



## **Working Paper 4: Interactions between States and Religious Institutions in the MENA Region**

**PUBLICATIONS**



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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Comparative Analysis of Risk and Resilience Factors for VE .....	5
2.1 Economic Factors .....	5
2.2 Legitimacy.....	7
2.3 Education.....	9
2.4 Interaction .....	12
2.5 Political system.....	16
2.5.1 Role of Religious Institutions after Violent Clashes.....	16
2.5.2 Individual Risk and Resilience Factors.....	17
2.5.3 Role and Impact of Security Institutions on VE .....	19
2.5.4 Role and Impact of the Judicial System on VE.....	21
2.5.5 Public Policies, State Institutions and Political/Religious Life .....	22
2.6 Dialogue / PVE.....	24
2.7 Gender.....	26
2.8 External Factors.....	28
3. Conclusion .....	30
4. References.....	33

## 1. Introduction

This deliverable is the result of the fieldwork and empirical research carried out in Work Package 4 of the PAVE Project. The objective of the following report is to explore the main risk and resilience factors for violent extremism in the MENA region. The report addresses specifically the role that political and religious institutions can play in the rise of violent extremism.

The research data collected here is based on five different reports produced in Lebanon, Iraq and Tunisia. These three countries have unfortunately experienced relevant instances of violent extremism in the last decade. Iraq is still recovering from the US invasion, the war and the consequences of a long-standing regime, resulting in several devastating episodes of political and religious violence in the last decade. Lebanon, while still recovering from a civil war and a military invasion that lasted until 2005, has seen itself involved in the war in Syria by hosting millions of refugees, functioning as the arena for conflict between regional powers, and even providing a safe haven for some of the armed groups participating in the Syrian war. Tunisia – a country still redefining itself after the revolution that brought down a long-standing regime – has also been a hotspot for violent extremism in North Africa and the largest exporter of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria.

In Lebanon, two reports have been examined on the interaction of the Lebanese state and the different religious institutions. For one of the reports, produced by the research team from the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme (FMSH), interviews were conducted with religious, political and civil society leaders from Saida, a city with a certain relevance when it comes to the emergence of violent extremist groups. The FMSH team also interviewed Maronite politicians from the two opposing political parties: the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces. A second research team from the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut (AUB) focused their fieldwork research on the town of Majdal Anjar, which became known for various Wahhabi-Salafi-related security issues between 1990 and 2014. The report by the AUB team also examined the role of Shi'a religious and political leaders in fostering violent extremism and media discourse in Lebanon.

The report on Iraq was produced by the Open Think Tank (OTT) and included interviews with several religious, political and civil society members in Nineveh Province. Specifically, interviews and comparative analyses were carried out in two areas affected by violent extremism, especially under the Da'esh regime: Tal Afar and Hamdaniyyah. The report also examined key elements in the recent history of Iraq that have characterised the recent emergence of violent extremist groups in the country.

In the case of Tunisia, a report was produced by the research team from the Tunisian League for Culture and Plurality in conjunction with the Euro-Arab Foundation for Higher Studies. This piece of research was based on interviews with scholars from Zaytouna University, one of the most important Islamic institutions in North Africa. Further interviews were conducted with representatives of the governmental religious institutions, civil society members, Islamic Studies students and former jihadi Salafists, providing very relevant insights on the political, religious and personal factors behind violent extremism.

Still in Tunisia, another report, produced by the University of Sfax, was based on interviews with religious and political leaders from the areas of Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid and Kef. Kairouan, once named the Islamic capital of the Maghreb, recently became an important town for Wahhabi-Salafi jihadism and hosted the first public event by the extremist group Ansar Al-Sharia. Sidi Bouzid is well-known as the city where the Tunisian Revolution began. It is badly affected by government neglect, lack of opportunities and unemployment and has also become a hotbed for violent extremism. The case of Kef, however, provides an interesting opportunity for comparative research, since it faces the same challenges as Sidi Bouzid, but has not experienced the spread of violent extremism to the same extent.

The report is based on and structured around the main fields of vulnerability and resilience, which are identified as: economic factors, legitimacy of religious and political leaders, education system, interaction between religious and political organisations, structure and dynamics within the political system, dialogue and PVE initiatives, gender dynamics, and external factors. The deliverable offers a systematic overview of the many relevant ideas observed in the various pieces of research examined. It provides a structured examination that can guide policy development and future research and encourage further consultation of the various country reports. However, it is not intended to provide a comprehensive and exhaustive explanation of the risk and resilience factors for violent extremism in the MENA region.

## 2. Comparative Analysis of Risk and Resilience Factors for VE

### 2.1 Economic Factors

When analysing the economic organisation of religious life in the three countries studied, we identify three different models that will subsequently be discussed in the report. Tunisia is notable for its highly **centralised** organisation of political and religious affairs. Lebanon represents a **semi-centralised** system in which the government funds and controls some of the religious organisations. Iraq has a **decentralised** system when it comes to funding and management of religious institutions. The comparison between the three models is relevant in researching the potential effects of more or less government intervention in religious life on the emergence and mitigation of violent extremism.

In reference to the economic factors in Tunisia, we note that **the government is in charge of all the religious institutions** either through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Mufti or, indirectly, through the Ministry of Higher Education. This means that all the salaries for teachers, members of these religious institutions and mosques are covered by the state. One of the vulnerabilities related to this system has to do with the **lack of funding for programming**. This is especially relevant in inland Tunisia where there is a clear lack of resources, especially in the fields of education and religious education, despite the large number of civil servants. In the interviews, the current Minister of Religious Affairs drew attention to the limitations to good programming, caused mainly by **an extremely bureaucratized system**, which allocates 93% of the Ministry's budget to wages, with little left over for programming. The lack of funding for schools in general and religious schools in particular is evident in **infrastructure needs, lack of teachers and outdated curricula**. These needs are more pronounced in inland

Tunisia in comparison with the coastal regions, and this is the cause 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 factor for violent extremism. On the one hand, it imposes a system closely controlled by the government (we will examine this in detail later) where certain manifestations are not permitted. On the other hand, the governmental institutions are not providing good services. This has left **a void that private religious institutions (many of them in receipt of foreign funding from questionable sources) have tried to fill**, especially in inland Tunisia. It is probably no coincidence that an area like Kairouan, hit by unemployment and lack of opportunities, became the cradle of Ansar Al-Sharia. An example of how much of a risk the proliferation of private uncontrolled religious institutions can be is observed in the sexual abuse and radicalisation scandals at the Regueb Quranic school (Zayat, 2019).

As described above, the case of Lebanon lies somewhere between Tunisia and Iraq. The government is in charge of some religious organisations such as the Mufti and Dar Al-Fatwa. This means the government is **responsible for paying for anything related to religious courts and the control of religious institutions by Dar Al-Fatwa** (mosques, religious schools, etc.). However, the **actual salaries of sheikhs and religious education teachers are covered not by the government** but by the Endowments. The Endowments are independent organisations that have their own real estate for mosques and religious schools and obtain most of their funding from donations. The decentralised system of donations to the Lebanese Waqf, or Endowment, **does not allow for control of how these donated funds are spent**. This could be problematic in terms of following up where these resources are spent. It has therefore been identified as a vulnerability factor for VE.

Iraq represents the opposite extreme to the Tunisian centralised model. Following the fall of Saddam's regime, the new Iraqi system seems to be focused on keeping the government at a distance from the religious institutions. While this may be a strategy to avoid sectarian tensions, it has not been as effective as expected, as we will observe throughout the report. In the Iraqi system, **the three main Endowments (Common, Shi'a and Sunni) organise and fund religious life in the country**. These Endowments are funded through various governmental budgets, specific allowances (for example, for taking care of shrines through the Holy Shrines organisations) and private donations. Therefore, they are not formally or economically affiliated with the state and **can manage their funds independently**. The independence that Religious Endowments enjoy in Iraq blurs the lines between what could be considered formal and informal institutions. On the one hand, **it has expanded the power of these Endowments** and the Holy Shrines up to the point where they negotiate directly with the state as regional political actors, which can cause sectarian tensions should these Endowments become too powerful. The fact that the state is not aware of the source of funding and does not interfere in programming has allowed **external powers** to fund and manage certain programmes developed by these Endowments (such as the expansion of Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, which has been funded by Iran and implemented by Iranian companies). This is seen as a vulnerability in the system, since it allows foreign interests to exert **soft power** and play a political role in the already complex Iraqi arena, which can eventually foster the emergence of violent extremism (see Section 2.8 on External Factors for examples).

