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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

RESEARCH PAPER

What is Causing Radicalism in the MENA?

Fadi Farasin, Cihat Battaloglu, Adam Atauallah Bensaid | Feb 2017

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The emergence of Al-Qaeda as a global terrorist organization carrying out devastating strikes across the USA, Europe, Middle East and Africa shed a spotlight on terrorism, and by extension on radicalism. The attention has intensified with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), its atrocities and the regional surge in terrorist groups pledging allegiance to it. This in turn has pushed the issue of radicalism to the top of the international agenda. Current efforts to defeat violent extremist groups such as ISIL are dominated by hard security measures, with no guarantees that military action alone can ensure permanent solutions to the specter of terrorism. Assuming the current wave of terrorist groups can be defeated militarily, foreign terrorist fighters may disperse to the rest of the world, creating new problems. Even in the case that foreign fighters are contained; radicalism will not disappear but will find ways to manifest itself.

It is impossible to counter what is not well understood. Therefore, there is a need to come to terms with the causes of radicalism. Such understanding is essential if efforts to counter, or better yet, prevent radicalism and terrorism are to succeed. Radicalism however, is not a simple phenomenon, but rather multidimensional by nature, thus a reductionist approach will consistently fail to account for its complexity.

This study is an attempt at explaining the root causes of radicalism in the MENA region which serves as a hotbed and magnet for radicalism and terrorism. It assesses multiple root causes of radicalism and begins with examining the socio-economic conditions of the MENA region to determine whether the region suffers from socio-economic deprivation which can be used to explain the rise of radicalism. To paint a comprehensive picture of the region's socio-economic realities this study reflects on poverty, inequality, and human development levels. It then addresses political drawbacks in MENA, which can be cited as root-causes of radicalism, using indicators of political participation; political and social integration; rule of law; and stability of democratic institutions. It further addresses issues of western intervention in the MENA, and how this serves as a catalyst for radicalization. In examining the role of western intervention in radicalization, the study analyzes the issue along two dimensions: Western support for autocratic regimes, and direct western military interventions. The study goes on to argue that the ideological element is a significant root cause of radicalism in the MENA, instrumentalized by radical movements to attract and manipulate recruits. The paper explores ideologies that lead to radicalism in the MENA region, commonly underpinned by a distorted, selective interpretation of Islam. Finally,

the paper considers the unhealed rift between modernity and traditional societies as a root cause for radicalism; not as a form of reactionism or cultural-religious intolerance. Rather, it argues this was a failed process leading to the marginalization of endogenous moderate thought and movements seeking to engage with modernity constructively; the failure of which resulted in societal anomie and propensity for violence as a means to change.

Root Causes of Radicalism

Socio Economic Root Causes

Is the lack of economic and human development a root cause of radicalism and terrorism or should terrorism be viewed exclusively as a 'security threat' with no distinct causes stemming from the realities of economic and human development? The answer to this is a subject of strong contention. On the one side, there are those who believe that socio-economic conditions such as poverty, lack of education and economic inequality are to blame for pushing people down the path of radicalism and terrorism. Johnson[1] concludes that transnational terrorism is largely the consequence of underdevelopment and poverty. Frankel and Romer[2] and Lai[3] put forward that countries with more economic inequality tend to have more terrorism than egalitarian societies. Moreover, Krueger and Laitin[4] claim that underdeveloped economies are more likely to harbor terrorists. The underlying logic to this thesis is an extension to what is found in mainstream literature on the economics of crime, that point to poverty and the lack of education as driving forces behind illegal and violent activity. In this vein, terrorism is

[1] A. Johnson, "Disparities in Wealth seen as Fuel for Terrorism", *International Herald Tribun*e (Dec 20, 2001).

[2] Jeffrey A. Frankel and David Romer, "Does Trade Cause Growth?", *American Economic Review* 89, no. 3 (Jun. 1999), pp. 379-399. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://eml.berkeley.edu/~dromer/papers/AER_June99.pdf

[3] Brian Lai, "'Draining the Swamp': An Empirical Examination of the Production of International Terrorism, 1968–1998", *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 24, no. 4 (2007): pp. 297-310. Accessed January 18, 2017 at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/07388940701643649

[4] Alan B. Krueger and David D. Laitin, "Kto Kogo? A Cross-Country Study of the Origins and Targets of Terrorism", in *Terrorism, Economic Development, and Political Opennes,* Philip Keefler and Norman Loayza (eds.), (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 148-173. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://harris.princeton.edu/faculty/krueger/terrorism4.pdf

akin to violent crime, on the basis of which the same causal factors contributing to crime are extended to terrorism. What follows, is the obvious conclusion; that social and economic development are the best cure for radicalism and terrorism.

The opposite side would reject a causal link connection between socio-economic factors and radicalism. Krueger and Malecková[5] state that any connection between poverty, education and terrorism is indirect, complicated and probably quite weak. In the same vein, Kurrild-Klitgaard et al.[6] and Krueger[7] emphasize that much of terrorism is unrelated to education or poverty and instead revolves around influencing political outcomes. Others go on to take the rejection of a causal link between socio-economic factors and radicalism further by arguing that considering socio-economic factors in the sphere of countering radicalism and terrorism diverts attention and resources from hard security measures needed to defeat terrorism. This is substantiated by the claim that considering socio-economic factors is equivalent to projecting weakness and rewarding radicalism and terrorism, which will only result in increased radicalism and terrorism.[8]

Both camps make compelling cases supported by theoretical and empirical evidence. Their arguments help explain different dimensions of radicalism and serve to deepen our understanding further. Nonetheless, the root causes of radicalism are quite complex, multidimensional, and interrelated and neither camp on its own provides a complete account of the root causes of radicalism. This section will therefore not seek to side with one camp or another. Rather, it will seek to enrich the discussion and provide new insight into the root causes of radicalism specific to the MENA region by impartially analyzing the MENA region, determining the realities of the region and contrasting it with the developing world, in order to determine whether the MENA region suffers from socio-economic deprivation that can be used to explain the rise of radicalism. To paint a comprehensive picture of the socio-economic realities of the

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[5] Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is there a Causal Connection?", *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (Fall 2003): pp. 119-144.

