Communities (of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Serbia), very little is done in this respect. At the same time, there is a lack of cooperation between the SOC and the two Islamic communities. While these two religious communities traditionally show respect and understanding for each other, there is very little interaction between them, and no meaningful institutional dialogue (on extremism or other political issues). The Interfaith Council was established in 2010, but it has not yet met.

The Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the positive examples of strengthening resistance to extremism and cooperation and dialogue, but it was stressed that this body **needs to be more visible on the ground**. With regard to processes and factors that contribute to the curbing of extremism, all communities (Sarajevo, Brčko, Prijedor and Mostar) and respondents from these communities agree that **key mechanisms are present in youth programmes, education, training and workshops**. These initiatives demonstrate good practices that encourage dialogue and interaction, which ultimately contributes to a better understanding of the other and reduces the risk of extremism. It is clear from the responses of the interviewees that the activities of some religious institutions (e.g. the Islamic community in Brčko), through their workshops and debates, have contributed to improving mutual understanding and strengthening the community's resilience to extremism. A similar positive example can be observed in Prijedor, where the **high school curriculum includes discussions on different cultural and ethnic customs and religious holidays and provides opportunities for exchange of experiences**. On the other hand, the **lack of political support** is a negative factor, but there is the example of the Brčko district government, which always publicly condemns detected hate speech.

The Islamic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with the OSCE and the IOM, has organised several activities in the field of prevention of extremism and **promotion of critical thinking**. These initiatives have had a positive impact on the public, especially in the context of the departure of fighters from BiH to foreign conflicts, which has put the Islamic Community of BiH under some pressure. However, this type of cooperation did not involve interaction with political/state institutions.

In Serbia, some Bosnian Sandžak political leaders have even decided to **go beyond ethnic and religious boundaries and move away from the logic of minority-majority divisions**. There are two **trans-ethnic political parties**, including Bosniaks, Serbs and others, led by Bosniak Sandžak political leaders: the Social Democratic Party of Serbia (affiliated to the SDP) and the PJR (formerly known as the Bosniak Democratic Community of Sandžak). The political expression of their willingness to (re)integrate Sandžak into Serbian society and to abandon the majority/minority division of politics is also a driving force behind the resilience of the community.

Several initiatives for intercommunity dialogue and prevention of violent extremism have taken place in the three WB countries studied in this report. The measurement of effectiveness of these initiatives presents obvious analytical difficulties. However, it is possible to extract some shared insights from the community response to these initiatives, which can guide future programming.

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In the case of Tunisia, for example in Kef, **where civil society is rather vibrant, some interreligious dialogue ("Dialogue between Religions") and PVE initiatives ("Ambassadors against Terrorism") seem to have succeeded in keeping young people away from VE**. Interviewees noted, however, that youth engagement in these activities has worked because of the strong culture of youth work and community development in the region. In Lebanon, Majdal Anjar launched a community-based PVE network at the al-Azhar Centre, with the collaboration of official religious representatives and national and local authorities. According to research in the region, this marked a new era in the spread of violent extremism. Thus, a **tradition of civic engagement and youth activism appear to be important resilience factors, which can be strengthened by grassroots PVE initiatives**.

Finally, **peacebuilding, peace advocacy and PVE initiatives that emerge from religious institutions** can be important resilience factors. We have already mentioned how some of these initiatives in times of crisis in Iraq and Lebanon prevented the escalation of conflict.

3.2.1 The Rhetoric of Resilience of the Maronite Church and Maronite Political Parties in Lebanon in the face of Violent Extremism

Although the 1932 official census of the Lebanese population is outdated and hence may represent one of the major problems that the state faces, not conducting any other sectarian affiliation census today helps to avoid this subject and thus sectarian tensions because it helps to avoid the question of the share of power by the heads of the main communities and thus the balance of power between them. **As long as the balance of power between the main groups is "stable", their political relations will remain stable as well**. However, since the Taïf accords in 1989, voices have been raised among the Maronite community to claim "the rights of Christians" which are embodied in the prerogatives of the President, the Maronite shares in parliament and ministries, and the rule that only Maronite parties name the Maronite ministers.

Today, as long as the Free Patriotic Movement – which has the majority of seats in parliament – gets along with Hezbollah and this coalition forms together the majoritarian bloc in parliament, we can state that the question of "the rights of Christians" would therefore remain unanswered in parliament. However, this question is still tackled in the partisan discourse, in other words, on the community level, in order to federate members of the Maronite community and to stay or become the main Maronite party. In their relationship to the two other main communities, competing Maronite parties must come to a political agreement on the issues that unite them and put aside the issues representing a potential conflict, which is never guaranteed.

The political, societal and economic crises that Lebanon is facing today showed that the demonstrations against the system in 2019, known as the revolution of October 17, raised the **separation between religion and politics as one of the major claims of the revolution**. This could pacify the relations between sectarian communities and would also compromise the power of sect's *zo'ama (leadership)*, who have been using this rhetoric since the Lebanese state was founded. This would also help to decrease the "us" and "them" rhetoric, replacing it with a rhetoric based more on national affiliation. **Political leaders, media and the religious authorities must also agree on curbing sectarian preferences and incitement in the rhetoric used both within and between each group**, and replacing it with

one that emphasizes affiliation with the Lebanese nation. In other words, they need to **break the sectarian canal towards Lebanese citizenship**. This is one of the toughest tasks for political parties that have made sectarianism their stock-in-trade. Sejaan Quazi for instance says in our interview that Lebanon was created as a sectarian state with Muslims and Christians, and today Maronites, Sunnis and Shias, rather than a civil state with citizens.

Although the Maronite Church plays a political role, Monsignor Mazloum denies it: "The church's role is not to play politics. Its role is a national role which is interested in big matters. If it sees that in politics there is something, for example, threatening liberties, it will say stop. Or if there are things threatening the independence of the country, OK. But it is not our role to get involved in everyday Lebanese politics, in terms of mayors, elections, MPs, etc. Today I am 86, I have never voted. I want to be able to be in the same distance from everyone and have the same relationship with everyone so I can be free to say what is right if I see something wrong, to say what is permitted and what is not … this is the role of church officials." While his speech leans for neutrality, it is clear that the Church is present in the political arena on both the Maronite and national levels. He also showed that he understands and could cleverly use the Maronite wording either to excite or to calm the Maronite community.