Funding and Management of Religious Institutions			
System	Main Characteristics	Risk Factors	Resilience Factors
<b>Tunisia – Centralised</b>	The government controls and funds all the official religious institutions, the creation and transfer of religious knowledge and religious education.	Over-bureaucratisation  Combination of centralised management with governmental neglect and lack of funds delegitimizes the government.  Vacuum in religious affairs that can be filled by uncontrolled foreign religious institutions.	
<b>Lebanon – Semi-centralised</b>	The government controls and funds some religious institutions. Religious activities (e.g. education in private and public schools) is funded by the Religious Endowments.	Lack of control over where donations come from and where funds are spent.	
<b>Iraq – decentralised</b>	All the religious activities are managed by the various Religious Endowments.	Endowments have become supranational entities thanks to external funding.  Open to external donations that can be used by regional powers to play a political role in internal Iraqi affairs.	Avoid sectarian tensions

## 2.2 Legitimacy

The position of religious institutions as political actors, representatives and points of reference for the religious community puts them in a sort of **competition for legitimacy**. Several factors seem to be relevant in this struggle. On the one hand, governmental institutions have to strike a balance between keeping in touch with the religious needs of the population while controlling the emergence and spread of fringe movements. Paradigmatic cases like Tunisia, where **the state has traditionally controlled anything** related to religion in order to prevent the emergence of extremist groups, illustrate **the counterproductivity of this model**. When religious governmental 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, like Tunisia and Lebanon (see section on security), **align state religious institutions with a governmental**



**agenda** that is far from the people. This delegitimises these institutions as religious reference points and opens the field for **alternative informal institutions** to emerge and spread.

In the same vein, governmental religious institutions are sometimes seen as **an extension of the government** and therefore aligned with **its policy-making in response to people’s needs** in other areas. If the Tunisian government controls religious institutions but does not provide good programming in terms of infrastructure, education, imam training, etc., believers will look for **“more legitimate”** religious support from foreign organisations. In the case of Lebanon, after the failure of the Lebanese state in securing prosperity, security, belonging, national narrative and equality for all its citizens, community members turn to their own **sects as legitimate representatives** of their religious and political rights.

In both Tunisia and Lebanon, this strong governmental control of the formal religious sphere has led to the **emergence of alternative religious institutions**. In the case of Tunisia, for example, some believe the strict control of religious production left the religious field empty of its essence, thus losing its **immunity to violent extremism**. In some way, the strict governmental control marked the collapse of Tunisian Islam and its traditional schools (Ashari, Maliki and Sunni Sufism). In the case of Lebanon, the government’s subordination of Dar Al-Fatwa and the Mufti led to the appearance of the Association of Muslim Scholars, an organisation that mainly includes Wahhabi-Salafi scholars and scholars close to Jamaa’ Islamiya (the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon). Despite its reliance on more extreme versions of Islam, interviewees saw this new organisation as representing a fresh approach that put forward a charismatic and revolutionary vision, **responding to the grievances of the Lebanese Sunni community**.

Following up on the Lebanese example, we observe how the **sectarian** element will also play a key role in the legitimacy of state religious institutions. In the cases of Lebanon and Iraq, where governments are more relaxed in the control of religious life, **informal religious institutions emerge as political actors** which negotiate directly with the state (see the above example of the Shi’a Endowment in Iraq), or which create **a porous environment** in which religious, legal and political organisations are difficult to differentiate, as in the case of Lebanon (more examples to be described later). Therefore, communities regard these religious organisations as **the only legitimate representation** and guiding source to navigate the sectarian turmoil.

Legitimacy			
System	Main Characteristics	Risk Factors	Resilience Factors
<b>Tunisia – Centralised</b>	The government controls all the religious institutions.	Perception that governmental religious institutions are not religious but political.  Need for alternatives in informal religious institutions.	
<b>Lebanon – Semi-centralised</b>	The state fails at providing security,	Government’s legitimacy is greatly disputed.	



	<p>stability, belonging or national narrative.</p> <p>Governmental religious institutions are strict and reject some ideologies and groups.</p>	<p>Religious and political sectarian organisations become more legitimate than the government.</p> <p>Alternative informal religious organisations start appearing.</p>	
<b>Iraq – decentralised</b>	<p>All the religious activities are managed by the different Religious Endowments.</p> <p>The state fails at providing security, stability, belonging or national narrative.</p>	<p>Government’s legitimacy is greatly disputed. Religious and political sectarian organisations become more legitimate than the government.</p>	

### 2.3 Education

When it comes to the management of education in general, and religious education in particular, we can differentiate between two main systems, very similar to the divisions we applied in previous sections: a **state centralised** system (as in Tunisia) and a **sectarian** system (as in Lebanon and Iraq). In the centralised model, we observe a government that controls religious affairs in general, including the management of religious schools. In the case of Tunisia, Al-Zaytouna University (an institution depending on the Ministry of Higher Education) is in charge of the creation of all knowledge related to Islam in Tunisia. This involves developing the curricula for religious teaching 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 like Al-Zaytouna University was identified by interviewees as a **resilience element against violent extremism**, since it exemplifies how a serious academic institution can have legitimacy in the religious community. Nonetheless, officials acknowledged **important weaknesses** in the **channels** which spread this knowledge around the Tunisian population. Some vulnerability elements were observed, related to the reality in both public schools and religious schools which, as noted above, are often **lacking in resources and understaffed**.

Curiously enough, despite the existence of an internationally respected centre for Islamic Studies, the Tunisian reality is that **most imams and preachers are not educated to university level**. Members of the Ministry of Religious Affairs who were consulted pointed out the **hypertrophy in state institutions**, illustrated in the allocation of budgets and how most funds for these institutions go to paying salaries, leaving programming and training with few resources. Along with the appearance of **distance learning**, this has become a vulnerability factor for the **emergence of informal religious training institutions**. An example of this is seen in the Imam Malik University for Sharia Sciences, an institution established with the purpose of promoting Shari’a sciences, Qur’an and Sunnah that has sometimes been **linked to Wahhabism**. Its director explained how the school teaches sheikhs according to the Maliki school of

jurisprudence and the teachings of Al-Zaytouna University and that it presents a different understanding of Wahhabi teachings, portraying Wahhabi Salafism as ignorant of the original texts. He also stated that, despite being completely independent from the Tunisian state, Imam Malik University supports national security. The institution is also open to research, debates and discussions with other Islamic academic centres and scholars. It thus represents an unofficial alternative outside governmental control.

Similarly, the legitimacy and trust of official religious educational institutions are always at stake and specific issues need to be paid attention to. In the case of Zaytouna, some of the most urgent needs identified include **a revision of the curricula** and the creation of a **shared vision** among professors who can unequivocally represent the institution. Furthermore, religious academic institutions would need to provide **employment prospects** (which could be achieved through specific training in preaching, teaching, legal matters, etc.) in order to compete with informal training options available online (like Imam Malik University). Lastly, **governmental interference** in Islamic academic, cultural and legal work (examples being the suspended Islamic Council and the Fatwa Court) could become an impediment to the right development of religious culture and education, as noted by scholars and students, and would threaten the legitimacy of the institution. Suggested improvements involve the systematisation of **Islamic education from lower educational levels**, which would protect the youth and university students from esoteric and extremist interpretations of Islam from an early age (e.g. creating specific Shari'a Sciences curricula in secondary schools).

In the second group, we have Lebanon, where the government allows religious teaching in public and private schools but does not provide salaries for teachers. Here, the Endowment or Waqf is economically independent of the state in that it relies on donations and has its own real estate. The Waqf is responsible for **hiring and paying the teachers** in charge of religious education **in religious and public schools**, and paying **salaries to imams**. It does not receive any allocation from the state.

The relevance of private primary and secondary schools is noteworthy in Lebanon, since around 60% of the students are educated in these schools. The main vulnerability element in this education system is the **lack of a national narrative** to be taught in formal (schools) and informal education (museums, etc.). The state does not produce a national curriculum and **political parties commonly interfere** in the history curriculum taught in private schools. As a consequence, the message students get from this system is that they will achieve leadership through their respective communities, not through national institutions. This transforms the sectarian character of the education system into a vulnerability factor.

The case of Iraq represents a sort of transition from the Tunisian to the Lebanese model in a context of sectarian tensions. Iraqi identity has **traditionally** been based on one **dominant discourse of Arabness**, causing social discontent among non-Arab minorities, especially the Kurds and Turkmen. This caused a negative state-society relationship during Saddam's regime. After 2003, a new sectarian system was created where **the state has no say in religious education issues**. As in the Lebanese case, two kinds of schools can be found in Iraq: religious and public. **Religious schools depend on the different 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 causes a feeling of exclusion in members of any of the other faiths present in the country (e.g. Yezidis). Religious schools, as noted above, are affiliated to 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 executives, whom they also train. The Endowments are also responsible for developing religious

curricula. Interviewees remarked on how the lack of cooperation between the different Endowments and the lack of a unified curriculum have laid the ground for sectarian division and violent extremism. A common national school curriculum that recognises Iraqi diversity was also identified as a need by interviewees. The current national Arabic curriculum, for example, contains texts from the Holy Qur’an but not from scriptures from other faiths, which can cause a feeling of exclusion in students from other religious communities when they are learning the national language of Iraq. In this way, the **sectarian character of private schools** along with a **lack of recognition for all the religious groups in public schools** and an **outdated curriculum** still dominated by an Arab-Muslim discourse can become **vulnerability factors** for VE related to the education system. Despite these much-needed reforms of the curricula and the education system, as in the case of Tunisia, Iraqi religious leaders pointed out that **good religious education** is key in fostering a culture of tolerance and is a noteworthy **resilience factor** to violent extremism.