[6] Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard, Mogens Kamp Justesen and Robert Klemmensen. "The Political Economy of Freedom, Democracy and Transnational Terrorism", *Public Choice* 128, no. 1-2 (2006): pp. 289-315.

[7] Alan B. Krueger, *What makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

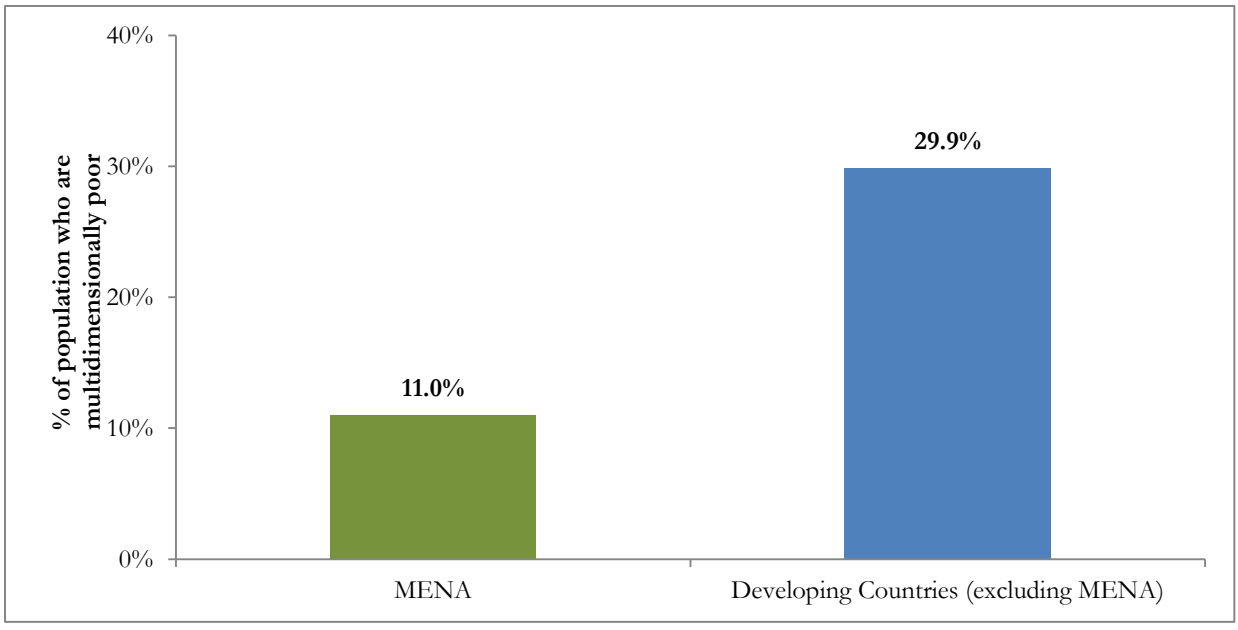
[8] Alan Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 2002).

MENA region this paper looks at the following three indicators: poverty, inequality, and the level of human development.

Poverty is often defined by one-dimensional measures, such as income. This is contentious as one-dimensional measures fail to capture the dynamic range of factors that constitute poverty. For this reason, this paper will utilize the multidimensional poverty index developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Imitative (OPHI) which complements traditional income-based poverty measures by capturing the deprivations that each person faces at the same time with respect to education, health and living standards.

Figure 1 reveals that 11% of MENA population is multi-dimensionally poor, significantly lower than the population percentage of poor in other developing countries where almost one in every three persons is multi-dimensionally poor.

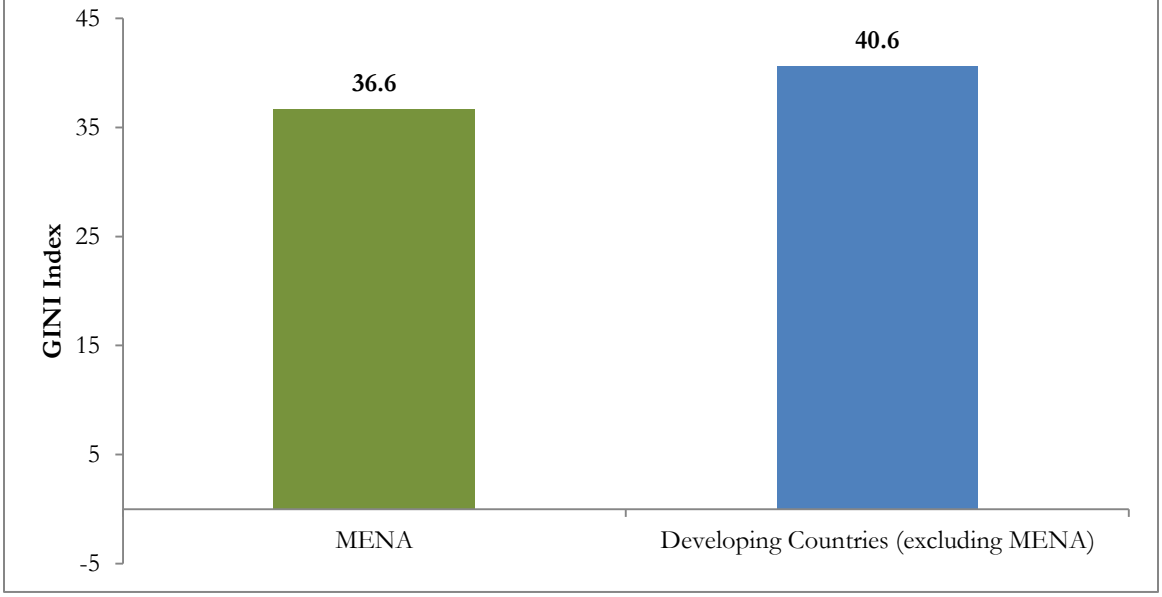
Figure 1: Multidimensional Poverty
Multidimensional Poverty