When the Patriarch claimed neutrality, it provoked reactions within the Maronite elite. Opinions varied between favourable and skeptical. For instance, Marie Najem defends the reaction of her party, saying that the FPM was the first to raise this claim: "We were the first to support this demand but we put conditions to implement it. We did not say that we are against neutrality and that it is not good for Lebanon, on the contrary."

One of the issues that have recently been raised is the question of dividing Lebanon along sectarian lines. In fact, it is a project that Lebanese Maronite right-wing parties raised during the civil war. During his interview, Monsignor Mazloum explained the stance of the patriarchy regarding this issue: "The patriarchy is absolutely against partition. And this was part of the conflict between the patriarchy and the Lebanese Front during the civil war because some parties of the Lebanese Front were for partition."

For his part, Sejaan Quazi regrets the sectarian system as his following quotation shows: "We should find a way to live with each other as Muslims and Christians and to make a secular system that relies on the value of the individual, not on the sect of the individual, but we still have a long way to go before we see this. After these events (Lebanese Civil War), the extremist Islamic currents started to flourish. And today, we've witnessed the emergence of ISIS and al-Qaida. And so, we strayed far away from secularism. How can you make this country become secular with Hezbollah? This is a religious party. It is not only a religious party, it is a party composed of religious people. How could you make it secular with Salafi Sunnis? And with Extremists, and ISIS and Hamas and others?" However, as this quotation shows, he **holds the Islamist movements responsible for today's sectarianism, relieving the Christian parties of any responsibility as they must defend their community**. He also pledges for a secular state because there "will no longer be a majority and a minority", as he states.

As shown earlier, the rhetoric of the Patriarch and Maronite parties tend to exacerbate the sense of sectarian affiliation. However, they both prove their **ability to calm the crowds, and thus participate in building resilience** of their public when their political interests are met. Raising claims of neutrality or secularism also serves a political project that does not necessarily lead to peaceful relations between Lebanese sects, since the other political actors, in particular Muslims, would translate these claims into sectarian terms.

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In Lebanon, **women are active political players when it comes to women's rights to give the Lebanese nationality to their children born to mixed couples** (foreigners or refugees in Lebanon such as Iraqis, Palestinians and Syrian partners). However, this activism does not suit Maronite parties or the Patriarchy as our interview with Monsignor Mazloum reveals. Mazloum confronts this demand to the cause of the state saying, "It is taking its precaution to ensure its unity." In the following quotation, the latter defends the rejection of the Maronite Church of granting the Lebanese nationality to children born from mixed marriages, mainly for demographic reasons: "If we go back in history, Lebanon is a state that is based on the diversity of its 18 sects and on the equality between these sects, and the Taïf accords named this equality 'fifty-fifty'. There is an imbalance in this equilibrium because Christians have fewer children than Muslims, second because the migration impacted more the Christians than Muslims. If we continue in this imbalance and encourage it then in 20, 30 years from now, the Christians will become a minority, maybe 10%. What will be their voice in the state? At this moment, Lebanon will become like any other Arab country. Then, what will prevent our Muslim brothers from saying that Lebanon is an Islamic state? We want to preserve the essence of the Lebanese entity, which is based on the coexistence between these 18 sects, regardless of the numbers. This is because such a coexistence between Lebanese allows people to live together equally regardless of their affiliation. Equality before Law, total freedom, freedom of belief, freedom of thought, and not being suppressed in the name of religion, etc. But if we continue on this track, then Lebanon will no longer be a state built on diversity but instead on unity."

When we asked this question to Marie Najem, she told us that while the Christian parties were hostile, Muslim parties would be favourable: "It is right that the FPM has a clear position on this question but I think that the Amal movement or Future movement or others do not have a problem with this because they are not afraid to lose like Christian parties are…" **As a woman, she also made a distinction between her point of view and her party's position**: "but on this question, I have my own opinion, and there is, of course, the opinion of the FPM. This question is a question of rights above all. And me as a woman, I cannot understand why I cannot bequeath my nationality to my children like my husband can. And speaking from a pure rights standpoint, even the FPM cannot stand against this matter. But back to the context, the reason for this historically was a reaction to the presence of the Palestinian refugees and now the Syrians, and so there are fears regarding granting citizenship status as they would then alter the sectarian balance in the country. And today, because the refugees are mostly Sunnis, protecting the sectarian diversity in Lebanon passes through impeaching Lebanese women from giving their nationality… What the FPM did is that it proposed a law for nationality which treats equally women and men. This law meant that if you want to exclude some nationalities for demographic reasons or political reasons or whatever, this exclusion applies to men and women equally. This means that if we are talking about Palestinians and Syrians here, neither men nor women could bequeath their Lebanese nationality to their children … what I am saying is that you are trying to find a solution for a dilemma, [to not reduce the number of Christians, as the majority of Lebanese women are married to Muslim foreigners] you cannot reach total equality between men and women which is logical and in the end, you made half a solution in the absence of a new law instead of a complete law [laughing]." Her answer shows how delicate this issue is because of the importance of maintaining the balance between the sects. Although she considers issues pertaining to rights as being above sectarian political calculations, she meanwhile adds that the FPM inherited this system and cannot easily tackle

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this question without reaching a national agreement to change it. However, this example shows how women's rights are also utilised as a sectarian issue on the political scene.

To conclude, even issues pertaining to rights are viewed with a sectarian gaze because of the sacredness of the question of maintaining the sectarian balance between the national communities of Lebanon. That being said, the Maronite parties as well as the church are aware that it is more a pretense of balance than a real balance between the communities. Unless a denominational census takes place, it would be impossible to know whether the sectarian balance of the 1930s is still relevant.