Education Systems			
System	Main Characteristics	Risk Factors	Resilience Factors
<b>Tunisia – Centralised</b>	The government is in charge of religious education in public schools and controls the development of religious studies curricula up to the university level.	<p>Hypertrophy of governmental institutions. Lack of funding for programming.</p> <p>Lack of knowledge-spreading channels and training for imams.</p> <p>University Al-Zaytouna: lack of a shared vision among its scholars, old-fashioned curricula, lack of employment prospects, and governmental interference in religious studies. Students look for alternatives.</p> <p>Appearance of alternative informal online education institutions (e.g. Imam Malik University).</p>	Unification of Islamic research in a respected and recognised institution like Al-Zaytouna University
<b>Lebanon – Sectarian</b>	The different Endowments are in charge of religious education in public schools and of religious private schools.	<p>Most students are educated in private schools.</p> <p>Lack of a national narrative.</p> <p>Interference of political parties in school curricula.</p>	

<p><b>Iraq – Sectarian</b></p>	<p>Religious education at all levels is managed by the different Religious Endowments.</p>	<p>Dominant discourse of Arabness still present.</p> <p>Only Islam and Christianity are taught in public schools.</p> <p>Lack of a unified national school curriculum.</p> <p>Outdated curriculum.</p>	<p>Good religious education can be a good resilience factor.</p>
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## 2.4 Interaction

As we have observed in previous sections, the Tunisian government has traditionally chosen to maintain strict control of the religious institutions in order to prevent certain discourses from entering the religious and political arena. After 1956, Islamic traditions, preaching, instruction, fatwas and the performance of rituals and ceremonies were under governmental control and no Religious Endowments were created, unlike in other Arab countries. In 1992, the Ministry of Religious Affairs was created in order to administer all religious affairs in the country, which eventually led to the political power to impose strict controls on the production of traditional religious knowledge. Ironically, in an attempt to regain the ground lost as a result of this strict control of religion, Tunisian regime leaders did not hesitate to adopt religious epithets (Bourghiba styled himself “the Great Moujahid”, whereas Ben Ali liked to be called the “Protector of Religion”). This **formal engagement with the religious community** did not involve further changes in the religious structures, which survived the Tunisian revolution. The Mufti of the Republic of Tunisia, for example, is the first adviser to the state on religious affairs and is appointed by the President of the Republic. Muftis are in charge of religious legal affairs, such as issuing conversion certificates for new Muslims and evaluating school books, documents, research papers and studies related to Islam. The Mufti also responds in person, by mail or telephone to questions from the public concerning religious practice. The Supreme Islamic Council is a consultative body on the implementation of Chapter One of the Constitution, which stipulates that Tunisia is an Islamic Republic. It provides opinions on social and legal aspects and also reviews the religious education programmes created by Al-Zaytouna University. An example of these institutions’ **lack of independence** is seen in the fact that the Supreme Islamic Council has had no leader since 2015, when the previous head was dismissed as a result of his call to stop a radio programme that was offending Islamic identity and distorting the Qur’an. Thus, we can infer that this firm control of religious institutions by the government (and censoring of religious manifestations aside from it) is seen as a factor contributing to the **delegitimisation** of these institutions and can foster the formation of **new religious interpretations**. Even before the Tunisian revolution, new religious actors had emerged in the country with the will to respond to popular demands, both social and religious. The fall of the regime allowed these religious actors to enter the public arena. Ansar Al-Sharia, for example, was formed in 2011 and can be considered the **public’s first experience of jihadi Salafism** in Tunisia. It was established after the revolution and differed from other religious currents, including other kinds of Salafism (such as that of Sheikh al-

Khatib al-Idrisi), eventually becoming the **dominant religious discourse** while being the **most polarising** current, especially among young people.

The case of Lebanon may provide some insights into what might happen to Tunisian official institutions when alternative non-governmental religious organisations start operating. In Lebanon, Dar Al-Fatwa is the official organisation administering Sunni affairs. It falls under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and is headed by the Mufti of the Republic, who is the country's highest religious official. The Prime Minister observes the work of Dar Al-Fatwa and is in charge of calling the election of the Mufti of the Lebanese Republic. As a result, this organisation has come to be perceived as **subordinate** to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and this, according to interviewees, has distanced the organisation from the Sunni community and their reality. Interviewees point out that Dar Al-Fatwa's direct economic dependence on the government completely challenges its **independence**. The loss of this organisation's legitimacy in the eyes of the community is also apparent in the general tendency to rely on the Religious Endowments which, despite being under the Directorate of Endowments, enjoy a certain de-facto independence. Furthermore, Dar Al-Fatwa has **systematically excluded** certain **opposition voices**, with the result that certain Sunni factions now consider that it no longer represents them. The **ineffectiveness** of Dar Al-Fatwa has also been observed in its limited capacity to exert any legislative pressure or undertake community work. The organisation sends out written sermons to mosques every Friday, but local imams can choose their own speeches and, apparently, that is what they generally do, since the research found that most worshippers prefer mosques where politics and security are discussed. Moreover, Dar Al-Fatwa has **no actual control over the opening or closure of mosques**, despite having the legal power to close mosques that engage in VE or hate speech. This power has seldom been used or its position has been ignored. For example, several Salafi-Wahhabi mosques have started operating in Lebanon against the will of Dar Al-Fatwa but they were not prevented from opening. Lastly, it has been argued that Dar Al-Fatwa has **failed to act** in those situations in which it could have worked as a resilience organisation. For example, it never attempted to encourage detainees or prisoners to move away from VE. The example of Dar Al-Fatwa therefore illustrates a relevant risk factor for violent extremism caused by the possible bureaucratisation of state religious institutions that are not tied to the reality of the religious communities on the ground. These organisations will therefore see their mandate either ignored or **reduced to formalities** by informal religious organisations and by whoever the religious communities designate as their **legitimate leaders**.

Another relevant aspect of the relationship between the state and the religious institutions has to do with the **official alignment** of the state with a specific religion. This phenomenon has been common to Iraq and Tunisia but is mostly associated as a risk factor in the former, due to the cultural and religious diversity present. Saddam Hussein was confronted in 1991 by the Shaabaniyah Intifadah in the South (led by Shi'ites) and the Kurdish National Uprising in the North, which led him to brandish Islam as the religion of the state in an attempt to find the common ground between these communities. He even included the phrase "God is great" on the Iraqi flag (apparently in his own handwriting in the first version), which is still present in today's version. This apparent alignment of religion and state was not received positively by all the communities and, along with minorities' **feeling of insecurity**, has been at the root of violent extremism. During Saddam's regime, for example, Sunni Turkmen were **privileged** over their Shi'a peers in government posts and security services in the North. After 2003, power shifted and Shi'a factions took over the government authorities in an attempt to recover control. The new governments that followed (especially those of al-Maliki) aligned themselves with Shi'as by giving certain privileges to Shi'a groups like the Badr organisation. This led to **harassment** of the local Sunni

population by the Shi’a **authorities** in areas like Tal Afar (torture, extra-judicial killings, sectarian-motivated property destruction). Eventually, strong Al-Qaeda factions emerged as a response to this, such as the Sunni Turkmen of Tal Afar, led by Abu Ala’ Abdula Rahman, a Salafi religious preacher and leader of the Sunni Turkmen who would eventually become the second man in Da’esh. He became popular because of his alleged courage to speak openly **against the state** while using a religious discourse. However, when Rahman started spreading his sectarian and Salafi jihadist message, Kurds, Shi’a Turkmen and even Sunni Arabs rejected his message and encouraged young people not to go to mosques, showing a **general reluctance** to engage in further sectarian conflict. This might have worked as a resilience factor but no further public action was taken due to Rahman’s repressive practices in the area. Other militias emerged in other religious communities. Muqtada al-Sadr founded the Mahdi army militia to defend Shi’as in Sadr City (Baghdad) and several Shi’a cities in the South of the country. Jihadists attacked Shi’a holy cities and sites (e.g. an attack in Najaf near the Imam Ali Mosque in August 2003 killed 123 pilgrims) and the Mahdi Army retaliated by committing ethnic cleansing against Sunni populations. As a consequence, the Sunni militias started joining with each other under Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad and what would become the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006, with the goal of establishing a Caliphate in the Sunni areas of the country.

This rough summary of the **tit-for-tat escalation** that has been present in Iraq’s recent history can be used as an illustration of the vulnerability factors that aligning the state with a specific sect can create. In the case of Lebanon, for example, communities in hotspots like Saida accuse Shi’a factions such as Hezbollah of having specific **privileges** (they operate their own intelligence and army), while the government prosecutes any Sunni organisation that they consider to be wrong (see section on security for more details). According to interviewees from these areas, the main reason to join Sunni armed groups nowadays has to do with the **protection** of Sunnis against the threat of Hezbollah as a governmental actor which can act both politically and militarily to defend the Shi’a community.