***Source**: Author's calculations based on OPHI 2016*

To examine the issue of inequality in the MENA region, we use the GINI index, the most commonly used measure of economic equality (distribution of income) where a value of zero reflects perfect equality and a value of 100 expresses maximal inequality. Figure 2 shows that the GINI index for the MENA region is 36.6, whereas in other developing countries the GINI index registers a value of 40.6. This would signify that wealth is more equally distributed in the MENA region, than it is in other developing countries. Thus, it can be asserted that there is a higher level of income equality in the MENA region when compared with other developing countries.

Figure 2: Equality (Income Distribution)
Equality (Income Distribution)



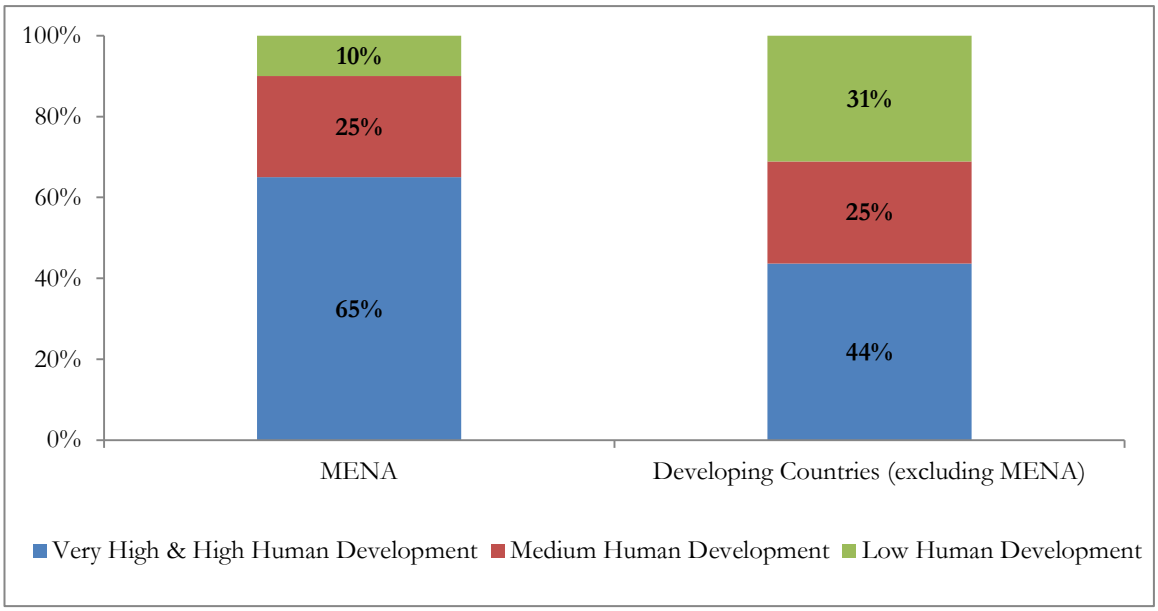
***Source**: Author's calculations based on the World Bank WDI Database. Latest available data since 2005*

When it comes to human development, we make use of the Human Development Index (HDI) developed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The Human

Development Index is a summary measure of average achievements in key dimensions of human development; a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living.

In the MENA region, the level of human development far exceeds what is found in other developing countries (See Figure 3). While 65% of countries in the MENA region have achieved very high or high levels of human development, the corresponding percentage in other developing countries is a mere 44%. Moreover, only 10% of countries in the MENA region suffer from a low level of human development which is far cry from the low 31% human development level observed in other developing countries.

Figure 3: Human Development
Human Development



***Source**: Author's calculations based on the Human Development Index, 2015*

The above analysis shows that socio-economic conditions in the MENA region are rather positive when compared to other developing countries. Yet levels of radicalism and terrorism in the MENA region are high. Could there be a disconnect between socio-economic conditions and radicalism in the region thus rendering discussions about socio-economic roots moot? To accept such a proposition would fly against what we know about the MENA region. For instance, while the reasons that drove the masses to the streets during the Arab spring are diverse and complicated, a commonly accepted driver is tied to a popular slogan chanted by protesters in Egypt: "عيش حرية عدالة إجتماعية" which can be translated into English as "bread, freedom, and social justice." The slogan

establishes that part of the frustration felt by the masses was rooted in socio-economics causes. More critically, radical extremist groups often reference issues of poverty and inequality in their rationale and propaganda.

While they may seem to be an initial a contradiction between socio-economic realities on the ground and what people feel and believe throughout the MENA region, analysis shows that socio-economic realities in the MENA region are comparatively better off than other developing countries, in spite of feelings throughout the region of socio-economic deprivation. To resolve this apparent contradiction, it is possible to conclude that the issue at hand here is not absolute deprivation but rather relative deprivation[9], referring to the gap between perceptions of what people believe they deserve and what they actually receive. In the MENA region, there are high expectations contrasted with socio-economic realties fail to satisfy these expectations. But what is the source of such high expectations throughout the MENA region and how do they form? The answer to this question can be found in social imaginary.