These identity panics which are in reality political panics are to be linked to the way in which Lebanon was built informally and not officially, since the constitution does not distribute political powers between sects. Rather it is a political custom that has prevailed since the country's independence, which dictates the division of powers between Maronites, Sunnis and Shiites.

By playing on the tightrope of sectarianism, the political parties, in particular Maronite, resort to a lexical field referring to their annihilation to stir up fear but also the sectarian hatred of their popular and militant bases. This utilisation of Christian identity panics results in either the migration of Maronite youth or their organisation to defend their community, which does not necessarily result in pacifying the relations between sects and therefore in resilience to violent extremism.

3.3   Civil Society Engagement in PVE Programmes

Non-governmental organisations have been recognised as an important factor in building resilience to violent extremism in communities, and their efforts focus on organising various workshops and seminars with donor support and coordination with the government. The **reality of civil society initiatives is relatively similar in the WB and in MENA**.

3.3.1   Western Balkans

In Serbia, civil society organisations play an important role in building resilience in the Sandžak region. Over the years, CSOs have established themselves as "**alternative service providers**" by shining a spotlight on the problems of radicalisation and extremism. CSOs in Serbia launched the first CVE programme in 2012, supported by the US State Department and aimed at empowering young people in preventing radicalisation and building trust between youth and police by deconstructing stereotypes about the police, Islam and youth culture. Local CSOs based in Sandžak (DamaD, UrbanIN, Forum 10, Svetionik[53]) have implemented several P/CVE projects over the years. These included research on risk factors affecting human security and assessment of the capacities of public institutions to support it, with the aim of increasing the resilience of the local community and youth to security threats and risks, including radicalism and extremism. In addition, DamaD has developed a referral mechanism to prevent and counter extremism and radicalism.

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[53]https://www.rcc.int/pubs/38/initiatives-to-preventcounter-violent-extremism-in-south-east-europe-a-survey-of-regional-issues-initiatives-and-opportunities

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The **CSO sector in Serbia has also recognised the importance of women as agents of prevention**, as they constitute the majority of P/CVE activists. Although a high percentage of the population in Sandžak is very religious, this does not prevent women from participating in various social and political activities. On the contrary, they constitute the majority of civil society activists in this region. This is partly due to the adherence to the moderate version of Islam and the tradition of secularism inherited from the period of socialist Yugoslavia.

In BiH, the civil society sector focuses mainly on **youth work and universal preventive action through education, training, youth clubs and other formats**. These programmes, in which participants are encouraged to connect and socialise, are designed for young people. An civil society activist explained: "These are workshops that bring them together. It's an opportunity for young people to socialise and that's the most important thing. A lot of the work we do is to address the alienation of young people, who go back into the community and become active once the programme is over. It is a **peer-to-peer idea, where young people invite each other to participate**[54]." Similarly, **activities are carried out with parents** to recognise the early signs of extremism and radicalisation[55].

The social work and mental health centers focus on working with at-risk groups and thus offer opportunities for preventive action. As one interviewee states: "What the centers have to do is to support each family in a way that meets their needs. By meeting these needs, you also influence radicalisation.[56]"

International organisations make an important contribution through sponsorship and various programmes run by both the civil society sector and public institutions. Like civil society organisations, **international organisations** are working to fill gaps in the school sector and to educate young people on critical thinking and emotional intelligence. Describing the work of international actors, one of our respondents said that "foreign organisations have developed methodologies and programmes for young people to connect, socialise and spend time together[57]".

3.3.2   MENA

Women's presence in civil society is significant and greater than that of the religious sector. In Iraq, for example, women are more present in civil society organisations than men (65%). The presence of women in cultural and community events in the city of Kef for example was seen as an element of resilience against violent extremism. Similarly, in Lebanon, women are much more present in civil society organisations, sometimes even representing a higher percentage of the staff of local NGOs and associations. The role and work of civil society organisations and NGOs can be an important resilience factor for VE, as it improves women's representation, political participation and social engagement. Women's presence is also evident in local associations or local networks that have emerged from international projects. For example, the network of strong cities operating in Majdal Anjar includes 5

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[54] Female representative from the civil society sector in Mostar.
[55] Male representative from the civil society sector in Prijedor.
[56] Female representative from the social welfare centre in Mostar.
[57] Female representative from an international organisation in Mostar.

women for every 10 men, while women make up 50% of the workers of the Association of Youth Initiatives (Youth), and the Cooperative Association for the Manufacture and Marketing of Agricultural Production (Initiators) includes 12 women for every 3 men. Women make up 25% of the employees of the Youth Initiatives Sports Club.

In Iraq, the large majority of grassroots participants – while praising the positive impact of PVE initiatives – opinionated that more needs to be done to promote peace and stability in Nineveh Province. These findings were corroborated by Rifaat's report that states: "the majority of the respondents were unaware of field efforts aimed at preventing VE […] This is despite a widespread recognition that increasing knowledge of other groups' identity, culture and religion is important for social cohesion and coexistence" (Rifaat 2021, 32–33). Indeed, the **'IS shock' contributed to the emergence of an Iraqi local civil society network working around important notions such as trust building, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence and raising awareness about the importance of building resilience to VE**.

The lack of community awareness about the efforts of civil society might explain why CSOs were only mentioned as the third actor of resilience in Nineveh Province, after religious representatives and political figures**. Despite the wish of interviewees to see political representatives take the lead in community resilience, these actors also scored the lowest degree of trust among grassroots, civil society and religious respondents alike**. It shows that the state is still regarded as the key provider of peace and stability in Iraq. The state is looked at as a "father" whose key tasks are to provide protection and services. The findings also highlight the urgent need to strengthen the role of the state in regard to PVE, and to reactivate the role of the Supreme Permanent Committee for Peaceful Community Coexistence of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.

While respondents highlighted the role of religious and political representatives and civil society in PVE, only a couple of them emphasized the need for a cooperative and integrated PVE approach in Iraq. This is reminiscent of the poor coordination between the Iraqi stabilisation and peace-building actors in the country, and the lack of bridges between each of the mentioned institutions and actors.