Interaction Between the State and the Religious Institutions			
System	Main Characteristics	Risk Factors	Resilience Factors
<b>Tunisia – Centralised</b>	<p>The state is officially aligned with Islam.</p> <p>Religious institutions operate under the control of the government.</p>	<p>Lack of independence of religious life.</p> <p>Delegitimisation of religious institutions.</p> <p>Appearance and spread of more extreme and polarising religious movement.</p>	
<b>Lebanon – Semi-centralised</b>	<p>Governmental religious institutions like Dar Al-Fatwa, led by the Mufti, manage religious affairs.</p> <p>Certain religious groups enjoy political and military privileges in the</p>	<p>Lack of independence of official religious institutions.</p> <p>Exclusion of opposition voices.</p> <p>Limited capacity to exert legislative pressure or community work.</p>	



	government (Hezbollah).	Failure to act.  Feeling of injustice and insecurity in the Sunni community because of Hezbollah's privileges.	
<b>Iraq – de-centralised</b>	The state is officially aligned with Islam.  Certain religious groups enjoy political and military privileges in the government.	Human rights violations by political-religious factions privileged by the government.  Jihadism spreads as a response to abuse against the Sunni community.  Tit-for-tat escalation/cumulative radicalisation.	Communities are tired and reluctant to engage in sectarian conflict.

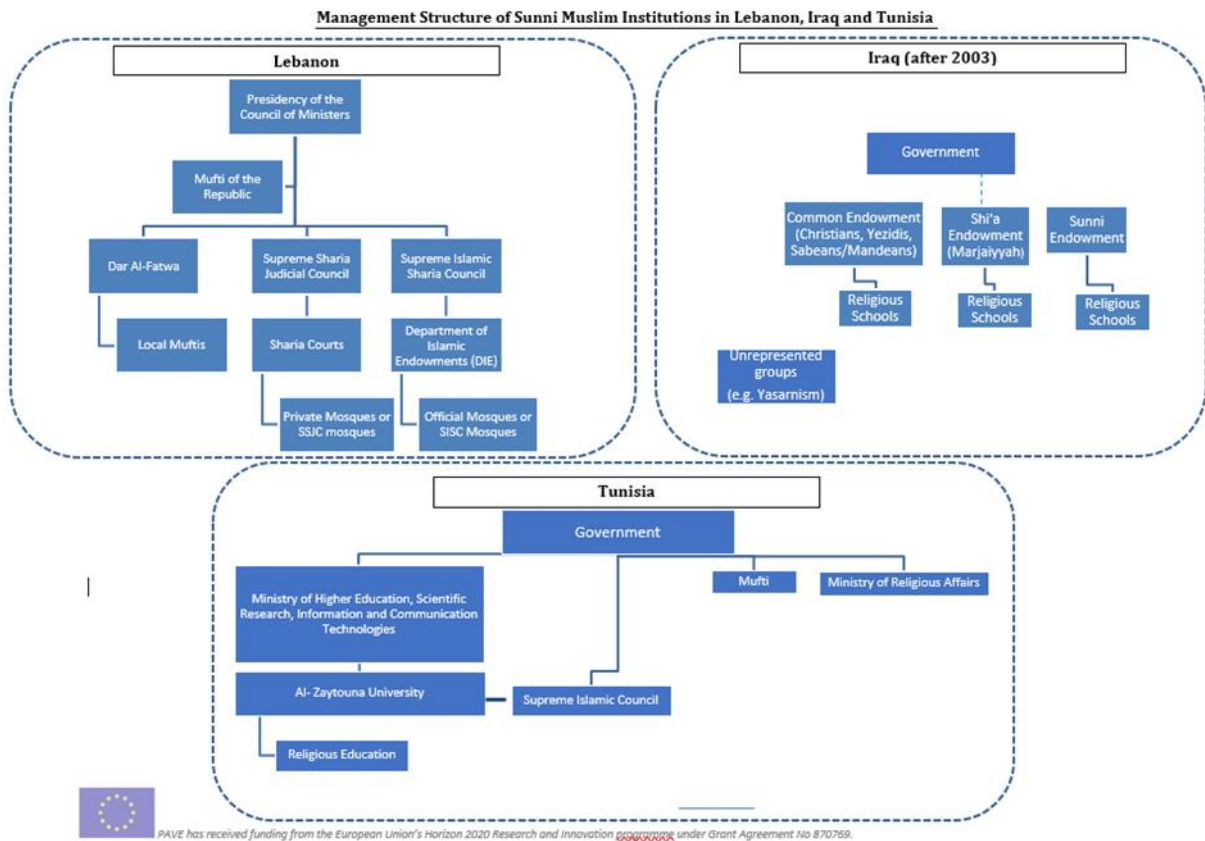


Figure 1: Visualisation of the management structures of Sunni Muslim institutions in Lebanon, Iraq and Tunisia.



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## 2.5 Political system

### 2.5.1 Role of Religious Institutions after Violent Clashes

When talking about violent extremism, there is a tendency to look for the origin of the problem in the role and message of religious institutions. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the complex role that formal and informal religious institutions play in the political system reveals the ways in which they can act to foster stability. A possible resilience element observed in this context is the ability of informal grassroots religious institutions to **mediate** between armed groups and the government in order to **de-escalate** violence. A good example of this is seen in the troubles that hit border towns in Lebanon in 2014. In Aarsal, for example, members of Da'esh and Tahrir al-Sham used to cross over from Syria to find refuge in the area. The Lebanese Army along with Hezbollah responded to this incursion with an armed operation. The Association of Muslim Scholars took the lead in a dialogue that involved the Lebanese President and the Army Command, which led to a temporary ceasefire. The Lebanese Army conditioned the ceasefire on the withdrawal of the other armed groups from Lebanese territory within 24 hours. Allegedly, these dialogue initiatives secured the lives of 120 Syrian refugees in Aarsal.

Another resilience factor related to religious organisations is the role they can play in unauthorising or **delegitimising armed groups** or armed group leaders. For example, the Iraqi Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako publicly dissociated the church from the PMF's Babylon Brigade (a brigade composed of Christians) after the brigade was accused of committing crimes against Sunni communities in the Nineveh Plain. He also called on all Iraqi Christians to **stay away** from any armed factions claiming to represent Christians.

Furthermore, the pseudo-political role played by religious leaders in states like Lebanon and Iraq can be key in **inter-faith solidarity initiatives** that can **prevent violent escalation**. A good example of this was seen during the Iraqi protests in 2019, led by the Shi'a Endowment. Foreign Christian leaders supported the protests and Patriarch Sako cancelled the Christmas celebrations in Iraq in solidarity with the protesters.

Lastly, as in the previous instance, religious leaders can play a clear resilience role by being at the forefront of **non-violent protests** and rejecting publicly the use of violence **by their own followers**. During the protests in Iraq in October 2019, the government responded violently against demonstrators. Shi'a leader Al-Sistani and other Shi'a scholars focused on endorsing the legitimate and peaceful protests and condemning violence, while urging the government to carry out the much-needed reforms (Beaoujouan, 2020; Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, 2020).

On the other hand, formal religious institutions cannot always act **in time** after a crisis, especially in centralised systems like Tunisia. After the revolution and the spread of jihadi Salafist groups in Tunisia, the government showed an interest in studying the religious reality in the country. The Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies addressed the Salafi jihadi phenomenon between 2012 and 2014. The government consulted researchers on the religious scene in Tunisia and a report on the religious reality on the ground was issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in cooperation with the government in 2014. This interest from the official religious institutions in examining the Tunisian reality, however, seemed insufficient in terms of actual policy advances or prevention of violent extremist groups. In a

similar fashion, we already mentioned the disappointment of some in Lebanon at Dar Al-Fatwa’s inaction in reducing tensions in the border towns and in Saida, or in engaging with radicalised detainees and prisoners.

Role of Religious Institutions after Violent Clashes		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
	Possible mediating role between armed groups	Dialogue after Arsal clashes in 2014 (Lebanon).
	Public de-legitimisation of armed groups	Chaldean Patriarch’s dissociation of the church from the Babylon Brigade (Iraq).
	Inter-faith alliances and solidarity initiatives	Chaldean Patriarch’s cancelling of Christmas in solidarity with Shi’a protests (Iraq).
	Public support for non-violent protests	Al-Sistani’s endorsement of peaceful protests and rejection of violence in 2019 (Iraq).
Late response by religious institutions after a crisis		Tunisian religious institutions’ late reaction to the rise of Salafism.
Inaction		Dar Al-Fatwa’s inability to act in the Lebanese border tensions or engage with VE detainees.

### 2.5.2 Individual Risk and Resilience Factors

An important area to study when analysing risk and resilience factors for VE is the impact of the religious and political events on those individuals who choose to join or abandon VE groups. Throughout the studies analysed, we observed three individual risk factors and one resilience element that could be exploited.

One of the main drivers leading to VE is the **feeling of defeatism and injustice**. In Lebanon, interviewees recognised that there is general discontent and a sense of impotence in the Sunni community due to the current political and military advantage of the Shi’a. Similar examples were seen in Iraq. In the case of Tunisia, the sense of grievance relates to what has been perceived as an oppressive government, and violent extremism has mainly been articulated as a fight against it. In this way, former jihadi Salafists described how personal experiences of governmental repression were at the root of their engagement with these groups. They also pointed out how recruitment followed the same idea: “We accepted those who sympathised with us and with the idea of struggle against governments, more than we accepted the religious aspects”. In Lebanon, Wahhabi-Salafi discourse entered Majdal Anjar in the early nineties with the main idea of opposing the government and the army. This came at a time when Lebanon was occupied by the Syrian army, which lent weight to the view that opposing these institutions was necessary.