Social imaginary determines the manner in which people and nations perceive themselves, their worldview, and their perception of their just place among nations of earth. The people of the MENA region have a collective social imaginary shaped by being home to great civilizations and historical legacies characterized by wealth, prosperity and significant advancements in the area of science and culture. This social imagination features great glory, heroism, grand conquests, and leadership. Ordinary people in the MENA region who consider themselves the rightful heirs of the great empires of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottomans and whose imagination have been shaped by memories of the great cities of Baghdad, Córdoba, and Granada; the legends of Umar bin Khattab, Khalid bin Waleed, and Muhammad the Conqueror can only harbor deep feelings of disappointment and resentment in contrast to the status quo. These feelings are both political and socio-economic in nature. They represent dissatisfaction with the level of socio-economic development in the region, and political resentment towards ruling regimes which they blame for their suffering. Here, social imaginary provides the people of the MENA region with an internal point of reference that they use for making comparisons, it is an internal point of reference because it offers a comparison of the self between different eras, past and present.

[9] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, (London: Routledge, 2015).

Furthermore, social imaginary does not just provide people of the MENA with an internal point of reference; it also provides them with an external point of reference. But what is this external point of reference? The answer is quite simply "The West". The history of the people of the MENA region has been closely entwined with the West. In this complex narrative one finds competition, cooperation, clashes, agreements, admiration and rejection. This is the reason that when people in the MENA region feel socio-economically deprived, they look not to absolute values of socio-economic development levels, but rather in comparison with the West.

Political Root Causes

One can argue that the political system is itself a sole factor pushing people down the path of radicalism; however, there can be no denying that political factors do matter. These include weak and non-participatory political systems lacking well-designed political institutions, good governance, political liberty, and freedom of saying which fuel extremism and radicalism[10]. They do so by inducing festering political grievances and dissatisfaction, thus motivating radicalism and terrorism[11].

In the late 90s, the majority of regimes in MENA initiated a considerable level of political reform in order to legitimize themselves and become more accountable to their population[12]. During these years, the largest challenge facing MENA countries was the development of better systems of governance. This was important due to emerging gaps between regimes and public opinion, opening spaces for opposition voices to register their discontent at the direction of policy[13]. In addition, increasing economic prosperity, improving educational standards, and developments in life standards raised new expectations in the MENA region; particularly in the political realm. Freedom in the MENA region however did not flourish, and regimes continued to be characterized by:

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[10] Subhayu Bandyopadhyay and Javed Younas, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism in Developing Countries: An Empirical Assessment", *Economics Letters* 112, no. 2 (2011): pp. 171-175. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6521/ed174163add4e9faffc868c5ca67ae6c6080.pdf

[11] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism" *Comparative Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4 (July 1981): pp. 379-399.

[12] Andrew Rathmell and Kirsten Schulze. "Political Reform in the Gulf: The Case of Qatar", *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, n. 4, (2000): 48.

[13] Nigel Ashton and Bryan Gibson, eds., *The Iran-Iraq war: New International Perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 120.

limited political freedom and pluralism; disregard for the importance of civil society; lack of rule of law and a well-functioning state (including an effective bureaucracy). For this reason, gaps between political aspirations of people and the realities on the ground has only grown in the region.

In the following paragraphs, we present the political drawbacks in MENA, which can be cited as root-causes of radicalism by means of selected indicators. In this regard, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) will be used to paint a comprehensive picture of political participation; political and social integration; rule of law; and stability of democratic institutions[14] in the MENA region in comparison with other country groups.

Political participation can take on several forms at all levels of the political system. In authoritarian states it may be reserved for the ruling elite, though the masses may be mobilized and compelled to vote in elections in order to demonstrate regime legitimacy. With political freedom, participation is voluntary except in those few countries where compulsory voting is mandated by law. The case for greater political participation is well founded in classical literature by both Rousseau[15] and John Stuart Mill[16]. The established argument is that taking part in the politics of one's country is good for both the moral and civic health of the individual, and the political life of the nation. In modern terms, political participation is focused extensively on civic engagement in all its forms, emphasizing the role of citizens within representative political system in each nation-state, including channels influencing elections, governments, and parties. In this regard, voting can be described as one of the most ubiquitous political activities of regular elections.

For the MENA region however, most regimes disregard: free and fair elections; association and assembly rights, and the freedom of expression in their reform agendas. Political reform in the region therefore remains cosmetic and based on regime

[14] The BTI index excludes countries that might be considered long-consolidated democratic systems and in which economic development can be regarded as well advanced. In the absence of a clearly defined "threshold of consolidation;" the Transformation Index therefore excludes all countries that were members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) by the year 1989.

[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract & Discourses*. (London: JM Dent & Sons, 1920).

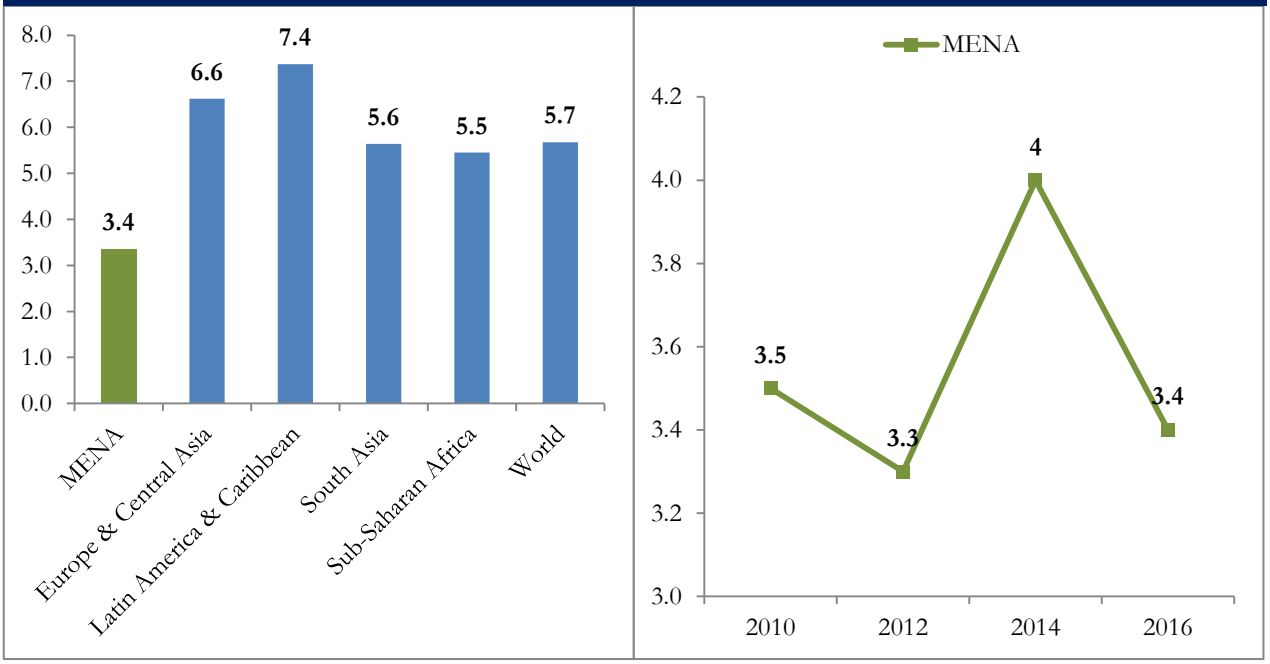
[16] John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty", *John Stuart Mill: A Selection of his Works*, (London: Macmillan Education, 1966).