Civil society may be the field where women are most involved in issues of PVE and witnessed some positive developments over the most recent years. According to the testimonies collected in Nineveh Province, activities organised by civil society are generally attended by a majority of women, while women employees in CSOs exceed that of male employees (on average 65%). This high percentage of women in this sector might also be attributed to prerequisites of international donors that ensure an equal representation of men and women in the position they fund. **At the level of local CSOs, the representativeness of women in civil society organisations largely depends on the willingness of the organisation's leadership to give positions to female applicants rather than male ones, rather than to international standards**. Women are also represented – although not to a satisfactory degree – in peace initiatives in Nineveh Province. Importantly, women are now fighting for their inclusion in peace building. For instance, the female members of Tal Afar Peace Committee along with a group of women activists strove to have a key role in the negotiation and in the signature of the 2020 Tal Afar Covenant Agreement, while they were initially excluded from the process (USIP 2020). Based on these findings and additional research, and within the scope of the project "Towards Enhancing Women's Participation in Peace Processes in Nineveh", El Barlament organisation issued a series of recommendations to increase the participation of women in peacemaking in Nineveh Province (2020).

The Tunisian National Committee for the Fight against Terrorism, which is currently represented by various ministries, has abandoned the religious police paradigm in favour of a more comprehensive

examination of risk factors. This led the institution to identify social exclusion as the main risk factor for VE in Tunisia, based on a map of marginalisation that coincides identically with the map of violent extremism. The Committee also recognised the tensions that state security actors have caused in the population and advocated a possible solution to this problem through the modernisation of security institutions and the privatisation of security for the first levels of intervention (e.g. sporting events). The Committee also noted the need for a reintegration center for former violent extremists and terrorist offenders, bearing in mind the stigma and social rejection they face upon release from prison, which adds to their already high vulnerability to reoffending. But over time, **CSOs have completely monopolised the issue of violent extremism and P/CVE programmes**. This has created a form of 'CSO bubble' where only CSOs are 'in charge' of the issue of extremism, with very little input from religious communities and public institutions on this issue. CSOs work mainly in the prevention sector, but their activities are limited due to the current lack of funds previously available for P/CVE-related actions, although some receive grants from international organisations. As a result, **many programmes follow the agendas of foreign actors, with certain issues being given more prominence if they are relevant to the donor**.

In Lebanon UN agencies have mandated CSOs and the government to develop a strategy to prevent violent extremism in order to overcome political sectarianism. A national PVE strategy was developed in 2018 which included a number of different ministries and CSOs. In addition to the UNDP, the Strong Cities Network (SCN)[58] – which is a prevention project against extremism – also worked in partnership with the national PVE coordinator at the local level, via the Local Prevention Networks. In order to drive all actors and stakeholders to adopt the national PVE strategy, the SCN, said Rubina Abu Zainab who represents the PVE Unit, organised a consultation meeting with Lebanese municipalities and local prevention networks in the cities of Saïda, Tripoli and Majdal Anjar. Through its partnership with the national PVE coordinator, the SCN, supported by the British Council, organised stakeholder consultations and workshops with local experts to enable a better understanding of local issues in the national PVE action plan.

On the local level, municipalities try to address violent extremism with the help of NGOs and by receiving financial support from foreign governments. Rubina Abu Zainab explains the functioning of this process and the countries that are involved in addressing violent extremism: "The strategy is in line with the UN Secretary General's Global Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Extremism published in late 2015 and implemented in 2016. […] I was appointed in early 2017 to develop the national strategy, and from day one, the focus of the strategy was to be complemented by a comprehensive government approach […] based on international standards. […] **Lebanon has taken a dual path by developing two independent strategies, one to prevent violent extremism and another to counter violent extremism**." She also states that the approach of the PVE national action plan moved from governmental to societal by teaming up with 300 institutions, 145 NGOs and 850 people who participated in the workshops organised by the PVE unit, as well as local stakeholders which constitute the national PVE network.

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[58] For more insight on SCN, see https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/ar/city/%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/, consulted on November 27, 2021.

As part of a series of sessions, the Majdal Anjar Community Prevention Network organised a PVE training to train local teachers to raise awareness of P/CVE methods for use in the classroom. The Community Prevention Network also launched a three-day youth camp on the prevention of violent extremism. The camp aimed to involve local Lebanese and Syrian youth in artistic and sports activities, and to develop and strengthen peace and social cohesion skills in order to prevent the emergence of violent extremist tendencies among local youth. The camp was led by the coordinator of the Community Prevention Network in Majdal Anjar and director of the Youth Initiatives Association Mr. Nidal Khaled, with the support of the Mayor of Majdal Anjar, Saeed Yassin[59].

For her part, Mirna Sabbagh who works as an editor-in-chief for the Municipality of Saïda and as the reference for the SCN-PVE strategy at the municipality, says that Saïda is the first municipality to be part of the SCN. This network includes several states and international actors and institutions in the field alongside civil society actors, including NGOs, and also involves sheikhs. Sheikh Abu Zeid plays an important role in the network, contributing mainly through his expertise and contacts. In agreement with Dar-al-Fatwa, Sheikh Abu Zeid has launched an **annual programme which involves unifying the preaching of Friday prayers in mosques by drawing on hadiths and texts from the Koran that urge moderation and rejection of violence**. These speeches were tested during a workshop bringing together sheikhs from the city of Saïda. The workshops were interrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The network also organises workshops for teachers of Islamic education in schools in Saïda.

The network, therefore, focuses on the religious sector and works mainly with youth, starting with the school network in Saïda and the Palestinian refugee camps run by UNRWA. It also targets post-school youth, up to the age of 20, says Mirna al-Sabbagh. One of the most important achievements of the network is the establishment of a guide for the city of Saïda on prevention against violent extremism in schools.[60] Al-Sabbagh further adds that **the municipality of Saïda also organised open dialogue tables with young people who participated in the revolution of October 17, 2019, through the student movement**. Thus, she says that the role of the network and the municipality of Saïda is to prevent the situation from taking a security turn. Therefore, the next step for the municipality of Saïda will be to integrate the police into the network to train them and provide them with skills on how they should treat people.