Another relevant vulnerability factor is the **need for trusted religious reference points** that are connected to actual research and Islamic academia. Former extremists from Tunisia explained how they were guided by the “search for the first Islam, the pure Islam” at a time when all the religious organisations were under the control of the government, as noted above. A Tunisian woman narrated how she discovered Wahhabism, and felt attracted to it because she found an answer to some unresolved issues (blessings, supplication and grave worshipping). This lack of reliable local sources of Islamic knowledge led some to a competition to become the purest in which all too often the most extreme view seems to be the truest.

In a similar vein, former extremists from Tunisia explained how they commonly enjoyed the feeling of **isolation** from the general community in a sort of **moral superiority** exercise. VE groups have observed, among their followers, the need to be an elite group of believers that is set apart from the community by even “quoting verses from the Qur’an and Hadith about isolation and alienation”. A possible explanation is that excluding certain political and religious options from the legal arena could play a reverse effect by reinforcing the feeling of moral superiority and moral disengagement in these political and religious groups.

On a different note, interviewees from rural areas of Tunisia highlighted the role that **culture, arts and media** can play as resilience factors for violent extremism. In their opinion, culture and arts can create a **comprehensive narrative** that respects individual characteristics. They argued that a significant problem in Tunisia was that culture had been **monopolised** by an extremely centralised elite discourse in a context of **refusal** of all political diversity: “The essence of culture shows its deep relation with reality, and its ability to face fragility and closure. It is a behaviour and a lifestyle, and it is the collective values that mean belonging to one society where national sense is strong enough to face all internal and external threats.” These statements were illustrated with the exploration of differences between Kef, Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid.

The general situation of individuals engaged in violent extremism in Tunisia has already been described above. It includes lack of opportunities, governmental neglect and the feeling of being oppressed by the security forces. These are conditions shared by most youths in inland Tunisia. However, remarkable differences were found when it comes to **cultural engagement** and violent extremism in these three towns. Kef’s rich historical heritage draws from Roman, Islamic, Turkish and French civilisations. This may be the cause of its current artistic, architectural and artisan culture. The fact is VE seems to be less of an issue in this region compared with Kairouan or Sidi Bouzid, which has led some to suggest that this cultural element is a resilience factor. One of the interviewees, a female head of an NGO which provides micro-credits, remarked that although the region is just as poor as any other inland region in Tunisia, its important cultural heritage has prevented the incursion of new movements and identities. Furthermore, she suggested that the **presence of women** in the public space through **cultural expression** (schools, work, arts and associations) has prevented their economic marginalisation and increased their empowerment and recognition as active participants in cultural, economic and political life.

In comparison, Jendouba, a town around 50 km north of Kef, represents the opposite case. Jendouba has no cinema, drama or music traditions and no specific cultural development, which has increased the vulnerability of young people from this town to VE. The case of Kairouan, the so-called most ancient Islamic capital in the Maghreb, is similar in some respects. The main leisure activity for young people is going to the café. Alcohol is forbidden but young people still drink illegally, sometimes to the

point of intoxication. In the 1970s, the Tunisian regime never showed any interest in promoting the value of this town in terms of Islamic culture. On the contrary, the government **denigrated the religious heritage** and institutions present in the town which, according to the current Director of the Centre of Islamic Studies, facilitated the **incursion of foreign versions of Islam** and imams through satellite TV and the Internet. The research points to the **rehabilitation of cultural life** and the **search for the original Tunisian Islam** of the region of Kairouan as possible pathways towards cultural and economic development and, therefore, as resilience factors to extremist discourse and militancy. In fact, the organisation of religious events such as the Moulded Festival (which is celebrated on the birthday of Prophet Mohammad and would have probably been banned by either the former regime or radical Islamists) attracted around one million visitors in 2019.

Individual Risk and Resilience Factors		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Feeling of defeatism and injustice		Sunni communities in Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia.
Need for trusted religious reference points		Tunisia lacked religious institutions that responded to people’s search for answers.
Isolation and moral superiority		Tunisian Salafist groups enhanced their feeling of difference and superiority from the rest.
	Community engagement in culture, arts and media	Kef’s cultural engagement has proven to be a major resilience factor against VE (Tunisia).
Disregard for religious/spiritual needs and religious cultural life		Tunisian marginalisation of religious life in Kairouan led the city to become a hotbed for VE.
	Reconciliation with local religious traditions (as opposed to imported religious practices)	Rehabilitation of cultural life and Tunisian Islam in Kairouan; Moulded Festival (Tunisia).

### 2.5.3 Role and Impact of Security Institutions on VE

The role that security institutions have played in violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa has been ambivalent. Wherever and whenever **sectarianism** has been a problem, **state security actors** have been seen by certain groups as the **armed representatives of the other sect**. This has prompted **security concerns** among the different communities, which, in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, has caused every community to have at least one armed wing. We already mentioned the testimonies of Sunni Muslims from Saida, who talk about their fear of opposing armed groups like Hezbollah, which have concentrated political and military power while being part of the Lebanese cabinet. The control that this organisation has over certain areas of Lebanon, along with the freedom to carry out their intelligence and military activities and their collaboration with the Lebanese army in certain operations

(see the above example of the operation in Aرسال), is the source of the **grievance and fear** felt by many members of the Sunni community.

Related to the previously described situation is the vulnerability factor of having security forces that are not strong enough to maintain stability. This may be the case in Lebanon, where extremist movements take advantage of a **weak state** and use an atmosphere of political, social and economic unrest to establish their influence. These movements ultimately pose as the sole **guarantors of security** for their communities in situations of sectarian violence, ignoring the rule of law and challenging a state that is too weak to respond. This constant perception of instability and insecurity makes communities vulnerable to extremist discourses that justify the use of violence.

Another relevant risk factor related to security policies can be found in the adoption of **preventive security approaches**. In Iraq, some argue that the al-Maliki government used the excuse of terrorism to systematically imprison its Sunni political adversaries. In Tunisia, for example, the staunch hard security approach taken by the government in the first decade of the 2000s is believed by many to have prompted the emergence and spread of violent extremist groups. Some interviewees say that the **atmosphere of police repression**, rather than their faith, was what led them to join Salafist organisations. Similarly, the Lebanese Internal Security Forces have arrested hundreds of Sunni Muslims as potential terrorists, based on contact documents issued by the military or subjugation warrants issued by the General Security (i.e. they were imprisoned **without a trial**). The Lebanese government stated that it would invalidate most of these documents, but this has not happened so far.

Two more risk factors have consequently appeared because of this preventive security approach in Lebanon and Tunisia. On the one hand, **human rights** have not always been respected **and fair trials** have not always been granted. Some of the interviewees from Lebanon pointed out that legal guarantees are not given to the detainees, since they are sometimes forced to give statements without their lawyer or confess under torture or are even denied the right to be seen by a doctor. In general, according to interviewees, the Lebanese authorities appear to be **confusing religious extremism with violent extremism**, despite the link between the two not always being clear-cut.

The second risk factor has involved the **spread of violent extremism in prisons**. The Tunisian government has imprisoned around 7000 individuals in the last decade, which created a perfect environment for Salafism to spread. In Lebanon, where massive imprisonment of Sunnis has occurred in some regions such as Saida, prisons have also become radicalisation hotbeds. One of the interviewees, a sheikh, commented that “the embryos of extremism are fed and raised in the wombs of prisons” in Lebanon. Other interviewees also drew attention to the negative effects this has had, not only on detainees but also on their families. Loss of reputation, shame and humiliation have normally followed the detention and, in some cases, led to homelessness and poverty for their families, which has dramatically increased the **vulnerability of detainees’ families**, who may themselves end up joining VE groups.

The Tunisian authorities eventually realised their mistake and changed their security policy to include some important shifts towards a more resilient security approach. The Tunisian National Committee to Combat Terrorism, which is currently represented by various ministries, has **moved on from the religious policing paradigm** to a more holistic examination of risk factors. This has led the institution to designate **social exclusion** as the main risk factor for VE in Tunisia, based on a marginalisation map that has considerable overlaps with the violent extremism map. The Committee has also **recognised**

**the tensions the state’s security actors have caused** in the general population and advocates for a possible solution through the **modernisation of security institutions** and the **privatisation** of the first levels of security intervention (sports events, for example). The Committee also highlighted the need for a centre for **reintegration of former violent extremists** and terrorist offenders, bearing in mind the stigma and social rejection that they face when leaving prison, which increase their already high vulnerability to recidivism.

Role of Security Institutions		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Sectarian security		Hezbollah’s military role causes a perceived grievance in the Lebanese Sunni community.
Weak State		Weak state institutions cause sects to create their own armies (Iraq and Lebanon).
Preventive Security Approaches		Police repression has had a counteracting role in Lebanon and Tunisia.
Putting Security above Human Rights and Fair Justice Systems		Imprisonment of individuals without trial in Lebanon.
Spread of Violent Extremism in Prisons		High numbers of VE prisoners in Tunisia and Lebanon. Impact of this on the detainees’ families increases their vulnerability.
	Comprehensive analysis of drivers for VE	The Tunisian National Committee to Combat Terrorism has designated social exclusion as the main risk factor and recognised the need for governmental security reforms.