interests, without tangible potential for satisfying the public's aspiration for greater political participation.

Figure 4 (Left) demonstrates political participation[17] in the MENA region in comparison to other regions. As a group, MENA countries score an average of 3.4 on a scale of 10 (10 being best and 1 being worst). This score demonstrates the weak political participation levels in the MENA region when compared to other country groups (the regional averages range between 7.4 and 5.5). Figure 4 (Right) also indicates a positive trend in political participation in the MENA region between 2012 and 2014. This can be attributed to political reforms after the so-called Arab Spring. This positive trend was nevertheless short lived, and between 2014 and 2016 a reverse trend is observed. By 2016, it can be argued that most MENA countries have abandoned reform paths, and as a result political participation has fallen behind the scores initially achieved in 2010.

[17] The score on the political participation index is based on the following criteria:to what extent are political representatives determined by general, free and fair elections; to what extent do democratically elected rulers have the effective power to govern; to what extent are there veto powers and political enclaves; to what extent can individuals form and join independent political parties or civic groups; to what extent can these groups associate and assemble freely and to what extent can citizens, organizations and the mass media express opinions freely?

Figure 4: Political Participation

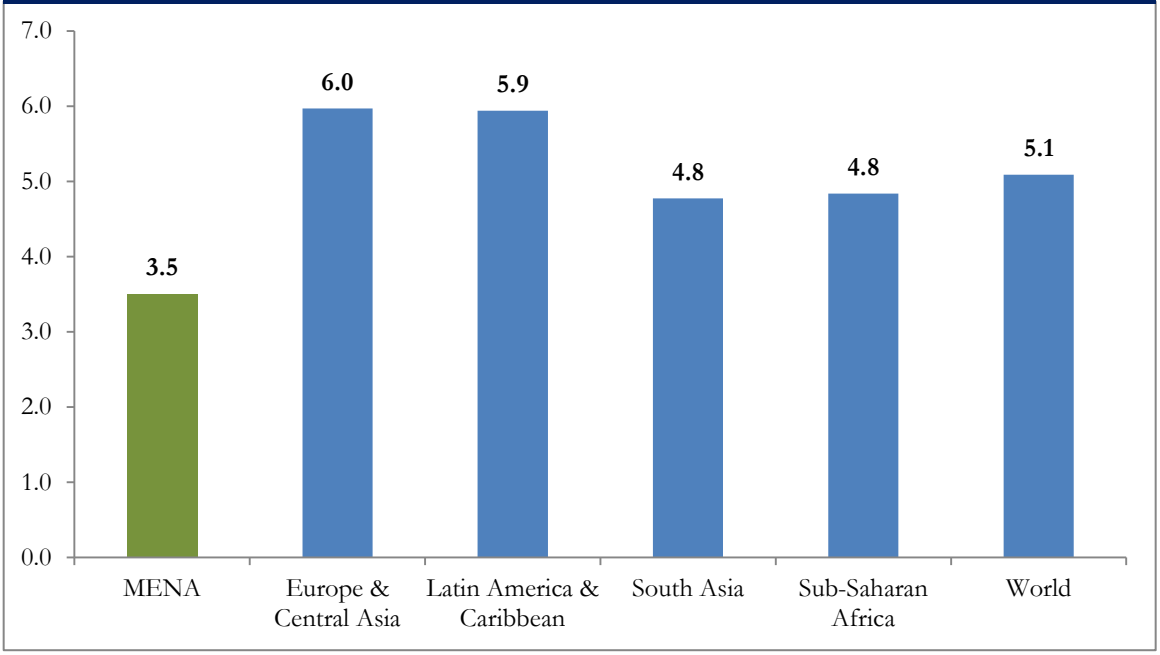


***Source**: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016*

The second indicator used to paint a picture of the political landscape in the MENA region is the political and social integration indicator[18]. In the MENA region, the process of political and social integration has the potential to transfer people loyalties from tribes, ethnicities, and sects to a larger political system. It does so by creating a sense of unity and shared identity, harmonizing threat perceptions, and making people realize that their well-being is connected to the well-being of their society. Without political and social integration, not only do people become excluded from benefiting from social capital with a shared sense of belonging they also become alienated and less protective of their society, thus opening the gates to encroaching radical views and tendencies. However, as shown in Figure 5, the level of political and social integration in MENA countries is rather weak (average score of 3.5) and lags behind that observed in other country groups (ranging between 6.0 and 4.8) and the world average (5.1).