Rubina Abu Zainab considers the PVE strategy as a "soft tool" to address violent extremism along with a "hard tool" which is the CT strategy developed by the government. Although separate, the two strategies are complementary, said Rubina. The national PVE unit also plays its part in the national committee to define the CT strategy.

Rubina argues that the activities of the national PVE action plan are mainly directed towards youngsters in order to prevent them from falling to extremism. Among their recommendations, they suggested the **creation of a space through the media for open dialogue dedicated to youth** to raise awareness regarding the risks and threats associated with radicalisation and extremism, the promotion of the culture of tolerance and peace through programmes dedicated to youth, etc.

However, the PVE unit sees young people, as well as other vulnerable audiences, as passive targets who can easily turn to extremism. In the context of this study, these recepients were not interviewed

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[59]https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/ar/city/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-
%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/
[60] A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism, 2016, Arabic version, Published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

to find out how the policies of the national PVE action plan are implemented and how these policies are received by these audiences. In addition, the action of the PVE unit is still new and it is therefore necessary to allow for more time before saying whether the national PVE action plan is a step a in the right direction.

In addition, we must not forget the strength of the sectarian system. We believe that to neutralise it so that the weight of religious affiliations is no longer a determining factor in political matters, state institutions must be reformed.

With regards to the gender dimension, on October 20, 2021, the Central Statistics Administration (CAS), in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)[61], launched Lebanon's first gender statistical report titled, "The Lives of Women and Men in Lebanon: a statistical portrait". The launch of this report comes against the backdrop of a multifaceted and deep crisis in Lebanon. The report focuses on the six thematic areas of demography, health, education, labor market, socio-economic conditions, decision-making and human rights and highlights the main trends that underpin the country's progress towards achieving gender equality over the past 15 years. It highlights in particular how progress towards achieving gender equality varies across areas of life. While parity between the sexes is achieved in the field of education and is even higher for girls in higher education; there remain significant disparities when entering the labor market, which induces a probability of economic dependence of women.

The report indicates that women are significantly underrepresented in politics, including in government and in leadership and middle management positions. The proportion of seats held by women in parliament remains very low (4.7% over the past 15 years). The election of women to local governments in all municipalities in Lebanon remains low (5.4% in the 2016 municipal elections). Women are still underrepresented in higher-level careers, managerial positions and religious positions, as reflected by their absence in our report. While the share of female senior and middle managers in the public sector has improved, exceeding 40% in 2018, the under-representation of women is more pronounced in the private sector as only 26.5% of managerial positions were occupied by women in 2018.

In 2000, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security which calls for women to participate in peace building, be protected from human rights violations, and have access to justice. Lebanon is one of the countries which include this resolution and related activities in its PVE National Strategy.

The Lebanese strategy paid special attention to women in the PVE strategy. This is the fifth pillar of the strategy which is exclusively dedicated to "gender equality and the empowerment of women". Eight ministries participate in aiming to achieve objectives of this pillar. As Rubina puts it in our interview: "Apart from the fact that women have their own pillar, PVE, as a component that has a relationship with women, is present in the strategy under the heading (1325 resolution of the UN Security Council) 'Women, security and peace'. In the part about this strategy for countering violent extremism and empowering women, it is already mentioned as PVE. It is therefore a part linked to the role of women in security and peace, the role of women in the family. **Women can be victims of VE but they can also be contributors to PVE**. Women are also one of the main target groups of the PVE national action plan,

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along with youngsters, prisoners and vulnerable communities. Those who attended the national consultation were around 50/50 female and male participants, so that women were major contributors to the development of the national action plan and the national strategy as well."

However, as indicated in the previous point, the PVE unit considers women as passive targets that can be vulnerable in the face of extremist discourse. During our fieldwork, we met with Em-Mohammad, the wife of Sheikh Khalil Solh. Her social and political commitments contradict the vision of the PVE unit towards women: "We are part of an association; its name is 'Association for Social Salvation'. We also went out into the field. I mean, we went out like the rest of the people, not in the name of an association or in the name of anything specific. No, because when the revolution [of October 17, 2019] started, I mean something inside motivated us to go down onto the streets. We didn't wait for someone to tell us to come down or participate. It's our duty." However, she acknowledges that the participation of women was lower than that of men. Regarding the association to which she belongs, she says: "It's more at the level of advocacy. It teaches classes in religion, education in Sharia, in addition to being social, humanitarian… Now, in the crisis, we distribute food, sometimes clothing…" However, she is lucid on the place left to women when it comes to participating in politics. She blames men for not taking women seriously in their political experiences. She also blames women for not being interested enough in politics and argues that although women demonstrate alongside men, they still lack political awareness. Sheikh Ossama Amin Shihabi puts it in a more direct way: "A woman's mission is to be a mother and a housewife, and this must be preserved." Most of our interviewees remained silent when being asked abuot the role of women in preventing or fueling violent extremism. This shows the **ineffectiveness of the various CSO initiatives and actions mentioned above regarding gender equality**.

3.4 Conclusion

Numerous stakeholders acknowledged that the religious sector should be involved at all levels in efforts to counter violent extremism. Internationally, programmes are targeting portions of their P/CVE strategy to directly work with religious partners, convening gatherings with various stakeholders to better understand whom to engage and how. On a national level, governments are considering the role of religion in various components of violent extremism and, in varying degrees and levels of effectiveness, recognising that **the religious sector can have positive roles in CVE, especially on the local level**. **But for policymakers and government and security actors to work effectively with religious actors, they must engage carefully and appreciate their unique, sometimes complex roles within their communities**.