#### 2.5.4 Role and Impact of the Judicial System on VE

The complexities of the judicial system allow risk and resilience factors to be detected in the various studies examined. An initial risk factor identified has to do with **corruption** in the justice system or the **lack of separation of powers**. A good example comes from Iraq, where during Nuri al-Maliki’s time in government (2006-2014), there was political interference in judicial matters, as already indicated in the previous section. As a consequence, the judicial system is weak and **lacks authority**, which has resulted in convicted persons evading prison sentences while false accusations are processed and innocent people go to jail. Similar corruption has been observed in the Lebanese legal system as well. According to the interviewees, it is common for the security forces, the army and political and religious leaders to **exchange favours** by releasing certain detainees, especially when judicial procedures are done without legal guarantees (see section on Security above for more on this). This general perception of a **corrupt legal system** where prison sentences are **decided by political/religious leaders** and used as a form of currency in their negotiations, adds up to the perception of **non-legitimacy towards the state**. Interviewees from Lebanon stated the need for important judicial reforms that include the **closure of primary courts** and the creation of **specialised courts to try cases of violent extremism**.

When it comes to resilience factors, the fieldwork carried out in Tunisia brought to light a noteworthy success of **judicial policies** in curbing violent extremism. After the **designation** of Ansar Al-Sharia as a terrorist organisation in March 2013, with the detention of its leaders and the banning of any public expressions of support for this organisation, interviewees noted a significant **decrease in popular support** for this organisation within Tunisia. This was also confirmed by former Tunisian Salafists who explained how, after the banning, violent extremist organisations like Ansar Al-Sharia became **frustrated and found it difficult to achieve their objectives**. Banning violent extremist organisations can thus cause **disillusionment** among some of their members, who may be less interested in clandestine activism and the risks it involves.

Lastly, another relevant resilience factor was observed in Iraq with the introduction of laws that **recognise the victims of violent extremism**. The Yazidi Female Survivors Law, which acknowledges the atrocities perpetrated by Da’esh against Yazidi, Turkmen, Christian and Shabak women and girls, is a good example of this. The recognition of victims of violent extremism may be relevant in bringing to light the **catastrophic consequences** of VE and **socially excluding** its supporters.

Role of Judicial System		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Corruption of legal institutions		Government, political parties and religious institutions exchange favours, interfere with prison sentences (Lebanon).
Lack of separation of powers		Political interference in judicial matters in Iraq.
	Illegalisation of VE movements	The illegalisation of Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia led to popular disenchantment with the organisation.
	Judicial recognition of VE victims	Iraq’s initiatives to recognise victims of Da’esh.

### 2.5.5 Public Policies, State Institutions and Political/Religious Life

When it comes to public policies, a factor noted in the research conducted in Tunisia had to do with the non-preventive and symptomatic approach to the VE phenomenon and the ineffective coordination between different state departments. After the Tunisian revolution, the government reduced its interference in religious matters, although it still enforced a **marginalisation/monopoly** strategy through the security forces (which banned certain movements and religious expressions). As already observed, this context of the official religious discourse losing ground allowed new informal religious organisations, including violent extremist ones, to spread easily. The Ministry of Religious Affairs tried to recover its space by rehabilitating the discourse in mosques, applying new policies that respected freedom, disconnecting the Ministry of Religious Affairs from the Ministry of Interior, and issuing new laws in agreement with other ministries. However, the jihadi Salafist movement was already a reality. A former Minister of Religious Affairs remarked that even today, there is limited coordination between



the Ministry and other religious bodies: Al-Iftaa, Al-Zaytouna University and the Supreme Islamic Council. **The lack of a comprehensive analysis of risk factors** and the **absence of preventive measures** for VE proved to be an important risk factor in Tunisia.

The public's **disappointment** with government policies is also at the root of VE, as we mentioned above. The absence of changes that can be perceived by vulnerable communities discredits the role of the government and promotes a **feeling of neglect**. This was observed in Iraq, where poverty and development failures are key drivers of VE, as they feed 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 of VE in Iraq. A similar inference may be drawn from the Tunisian reality, where the public expected big changes after the revolution and now has to contend with an unfair development model that prioritises the coastal areas over inland Tunisia. This feeling of disappointment and neglect now extends to the entire political system and the political parties, allowing new fringe and extreme movements to enter the political arena.

Nevertheless, in some cases, the emergence of political options that shared some principles with Salafism was **key to divert former extremists from the path of violence** and involve them in political life and civil society. A former Tunisian Salafist interviewee explained his disappointment with the available political options but remarked that the emergence of the Al-Karama Coalition in 2019, along with the religious guidance he received from Al-Zaytouna University (which showed him the inconsistencies of the Salafi-jihadi movement), marked his movement away from violent jihadi circles to non-violent activism. A female Salafist interviewed in Tunisia recalled that the emergence of the Hazmieh movement drew her away from jihadi Salafism. Thus, despite the emergence of extremist movements and political parties being a risk factor, allowing them to **play by the rules of the political game** can be a resilience factor in diverting these movements and their followers away from violence.

The devastating episodes of sectarian violence that took place in Lebanon during the Civil War and in the recent history of Iraq led these two countries to design **power-sharing models** in order to prevent more sectarian tensions and violent extremism. The effectiveness of these models is debatable, however. In the case of Iraq, the so-called Muhasasa system introduced proportionality arrangements for all the ethno-religious groups in various governmental bodies. The system has been harshly criticised and has undergone several reforms since 2010, because of the Shi'as' disproportionate power. The current situation is not much better. Each community is holding strong to its share of power. Among interviewees, the system is definitely seen as **a trigger for exclusion**. While 60% of the interviewees held this view, almost all the religious and civil society leaders interviewed expressed discontent with this system, since it is used to **monopolise power based on identity or belonging, rather than on skills or competence**. On the other hand, 65% of the politicians interviewed stated that the system fosters inclusion. The situation in Lebanon is quite similar when it comes to the power-sharing system. Also, as in Iraq, Lebanon's institutions are weak, and this creates a perfect arena for religious institutions and their political counterparts to act as supra-state entities that provide security, livelihoods and political representation for their communities. In this way, the importance of these sectarian institutions for the different communities has made **political and religious polarisation** the main driver of radicalisation in Lebanon. Whenever there has been a political crisis, religious institutions utilise **religious references to mobilise** members of their communities and act as their representatives. One example dates back to 2016, when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (a Shi'a sheikh himself) and the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai met to discuss the power vacuum that the country was going through after

years without a president. Thus, the power-sharing system allows for this **porosity between the three branches of government and also the religious governmental institutions**. Dar Al-Fatwa, for example, openly stated that bringing former Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab (from the Sunni party “Future”) to court because of the port explosion was “a bureaucratic and discretionary decision”. In summary, the power-sharing system seems to be a kind of continuation of the civil war in the political arena. Polarisation based on identity rather than political positions leads to clientelism, nepotism and corruption. Without a doubt, this increases vulnerability to VE among young people facing sectarian barriers to employment and active citizenship.

Public Policies, State Institutions and Political/Religious Life		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Lack of a comprehensive analysis of risk factors and PVE measures		Tunisian government’s lack of cooperation and PVE measures allowed jihadi Salafism to spread.
Disappointment with government policy and feeling of neglect		Development failures in Iraq and in inland Tunisia caused young people to join illegitimate activities and groups.
	Emergence of extremist political but non-violent movements that play by the political rules	The emergence of al-Karamah Coalition and Hazmieh movement pulled violent extremists away from violent groups.

## 2.6 Dialogue / PVE

Several initiatives for inter-community dialogue and the prevention of violent extremism have emerged in the three countries studied for this report. There are obvious difficulties in analysing the effectiveness of these initiatives. However, it is possible to share some insights, based on the community response to these initiatives, which can guide future programming.

The reality of most initiatives in the MENA region is that they are often funded and organised by **foreign actors**. This can be identified as an important risk factor, since the development of these programmes can be perceived as **political interference**, with PVE work being used in order to promote other political agendas. This has been especially important in Iraq, where the role of international NGOs (mainly from the US) that have been working on preventing VE has been controversial, especially among members of the Shi’a community. An example of how this has happened is the conference organised by the American Center for Peace Communications, which took place in Erbil on 24 September 2021. Under the guise of a peacebuilding initiative, the organisation was mainly interested in the promotion of normalised diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. The research conducted in the area right after the event proved that it had increased fear and mistrust of international P/CVE initiatives within the community and the government.

Similarly, international organisations have developed many P/CVE projects in Lebanon. In addition to mistrust of these organisations in certain areas, respondents identified another possible obstacle to

the effectiveness of these programmes: a culture among NGOs that aims to **please the donor, rather than focusing on actual change**.

The reality of nationwide and governmental initiatives is similar; here, two main impediments were identified. On the one hand, communities' possible mistrust of the government, based on the political, legal and social inconsistencies described above, can become a major obstacle in developing PVE initiatives and **engaging local communities**. In the case of Lebanon, for example, the National Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism succeeded in bringing security, judicial, academic and civil society representatives to the table. However, as the massive protests against the government in October 2019 showed, there was a high level of mistrust of government within the Lebanese population, which increased the challenges of implementing the strategy.