[18] The score on the political and social integration indicator is based on the following criteria: to what extent is there a stable, moderate, socially rooted party system able to articulate and aggregate societal interests; to what extent is there a network of cooperative associations or interest groups to mediate between society and the political system; how strong is the citizens' approval of democratic norms and procedures and to what extent have social self-organization and the construction of social capital advanced?

Figure 5: Political and Social Integration



***Source**: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016*

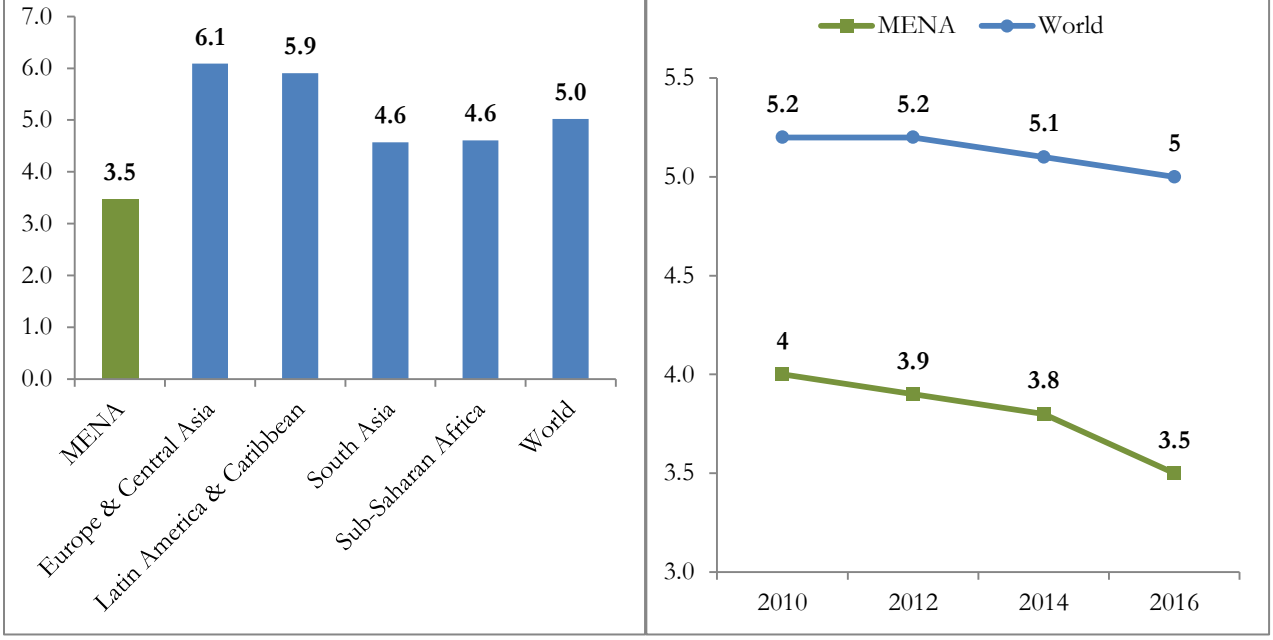
Citizens are better off when the political system establishes rules for all to follow, rather than subjecting citizens to either arbitrary rule or anarchy. Dicey described this as embodying the predominance of law over discretionary authority.[19] High-caliber rule of law is considered dampening to ordinary citizens' opportunity and willingness to engage in radical activities and political violence[20]. Although governments in most political systems are at least rhetorically deferential to this concept, what counts is the fact that a government agrees to abide by its own laws by entrusting the interpretation and enforcement of laws to independent legal entities. In that regard, the BTI index examines the separation of powers; independence of judiciary; prosecution of office abuse; and the protection of civil rights in order to rank the rule of law in 129 countries.

[19] Albert Venn Dicey, *The Law of the Constitution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[20] Seung-Whan Choi, "Fighting Terrorism through the Rule of Law?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no.6 (June 2010): pp. 940-966. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://bit.ly/2jehqYl

Figure 6 (left) shows that MENA countries perform the worst on the rule of law indicator with an average score of 3.5, as compared to other country groups which average scores ranging from 4.6 and 6.1. Since 2010, the rule of law has regressed globally, with the world score declining from 5.2 to 5.0. The MENA region however, paints an even bleaker picture with the score on the Rule of Law indicator dropping at a sharper rate from 4.0 to 3.5 (Figure 6, right).