P/CVE policy, internationally and domestically, has **tended to instrumentalise religious actors** – if they are referenced in a positive, collaborative way at all. Two examples reflect the interaction between state and religious leaders. For example, a government initiative may seek moderate religious leaders to promote counter narratives to violent interpretations of religious scripture, often offering to support the religious leader or organisation in various ways, including financially or through skills-based training. In addition, **security officials often instrumentalise religious actors and call on religious leaders to provide surveillance and report any signs of radicalisation among their community members**, as has been happening around the world.

Government regulation of religious space is a delicate issue in many countries and fraught with risk. On the one hand, in a country with a sectarian sectarian system, the government can control or monitor what an official imam or a pastor says in a sermon, but cannot do this with unofficial or informal religious leaders. On the other hand, even if the government contributes financial resources to a religious institution, the government does not necessarily have more authority to make decisions on behalf of its leaders. This interaction has an impact on the social contracts that bind society and the state. **Religious leaders both formal and informal, do more than religion**. **In many communities and societies their roles transcend spaces, activities, and institutions conventionally demarcated as religious**. They are **social actors who have influence in a broad range of sectors including governance, human development, economic growth, conflict resolution and peacebuilding**.

Official and unofficial religious leaders are likely to be more trusted and to have a finer understanding of the specific issues facing their communities, and the same applies to institutions of religious higher learning closely associated with, or regulated by the state.

4   General Conclusion

In exploring the interaction between the state and religious actors and their influence on the propensity of communities to be vulnerable or resilient to patterns of violent extremism, the PAVE teams in Iraq, Lebanon, Tunisia, BiH and Serbia focused on a number of different factors including i) the legitimacy of formal state institutions and formal and informal religious institutions, ii) the interaction between state religious leaders, civil society and NGOs/CSOs, iii) exploration of political systems and their complexities, including security institutions, judicial institutions, public policies and political discourses, iv) economic issues and resources, including regional, national and international funding and its impacts, and v) education systems involving the management of schools and religious affairs. In addition, the impact of dialogue and cooperation between different actors, both vertically and horizontally, was explored, as well as the role of programmes and initiatives designed to ensure resilience at the community level. The actors studied cover three levels: state institutions, formal and informal religious institutions and leaders, and civil society.

Comparing the three different models of government (centralised in Tunisia, semi-centralised in Lebanon, Serbia, BiH and decentralised in Iraq), we examine the elements of risk for each model. No model appears to have exceptional PVE results. However, we note that the centralised model in Tunisia has more risk factors related mainly to the lack of legitimacy of official religious institutions, which are strictly controlled by the state.

In this struggle for the **legitimacy of religious institutions**, we note how important it is for them to respond to religious needs and maintain a link with religious communities in order to continue to represent them. Furthermore, we note that the **perceived alignment of state-run religious institutions with failed public policies** in other areas also affects their legitimacy. Thus, strict control of religious life combined with failed social, educational and economic policies will not work as a PVE strategy.

In terms of **education**, the two models (centralised and decentralised) present different problems. The centralised Tunisian model could provide resilience by having formal religious institutions (al-Zaytouna

University) that are a regional reference. However, **outdated curricula** without applied perspectives, as well as a **lack of effective dissemination channels and knowledge transfer programmes**, deactivate this resilience potential. In other cases, reliance on private religious schools and control of curricula by religious and political organisations **prevent the development of an inclusive national narrative**.

With regard to the **interaction between the state and religious institutions**, this research highlights the porosity of this relationship, which leads to corruption and a sense of relative deprivation of different religious communities. Furthermore, religious institutions should be granted independence from the state and democratic internal approaches, so that **dissenting voices** can be included. Finally, it was noted how the mandate of official religious institutions should be applied when it comes to PVE initiatives and **dialogue with extremist organisations**. In this sense, the role of religious institutions was also noted as crucial and effective in **de-escalating conflict during violent clashes**. Strengthening this role and their potential as PVEs with the religious community, they represent what seems to be a major resilience factor for PVE.

On the security level, the study found that the **failure of state security initiatives leads to the emergence of alternative sectarian armed groups**. In this sense, strengthening national security institutions seems essential to prevent VE. However, **national security institutions must be governed by law and respect human rights**. Preventive security approaches to the IE and terrorism have been found to be counterproductive, turning state prisons into factories of future violent extremists. Thus, a soft approach to extremism that differentiates between violent and non-violent extremism seems necessary. **Mass incarceration** should therefore be avoided. In the same vein, **security reforms** that reconcile the security forces with the community and deradicalisation initiatives are potential preventive actions.

Some of the judicial initiatives reviewed had relevant elements of resilience. On the one hand**, outlawing VE** groups discourages followers. However, it was also noted that this measure will be particularly effective if combined with allowing non-violent extremist options to participate in the political and religious arena. In addition, **legal recognition of VE victims** can help raise awareness of the pain caused and the social rejection of VE groups.

In general, government policies on P/CVE will need to implement a more **comprehensive analysis of vulnerability factors**, which includes inclusion and development policies. This may require the revision of power-sharing models in contexts such as Iraq and Lebanon.

In addition, it was noted that **local grassroots PVE initiatives work better than international and national programmes**. A more effective approach seems to be **community development activities that involve the local population**. These should always take priority over events and actions organised by foreign organisations that are disconnected from the grassroots movement.

In terms of gender, the study noted the **general lack of representation of women in religious institutions and political life**. Promoting women's participation in religious and political life should be a potential resilience factor. On the other hand, administrative bodies, schools and civil society organisations show a widespread prevalence of women, which offers an opportunity to engage these institutions in PVE work. Finally, the need to understand radicalisation processes from a **gender perspective** (without underestimating the potential for radicalisation and recruitment of women) was also highlighted.