The relevance of PVE may also be obscured by the **emergence of other more urgent issues**. In the case of Lebanon, the work of the successive governments in place since 2019 was disrupted by the Lebanese Uprising in 2019, the coronavirus pandemic, the port explosion and the economic crises. As result of these events, other needs were prioritised, leading to a slowdown in the implementation of the National Strategy.

Nonetheless, a different scenario is presented with some initiatives that were launched by **grassroots organisations** and seem to have had an impact in the local communities. In Kef in Tunisia, for example, where there is a fairly dynamic civil society, some inter-religious dialogue projects ("Dialogue entre les Religions") and PVE initiatives ("Ambassadeurs contre le Terrorisme") seem to have worked in keeping young people away from VE. The interviewees explained, however, that youth engagement in these activities has worked due to the culture of **youth work** and **community development** present in the area. In Lebanon, Majdal Anjar launched a Community PVE network at the Al-Azhar Center, with the collaboration of official religious representatives and national and local authorities. According to the research carried out in the area, this reduced effectively the spread of violent extremism. Thus, **a tradition of civic engagement** and **youth activism** seems to be an important resilience factor, which can be enhanced by grassroots PVE initiatives.

Lastly, **peacebuilding, peace advocacy and PVE** initiatives that emerge **from religious institutions** can be important resilience factors. We have already mentioned how, during the crises in Iraq and Lebanon, some of these initiatives prevented the escalation of conflict. Some noteworthy initiatives have also been reported in Tunisia. Kairouan hosts the Centre for Islamic Studies which, according to its current director, is mainly tasked with reconciling the town with Maliki Islam and diverting it away from Salafism. Recent political moves such as the unification of this centre with Zaytouna University under the auspices of the Ministry of Higher Education have allowed the emergence of Islamic culture, education and PVE initiatives in the region, including the training of imams on the interpretation of the Qur'an. Following this idea of reconciliation with traditional Islam, Tunisian Sufis are also claiming a possible role in promoting spiritual peace as a truly Tunisian religious expression, far from the esoteric VE interpretations and practices or the government's "forced modernisation". In their opinion, **Sufi education** could be a strong resilience factor that should play a part in the healing process.

Dialogue / PVE Initiatives		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Political interference through international NGOs		Peace conference in Erbil with a hidden pro-Israeli agenda. Consequent lack of trust in international NGOs by community and government.
Donor-focused paradigm		Lebanese NGOs more focused on pleasing the donor rather than focusing on actual change.
Governmental mistrust		Difficulty in engaging local communities in Lebanon after the 2019 protests.
Emergence of more urgent issues		Political unrest, Covid-19 pandemic, port explosion and economic crises in Lebanon put PVE after other priorities.
	Local grassroots organisations coming out of youth and community development organisations	Local initiatives in Majdal Anjar which have changed the VE situation in the area (Lebanon).
	Religious institutions engaged in PVE	Kairouan Centre for Islamic Studies' engagement with Zaytouna University in the training of imams (Tunisia).

## 2.7 Gender

Gender issues and violence against women are linked to the phenomenon of violent extremism in various ways. First, violence against women has been used **as a weapon** by extremist groups. In Iraq, for example, rape was used by Shi'a officers in the Iraqi army during the US invasion as a weapon to dishonour the Sunni male fighters.

Furthermore, intra-familial **violence against women is seen as a sign of violent extremism**. Some would consider that a man treats society the way he treats his own family. Domestic abuse is common in rural Iraq, in the same areas where VE has also spread significantly.

A different risk element for violent extremism is related to women's **lack of representation** in decision-making processes of **official religious institutions**. This is common across the three countries. **Political engagement is also reduced**. In Lebanon, for example, women's participation in political life is not enough to bring a substantial change. Only six women won seats in the Lebanese Parliament in 2018, out of 128. Of these six, only one is Sunni. Nonetheless, women do have a **higher presence in administrative bodies** of the official religious establishment and in **educational institutions** affiliated with Dar Al-Fatwa. The case of Tunisia is not very different. No women were reported to hold senior positions in religious institutions, although they are present in religious education institutions, like Zaytouna University, both as students and as teachers.

A different picture emerges when the **presence of women in civil society** is analysed. In Iraq, for example, women were more present in the civil society organisations than men (65%). Likewise, in Lebanon, women have a much higher presence in civil society organisations, sometimes even accounting for a higher percentage of the staff of local NGOs and associations. The role and work of civil society organisations and NGOs might constitute an important resilience factor for VE, since **they enhance women’s representation, political participation and social engagement**. The **presence of women in cultural and community events** in the town of Kef has been seen as a resilience factor for violent extremism, for example. An interviewee explained how her family had no problem in letting her travel to Europe for her studies and pursuing her professional career, since her role was not so very different from “what the old women from town had always done”.

Lastly, researchers explored the **gender dynamics** present in the **radicalisation processes**. An interview with a Tunisian Salafist woman revealed the specific issues that drove her towards Salafism. Her hostility towards the Tunisian regime was increased, aside from the restrictions on religious expression and the arbitrary detentions, by the governmental laws on the use of the hijab. Thus, radicalisation has **specific gender dynamics** that should be evaluated in PVE. This young Tunisian Salafist woman also illustrates the **influence of political-ideological alignments in the household**. She married a Tunisian man who was not very religious. Through her perseverance, she managed to convince her husband to abandon the Ashari faith and adopt Wahhabism. The man, she remarked, did not seem especially convinced of Wahhabist ideas but apparently aligned himself more closely with her positions for the sake of the relationship. In this way, gender roles and family dynamics can encourage the spread of extremist ideas and become an important risk factor for violent extremism.

Gender Factors		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Violence against women as a weapon		Rape used by Shi’a armed groups during the American invasion.
Domestic violence against women		Domestic violence against women is common where VE is common (Iraq).
Lack of women’s representation in official religious institutions		Lack of women’s representation in Lebanese, Iraqi and Tunisian religious institutions.
Women’s reduced political engagement		Need for more presence of women in decision-making bodies in Tunisia, Iraq and Lebanon.
	Women’s engagement in civil society organisations	Women’s presence in civil society organisations in Tunisia has enhanced their representation, political participation and social engagement and has been a key element in preventing VE.
Unexplored gender dynamics in VE		The hijab polemic sparked by the Tunisian government pushed women towards VE.

## 2.8 External Factors

The political and religious reality of the MENA region cannot be correctly analysed without considering regional trends and tensions and the various interventions by Western powers in the region. Several external factors have greatly affected the vulnerability of the MENA countries to violent extremism.

On the one hand, the MENA region is currently embroiled in **regional conflicts** that have affected the stability of these countries. In the case of Iraq, for example, being surrounded by Iran, Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia has facilitated the **infiltration of armed groups** into Iraqi territory, which has triggered various responses from the local population and armed groups. A good example of this has been seen with the PKK presence in Northern Iraq, which irritated both Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government ruling party (KDP) and increased tensions in the area. Regional cooperation between the different governments and authorities involved was identified as a resilience factor. That is why Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Iran and Turkey organised a conference in Baghdad in August 2021 in order to deal with regional political, economic and security issues.

In a similar way, Lebanon has suffered greatly as a result of regional tensions that have increased the legitimacy of violent extremist groups and the local population's support for them. On the one hand, the **military occupation by Syria**, which ended in 2005, was described by those involved in extremist groups as the trigger to engage in violent extremism. The subsequent **Syrian revolution and war** also affected the political tensions and sectarian divisions in Lebanon, to the point where two main coalition blocs were created based on their respective positions in the Syrian conflict. The allegiance and support provided by certain parts of the Lebanese Sunni community to Syrian insurgent groups have also allowed the **incursion** of these groups into Lebanese territory, especially in border towns like Arsal and Majdal Anjar and in Palestinian refugee camps like Ain Al-Helwe in Saida. On the other hand, the **Israeli invasion** and conflict in South Lebanon until 2000 and the continued tensions with Israel, including attacks that reached the outskirts of Beirut in 2006, have greatly influenced the Lebanese political spectrum and the **legitimacy** of armed political groups like Hezbollah.

Nevertheless, the emergence of violent extremism has not only been influenced by regional tensions and the porosity of geographical and political borders, as we saw above. In some cases, **foreign powers** have made open calls to use these countries' territory to fight their own **proxy wars**, disregarding the effects that this can have in the local population. In Iraq, for example, the assassination of Iranian Army Commander Qassim Suleimani and PMF deputy chief Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis in a drone strike by the US Army caused great anger among Shi'a political and paramilitary forces. The local communities experienced these events as triggers of more instability and sectarian violence, and even the Iraqi President warned that this war would increase the country's vulnerability to violent extremism. Also, direct foreign interventions do not respond to the needs of local communities, which makes them **unreliable and ineffective**, even when they achieve stability. In the case of Iraq, the US created the Sunni Awakening Forces (Sahawat) to confront Da'esh. However, right after its defeat, the Americans stopped paying these forces and so did the Iraqi government. The Sahawat stopped fighting, which allowed Da'esh to regain control of the area in 2014.