As far as BiH is concerned, the state and political institutions are not very visible or involved in the prevention of violent extremism. However, they strongly influence the formation of interethnic relations, and in this case the state was seen as a contributor to nationalist discourses and narratives. The

role of religious institutions was seen as an important factor in interreligious and state cooperation and dialogue, as religious communities and leaders enjoy a high level of trust within Bosnian society – in contrast to the **high levels of distrust of state institutions** and **dysfunctional administrative bureaucracy**. The lack of direct and permanent communication between religious and political/state institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina around the issue of radicalisation and extremism is considered a major vulnerability factor. This **communication** is practically non-existent at the state level (some exceptions were observed at the local level) and when it does take place, it is on an ad hoc basis and usually in response to manifestations of extremism that have already taken place, usually in the form of public condemnation. Another factor of vulnerability is the **permeation of ethno-political concepts into the religious matrix**, which leaves room for misinterpretation, as well as the general state of apathy in society towards issues of religious and political extremism.

With regard to resilience, **NGOs and CSOs** are considered the most important actors in preventing ethno-political radicalisation and are the most significant factor in reducing the risk of extremism. **Youth programmes, educational activities and workshops**, in addition to training, are considered the most useful in fostering interethnic communication and cooperation. The activities of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, sometimes in collaboration with the OSCE and the IOM, were presented as a positive example in the field of prevention and promotion of critical thinking.

With regard to gender and vulnerability/resilience to extremism in BiH, all interviewees, whether from state/political or religious institutions, are convinced that **women** can be considered as important actors in prevention processes. Women's contribution is seen as a cohesive factor in the case of **returnees and their children** – women are more involved in working with them through mental health and social work centers. There is also a perception that women have been unfairly neglected in religious communities in the past (in terms of employment), but positive changes are taking place.

As far as **Serbia** is concerned, the state and religious institutions are involved in the **normalisation and mainstreaming of extremist narratives** and contribute to **socio-economic underdevelopment** and the spread of radical ideologies, interreligious/interethnic discrimination and hate speech. This is a major vulnerability factor. Other factors of vulnerability are: i) **political links between state/local institutions and extreme right-wing organisations** ii) **different treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim extremism**, iii) **center-periphery relations**, and iv) a **'culture of extremism'** that has developed in the region since the conflicts of the 1990s. Religion plays a key role in this 'culture' as it has often been – as a constitutive factor of the nation – the main diacritic between the warring parties in the 1990s. The passivity of state institutions in the face of rising extremism is also a factor of vulnerability. The research distinguishes between right-wing and Islamist extremism in Serbia, showing that the main driver of right-wing extremism is the strong **parastatal system** currently in place in Serbia, where the state is unable to ensure the welfare of its citizens and where the system relies instead on illegal activities, links to right-wing extremist organisations, hooliganism and clientelism. Right-wing extremist groups and football fans are often used as cover for criminal activities and as **mediators between criminal and political groups**. Paradoxically, this parastatal system is **both a component of vulnerability and an aspect of resilience**. Parastatal control over right-wing extremist activity means that the government can influence such activity and prevent the groups concerned from committing violent acts. In this way, the government can control the expression of localised violence. In addition, there has been an increase in crime prevention and control activities in recent times, driven by CSOs in the region, creating a **'CSO bubble'** on the issue of extremism. It is also a factor of resilience and vulnerability – resilience as a

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mitigating factor in response to **growing ethno-nationalism in the region**, and vulnerability in terms of lack of engagement in P/CVE efforts by formal state institutions.

With regard to the role of gender and vulnerability in radicalisation and extremism in Serbia, the findings show that in addition to being the actors of prevention, **women also have a role in supporting or promoting radical and extremist attitudes**. This role is not only passive, in the sense that they only follow their male family members in extremist activities, but also active, especially when it comes to right-wing extremism. Women are actively involved in far-right politics and even lead some far-right organisations in Serbia. This phenomenon of women's radicalisation and motivation to join extremist groups is largely understudied in Serbia and requires further empirical study. Furthermore, there is a clear lack of conceptualisation of the role of women in these situations, as almost none of the stakeholders or interviewees recognised it as a problem.

5   Recommendations

5.1   General

- Developing national and local P/CVE strategies that include all relevant actors, the state, religious communities, local institutions, CSOs and the education system.
- Developing programmes and mechanisms for the prevention of radicalisation and deradicalisation, both at national and local levels.
- Developing primary and secondary education reforms that encourages young people to develop skills in civic engagement, critical thinking and media literacy – all necessary preconditions for the development of multi-perspective perceptions of the past and tolerant and open worldviews.
- Reforming religious education in primary schools by introducing history of religions as a compulsory course and religion courses as electives as well as introducing interreligious and civil monitoring of religious education programmes and curricula.
- Developing specific safety, social and educational programmes for 'vulnerable local communities', with an emphasis on increased participation of local religious communities, youth and women.
- Initiating open dialogue, debate and cooperation of all state institutions with all religious communities, or heterogeneous cooperation excluding ethnic, national or religious divisions.
- Organising regular consultations (and/or reports) by state and religious institutions on all issues related to extremism that might be of interest to religious communities and on which the latter could act preventively.
- Adopting a more reasonable approach towards the state and religious communities with regard to P/CVE, as without the involvement of these actors, P/CVE will remain a 'CSO bubble', an externally imposed activity.
- Developing programmes aimed at promoting a culture of tolerance and peace, especially programmes that focus on depolarisation and re-humanisation of formerly warring parties.

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- Creating space for open dialogue on critical P/CVE issues (schools, universities and public debates), as well as for community work with youth, and embrace the role of community leaders in this process.
- Challenging traditional gender roles that hinder women's participation in private and public life (while avoiding a backlash from conservative communities), focusing on their financial dependence, poverty and illiteracy (especially in rural areas).
- Building better coordination between the CSO sector and local state institutions through the implementation of community-specific youth training programmes.
- Developing greater involvement of local religious leaders in CSO actions, especially in high-risk communities.

5.2 Per country

5.2.1 Lebanon

- Religious leaders should support political figures to preserve their power, just as religious leaders need the recognition of political decision makers to remain official and therefore maintain their position.
- All sectarian communities should work together to define the limits of religion and extremist – even violent – political action.
- A reform must affect the Lebanese system, based on a real separation between religious institutions and state institutions, and political affairs should cease to be interpreted in terms of religious affiliations.
- Political parties must go beyond sectarian representation, in other words, not to approach political issues in sectarian terms.
- In order to limit violent extremism, the justice system must also be reformed. In prisons, public authorities must reorient and rehabilitate people. The lack of means of the Lebanese state pushes it to place the proven violent extremists and the accused in the same cells. Thus, the accused become the recipient audience of the preaching of extremists in prisons. To curb their thirst for revenge, inmates must be assigned to rehabilitation programmes by sending religious dignitaries and psychiatrists to prisons.
- History education must be carried out in a dynamic of openness to other communities so as to learn from their sectarian memories. This will help defuse political sensitivities with regard to remembering the horrors of civil war.
- Lebanese public authorities need to strengthen official sectarian representations in the face of the rise of the unofficial ones in order to pacify political relations between different faith communities.
- The Law must be strengthened in the face of sectarian offenses (on the discursive and practical levels). Communities can also participate in neutralising sectarian hate speech by encouraging their members to work with members of other groups to promote a historical and national narrative accepted by all the Lebanese national components.

5.2.2 Serbia

- Initiating dialogue between the state, the Serbian Orthodox Church and two Islamic communities in Serbia. This dialogue should be institutionalised at the national level but also at the level of local communities.

5.2.3 BiH

- Supporting interreligious dialogue and activities carried out by the Interreligious Council in BiH.
- Encouraging the involvement of all religious communities in BiH, the recognition of extremism and the joint implementation of programmes, mainly through youth work.

5.2.4 Iraq

- Encouraging the sustainability of NMI and EUAM support to the Iraqi state in regard to SSR and PVE. These two missions are by far the least controversial foreign military involvement in the country and do not crystallise and/or field divisions among political and religious groups.
- Establishing special courts to deal with IS-related crimes; establishing a military justice and forming courts composed of civil legal experts and military officials to judge acts of violence perpetrated by armed groups inside Iraq. The existence of a military justice shall aim at putting an end to the lack of accountability of armed groups and militias and their lack of loyalty to the Iraqi state.
- Supporting dialogue between the KRG and the Federal government to solve the issue of the disputed territories in Nineveh Province.
- Rehabilitating areas that have been liberated from IS to encourage the return of the displaced. This process can be facilitated, but should not be negotiated, by armed groups present in the area.
- The reconstruction of Nineveh Province must not only focus on material reconstruction but encourage the establishment of programmes aimed at psychological reconstructions for local populations that bear the trauma of violence and displacement.
- The psychological elements must be adapted to the religious, tribal and traditional nature of society in Nineveh Province. The use of artistic forms of expression should be prioritised for children in these programmes.
- Creating safe spaces for women to express themselves as well as women's shelters for victims of domestic violence.
- Creating a programme to reintegrate former IS members and their families to prevent further forms of violence to occur.
- Giving legal status to the victims of violent extremism/terrorism and compensate them financially, as well as the families that have lost one or more relatives.
- Implementing reconciliation and religious settlement, especially in areas that accommodate different ethnic and religious identities such as the Nineveh Plain. Involving the civil society to create indicators to monitor the implementation of these settlements.
- Reactivating the role of the Supreme Permanent Committee for Peaceful Community Coexistence of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.
- Amending the constitution to include the presence of religious minorities that were not recognised in 2005 and creating additional Endowment Office(s) for these minorities (i.e., Kakai).

- Building communication channels between state and religion institutions and between the different offices of Religious Endowment.
- Creating a committee that is common to the three Offices of Religious Endowment, with the objective of supervising the enaction of common and consistent policies, interfaith dialogue, notably in the education sector.
- Creating a Committee within the Ministry of Education composed of religious leaders (at least one representative for each religion in Iraq) with the aim to actively participate in the reform and development of school curricula.
- Encouraging religious representatives of all religions in Iraq to hold at least two annual conventions to discuss common issues, foster interfaith dialogue and discuss common PVE initiatives.
- Enacting a law/decree to set up a minimum quota of 15% for women in religious institutions across all religions.
- Establishing of an umbrella organisation to represent local civil society and support cooperation and exchange of expertise across Iraq.
- Using the Committee of Civil Society Organisations of the Iraqi Council of Representatives (CoR) and the Non-Governmental Organisations Service of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers as platforms to foster cooperation between civil society and political institutions.
- Encouraging the Iraqi government to sustain the progress made in anti-corruption policies.
- Supporting genuine decentralisation mechanisms to give power to local political and administrative institutions to make decisions related to PVE and development programmes in Nineveh Province. A shorter chain of decision-making would foster fast decision-making and less corruption.
- Adopting genuine check and balance mechanisms to avoid political interference in judicial courts.

5.2.5 Tunisia

- Orienting studies and activities not only as a manifestation of disengagement, but as a fundamental pillar of rehabilitation towards reintegration, in line with the above-mentioned approach to transforming violent religious extremism.
- Supporting scientific field studies, both academic and private, think tanks and civil society institutions, capable of dismantling this new thinking, revealing its working methods and proposing preventive approaches to minimise the expected damage and innovative associations for digital religious content development projects on the Internet, to counter the flood of generalist religious sites, which research has shown to be one of the most important pull factors for the narrative of violent religious extremism.
- Lifting the political freeze of the Supreme Islamic Council, reviewing its legal framework and structure, and expanding its powers to include the development of horizontal policies for spiritual security in Tunisia, in collaboration with the Ministries of Culture, Education and Higher Education and other official institutions and academic academies.
- Supporting the budget of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and directing it with capacity-building projects. Making it efficient and effective by focusing its work on the management of the religious institutions to which it belongs and providing the appropriate atmosphere for presenting its perspective.

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- Conducting participatory projects between the state, civil society, international organisations and the private sector, in order to rehabilitate the religious sector according to the principle of distribution of roles between the religious institutions in Tunisia.
- Introducing the separation between institutions of an administrative nature and institutions of a material nature.
- Taking interest in the content of cultural projects against the discourses of violent religious extremism.

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