In other cases, political interference by foreign powers takes the form of **soft power**. Iran's political collaboration with the Shi'a Endowment in funding and works for the Iraqi religious shrines is just one



example, mentioned above. In Lebanon, the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria are consulted and need to reach a consensus on the election of the head of Dar Al-Fatwa, the Mufti.

This subordination to regional political and religious powers plays a major role in internal sectarian politics and violence and is a significant obstacle to stability. An example of this **influence through religious organisations and leaders** was seen in Iraq in 2004, when a group of Saudi clerics issued a call for Iraqis to undertake jihad against occupation targets in the country.

Another risk element identified by former extremists has to do with the **idealisation and romanticisation** of foreign conflicts and wars. This has played a particularly important role in enhancing the narratives of **victimisation** among Sunni Muslims. The role of European and US policies in conflict areas like Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq was identified by some extremists as the main trigger for their recruitment. In Tunisia, the **US invasion of Iraq** coincides with the spread of the Salafi jihadi phenomenon. Interviewees from Salafi jihadi circles explained how for them, Muslim combatants like Osama Bin Laden represented the new “Che Guevaras” fighting against imperialism and encouraged foreign participation in this revolutionary fight. The massive **outflow of young fighters from Tunisia** to conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan signals the arrival of violent extremism in the country. The **return of these fighters** facilitated the emergence of these movements in Tunisia itself. A similar situation arose in Lebanon. Young people travelled to Iraq to fight against the US invasion and Western imperialism. On the other hand, Shi’a youths enrolled in groups like Hezbollah, which participated actively in the war in Syria alongside the Syrian regime.

Another important risk element very much related to the previous factors has to do with **foreign occupation and human rights abuses** by occupying powers. Contemporary history has many examples of human rights abuses by occupying powers, especially in the MENA region. In Iraq, for example, the US Army increased tensions after Operation Iraqi Freedom. The US-led coalition dissolved the Iraqi army and **left a power vacuum** that was quickly filled by a number of non-state actors, Sunni malcontents, and Iraqi and foreign jihadists. In fact, following the establishment of the Coalition Provisional Authority, the well-known Shi’a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr claimed that he had more authority than this new authority. **Colonial and illegitimate behaviour** by the US sparked agitation against the US presence in Iraq. Furthermore, cases like the Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse, the Haditha massacre and the Mukaradeeb wedding party massacre shocked not only the Iraqi public, but the rest of the world. In summary, the research carried out in the field clearly shows how the American invasion triggered the formation of Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-jihad by Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, which would eventually become Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Their initial goal was the fight against foreign occupation, which led them to target locals collaborating with the Americans.

And lastly, two other risk factors were identified that are related to the spread of violent extremism in the MENA region. On the one hand, Tunisian interviewees emphasised the role played by **globalisation and technological development** (i.e. spread of satellite TV and the Internet) in bringing **new religious expressions into the country** after 9/11. A good example of this was the Minbar al-Jihad website, which became popular among young people in marginalised neighbourhoods of Tunis. It was especially important there since it used a discourse of marginalisation and social exclusion, which were realities for local communities, in order to legitimise the use of violence.

The other risk factor had to do with the **influx of violent extremist narratives and fighters from Europe**. All the Tunisian former jihadi Salafists interviewed said that their approach to this ideology was



sparked by someone coming from Europe. In one case it was a French individual who brought books on Salafism from France; in another, it was a group of Tunisians affiliated with the Salafi movement who returned to Tunisia after residing in Italy for years. In a third case, a Tunisian man returning from Denmark quoted the Qur’an and the Sunnah and promoted the website Minbar al-Jihad. The role of **European religious and political dynamics** in the rise of VE in the MENA region should therefore be noted.

External Factors		
Risk Factors	Resilience Factors	Example
Regional conflicts and incursion of foreign armed groups		PKK presence in Northern Iraq, which causes tensions both with the KRG government and with Turkey.
	Regional security initiatives	Baghdad Conference in 2021.
Proxy wars		American assassination of Suleimani and its effect on local instability in Iraq.
Soft-power influences		Iranian funding and works at Iraqi religious shrines.
Idealisation of foreign conflicts and wars		US invasion of Iraq turned Bin Laden into the new “Che Guevara” for Tunisians.
Foreign occupation and human rights abuses		US colonial and illegitimate behaviour in Iraq triggered the creation of VE groups.
Globalisation and technological development		Jihadi Salafism was spread through Minbar al-Jihad’s website in Tunisia.
Importing of VE narratives and fighters from Europe		All the former violent extremists interviewed in Tunisia mentioned a contact with someone coming from Europe as their first approach to VE.

### 3. Conclusion

This report has presented a considerable amount of data that can be analysed in order to understand the reality of the MENA region when it comes to VE. First, the comparison between the three different government models (centralised in Tunisia, semi-centralised in Lebanon and decentralised in Iraq) allows us to look at the risk elements for each model. No model seems to present exceptional results when it comes to PVE. However, we show that Tunisia’s centralised model presents more risk factors linked mainly to the lack of legitimacy of the official religious institutions, which are strictly controlled by the state.

In this fight for legitimacy of religious institutions, we point out how important it is for them to respond to religious needs and to maintain a connection with the religious communities in order to keep representing them. Furthermore, we note how the perception of alignment of state-run religious institutions with failed state policies in other fields affects their legitimacy as well. In that sense, 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 challenges. The Tunisian centralised model may provide resilience by having official religious institutions (Al-Zaytouna) that serve as a regional reference point. However, outdated curricula, poor employment prospects and a lack of dissemination channels and knowledge transfer programmes inactivate this resilience potential. In the cases of Lebanon and Iraq, the reliance on private religious schools and the control of curricula by religious and political organisations impede the development of an inclusive national narrative.

When it comes to the interaction between the state and the religious institutions, this research highlights the porosity of this relationship, especially in the cases of Iraq and Lebanon, which leads to corruption and a feeling of relative deprivation between the different religious communities. Furthermore, religious institutions should be granted independence from the state and internal democratic approaches, so that dissident voices can be included. Finally, it was noted that the mandate of official religious institutions should be enforced when it comes to PVE initiatives and dialogue with extremist organisations.

The role of religious institutions was also identified as crucial and effective in the de-escalation of conflict during violent clashes. Enhancing their role and their PVE potential with the religious community they represent seems to be a major resilience factor for VE.

Individual risk factors for VE were also explored and a need for a more comprehensive point of view that involves factors other than religious extremism was identified. Feelings of defeatism and injustice along with lack of trusted religious reference points were identified throughout the study. Moreover, individuals' engagement in social, cultural and religious life was seen to be an important resilience factor.

In terms of security, the study pointed out how failed state-run security initiatives lead to the emergence of alternative sectarian armed groups. In that sense, enhancing national security institutions seems key in order to prevent VE.

However, national security institutions need to be governed according to the law and should respect human rights. Preventive security approaches to VE and terrorism were seen to be blatantly counterproductive, turning state prisons into factories of future terrorists. Thus, a soft approach to extremism that differentiates between violent and non-violent extremism seems necessary. Mass incarcerations should therefore be avoided. In the same vein, security reforms that reconcile security forces with the community and de-radicalisation initiatives are potential preventive actions.

Some of the judicial initiatives examined also presented relevant resilience elements. On the one hand, outlawing VE options discourages followers. However, it was also noted that this will mainly work if it is combined with non-violent extremist options for participation in the political and religious arena. Furthermore, the legal recognition of VE victims can help in raising awareness of the pain caused and in fostering social rejection of VE groups.

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In general, when designing PVE policies, governments will need to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of risk factors that encompasses inclusion and development policies. This may require the review of power-sharing models in contexts like Iraq and Lebanon.

Furthermore, it was noted that local grassroots PVE initiatives produce better results than international and national programmes. A more efficient approach seems to start from community development activities that involve the local population. These activities should always be prioritised over events and actions organised by external actors that are disconnected from the grassroots movement. Religious institutions should be key actors in PVE initiatives, especially those providing respected knowledge and presenting possible traditional religious healing practices (e.g. Sufi Islam).

In terms of gender, the study highlighted the general lack of women's representation in religious institutions and political life. Promotion of women's participation in religious and political life should be a potential resilience factor. On the other hand, women are present in administrative bodies, schools and civil society organisations, which offers an opportunity to engage these institutions in PVE work. Lastly, a need for gender-inclusive understandings of radicalisation processes (that do not underestimate women's radicalisation and recruiting potential) was also identified.

When it comes to external factors, regional instability was identified as one major risk factor. Thus, regional security dialogue initiatives were presented as potential resilience factors. In the same way, the use of MENA countries as battlegrounds for proxy wars was identified as an important risk factor, along with foreign occupations and human rights abuses in the region. In a similar vein, the need to enforce independent national religious institutions that do not depend on external budget or political approval was also identified as an important factor. The control of the spread of VE through international TV channels and the Internet was also recognised as a need. Finally, the research highlights the need for further studies to be carried out in Europe in order to understand the important flux of VE narratives and fighters from the EU into the MENA region.

## 4. References

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