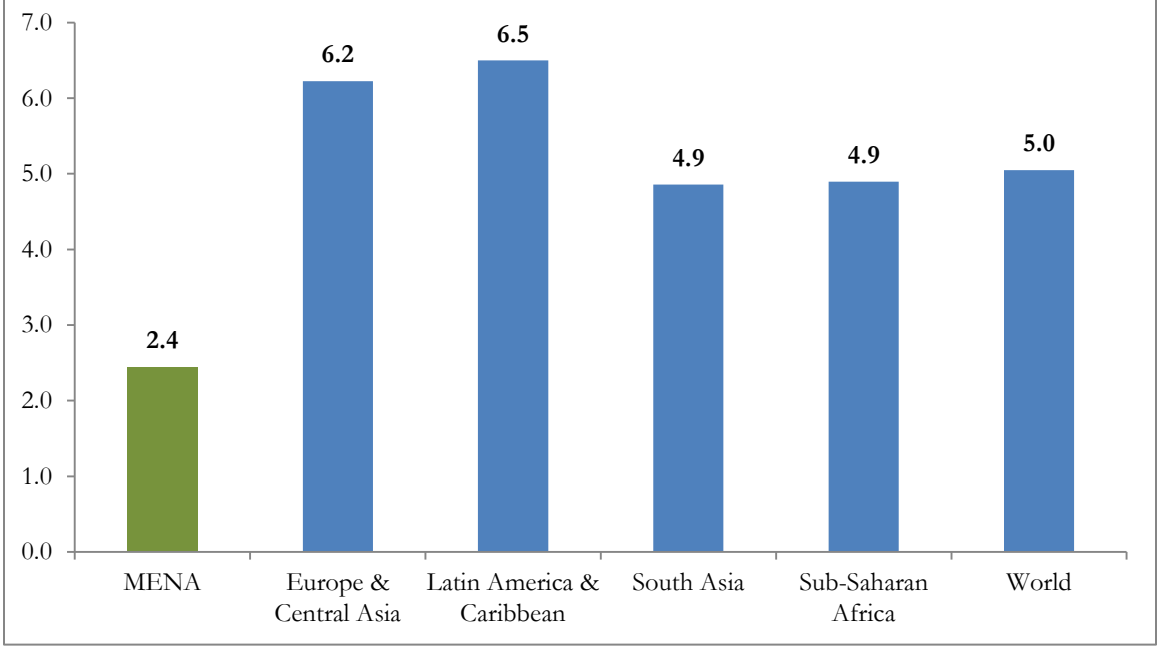
Figure 6: Rule of Law



***Source**: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016*

When it comes to the stability of democratic institutions, the BTI index aims to establish whether democratic institutions exist and to what extent they perform their functions effectively, and are free from extensive, counterproductive friction. More critically, the BTI index seeks to determine to what extent democratic institutions are accepted as legitimate by the following actors: government bodies, political parties, associations, interest groups and civic organizations, as well as groups with potential veto powers, such as the military or the clergy. Figure 7 indicates that the average score for MENA countries in terms of stability of democratic institutions is 2.4, or less than half of the world average of 5.0 and other country group averages (ranging between 4.9 - 6.5). In light of this, it can be argued that democratic institutions in MENA region are very weak and unstable, compared to other region.

Figure 7: Stability of Democratic Institutions



***Source**: Author's calculation based on the BTI Index, 2016*

The above indicators illustrate that political systems in the MENA region remain repressive, corrupt and unstable when compared to other regional groups. The absence of liberties, freedom of 'saying', political participation, political and social integration and the rule of law continue to be primary sources for political tribulations in the region. They erode state legitimacy and contribute to radicalism and political violence. Repressive political systems also foster exclusionary norms and institutions, creating a combustible environment where the frustrated find radicalism an increasingly appealing pathway. In that context, it is justifiable to argue that the poor political conditions in the MENA nurture movements against injustice, state oppression, and western support for repressive regimes, and as such, these poor political conditions can be considered among the main root causes of radicalism in the MENA.

In order to alleviate political root causes of radicalism, a number of steps have been witnessed in the MENA region. Most regimes in MENA have promised to improve political conditions and meet the minimum criteria of electoral politics and constitutional reform. Nonetheless, in the majority of MENA countries, excessive power of the regimes

remained untouched which consequently hinders political and social transitioning and integration. Some MENA regimes, particularly Gulf monarchies, ban political parties by law and maintain repressive control over civil society. In such countries religious groups are the only institution not brutally suppressed by the regime. When religious groups become the only outlet for engaging with the politics of change the outcome is inevitably predictable, leading to the politicization of creed, followed in turn by the misinterpretation of theological doctrines for political purposes, and the consequent rising tide of radical, aggressive, intolerant movements. Political systems in MENA region must therefore undergo a paradigm shift, accepting progressive and inclusive reforms that foster an active civil society with a vibrant political culture; as well as an egalitarian rule of law, a functioning state, and an effective bureaucracy.

In addition to efforts at state and regional levels, Western countries have also initiated several democratization projects for counter-radicalization and terrorism targeted towards the MENA region. Nonetheless, a number of landmark events (i.e. occupation of Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, rising Islamophobia in Europe) have seriously undermined western credibility in their promotion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This creates new necessities, where the concept of political freedom needs to be redefined in accordance with the socio-economic and political dynamics of the MENA region. In this regard, it is important to argue that instead of importing definitions of political freedom under the framework of democracy, MENA countries should re-conceptualize the word "freedom" through receptive political reforms, merged with solid socio-economic foundations of the region.

Western Interventions

Media discourse as evinced by radical and terrorist groups is rather consistent; justifying attacks against western interests and citizens as retaliation against western intervention and meddling in the MENA. From this discourse the conclusion is straightforward, western intervention in the MENA region is at the heart of the MENA people's anger, and a driving force behind radicalization.

Western interventions in the MENA region have deep roots in history. In contemporary times however, a referent point in time must be chosen relevant to the analysis of radicalism and its root causes. The point of time that stands out as relevant in this respect is the collapse of the Islamic caliphate (Ottoman Empire) at the beginning of the twentieth century. With its collapse, western powers–chief among them Britain and France–colonized the MENA region in pursuit of imperial ambitions, fulfilling a number

of goals including; exploitation of natural resources, control of trade routes, and the establishment of Israel. A cursory look at the different states in the MENA region reveals that the majority of them are artificial constructs created by Britain and France under the auspices of the secretive Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916.

Not only did western powers create artificial states with unnatural boundaries cutting through cultural fault lines and forcing ethnicities and populations with histories of friction into the same states, they also appointed autocratic and oppressive rulers in these states who were compliant to the will of Western overseers. As democracy spread to many parts of the world, the MENA region remained one of the exceptions with western powers backing and supporting autocratic regimes and even sabotaging attempts at democratization. For instance, the USA was very hostile to Syria during its democratic years (1954-1958) going as far as attempting to overthrow the Syrian government because it would not cooperate with Western anti-communism. In 1965, the USA supported King Hassan II of Morocco who suspended parliament and seized all executive and legislative powers. In 1986, rule in Sudan was relinquished to a civilian government and a process of democratization was initiated; however, the USA was not pleased with the new Sudanese government which wished to maintain a stance of non-alignment and improve relations with Libya, Ethiopia, and the Soviet Union. Western support of autocratic rule and rejection of democracy in the MENA region was on full display in Algeria in 1991. In this year and in the first multi-party elections since independence, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats. The Algerian military responded by violently overthrowing democracy and rounding up tens of thousands of Muslims who had supported the winning party, throwing them into concentration camps in the midst of the Sahara, to be tortured and abused[21]. John Entelis, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Middle East Program at Fordham University in New York, remarked:

The Arab world had never before experienced such a genuinely populist expression of democratic aspirations… Yet when the army overturned the whole democratic experiment in January 1992, the United States willingly accepted the results… In short, a democratically elected Islamist government hostile to American hegemonic aspirations in the region… was considered unacceptable in Washington… more important was the army government's willingness to collaborate with American regional ambitions…

[21] Hamou Amirouche, "Algeria's Islamist Revolution: The People versus Democracy?" *Middle East Policy 5*, no. 4 (1998): 82.

including collaborating with Israel in establishing a Pax Americana in the Middle East and North Africa.[22]

In this respect, it is necessary to note that western powers are not hostile to democracy in the MENA per se; but that they find it much easier to engage with autocratic regimes willing to secure Western economic and strategic interests in exchange for western support of the suppression of liberal and democratic aspirations of people. However, such policy is shortsighted and counter to the strategic interests of the West, as it only provides an effective impetus for the rise of Islamic radicalization, a fact acknowledged by ex US president George W Bush who stated:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.[23]

This fact was also acknowledged by the 9/11 Commission Report which stated:

Where Muslim governments, even those who are friends, do not respect these principles, the United States must stand for a better future. One of the lessons of the long Cold War was that short-term gains in cooperating with the most repressive and brutal governments were too often outweighed by long-term setbacks for America's stature and interests.[24]

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[22] John Entelis, "Democracy Denied: America's Authoritarian Approach Towards the Maghreb", (paper presented at the 18th World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Quebec, Canada, August 1-5, 2000), pp. 1-5.

[23] George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy", United States Chamber of Commerce, Washington, DC (November 2003). Accessed January 19, 2017 at: https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html

[24] Steven Kelman, "Book Review Essay: 9/11 and the Challenges of Public Management: The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States", *Administrative Science Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (March 2006): 129. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2189/asqu.51.1.129

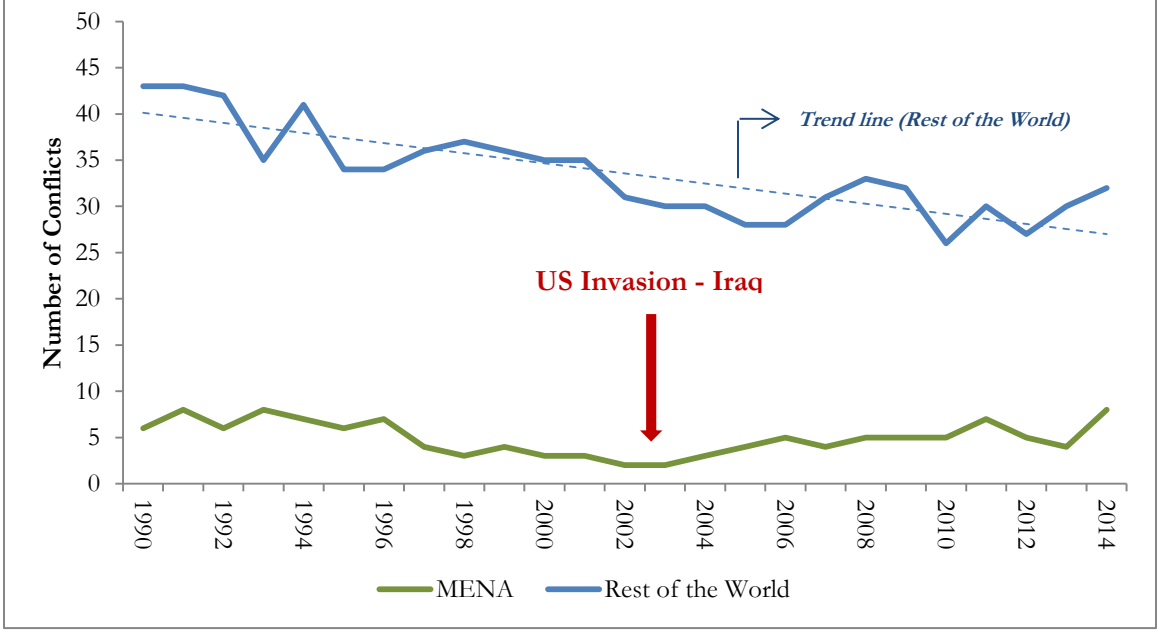
Western intervention in the MENA goes beyond the support of autocratic rule to direct military intervention. This military intervention is a primary source of anger and grievance among people of the MENA region. Radicals and terrorist groups tap into this anger and grievances, turning them into effective recruitment pathways. Robert Pape and James Feldman in their book *Cutting the Fuse* analyzed more than 2,100 documented cases of suicide bombings from 1980 to 2009, concluding that most perpetrators acted in response to U.S. intervention in the Middle East, rather than from religious or ideological motivation[25]. In a report for the Brookings Institution on the threat of terrorism from foreign fighters, Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro also examine all known reasons for foreign fighters to engage in violent extremism. The reasons range from a sense of adventure to religious radicalism, but battling foreign intervention is often high on the list.[26]

The most striking western military intervention in the MENA region has to be the invasion of Iraq in 2003 with resulted in catastrophic consequences for Iraq, the MENA, and the world at large. Figure 8 reveals that the number of conflicts in MENA reversed its direction and started to experience an upward trend since 2003, in contrast to the trend visible throughout the rest of the world.

[25] Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and how to Stop it*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[26] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be afraid. Be a little afraid: the threat of terrorism from Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq", *Foreign Policy* at Brookings, Policy Paper no. 34, November 2014. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Be-Afraid-web.pdf

Figure 8: Conflict Trends

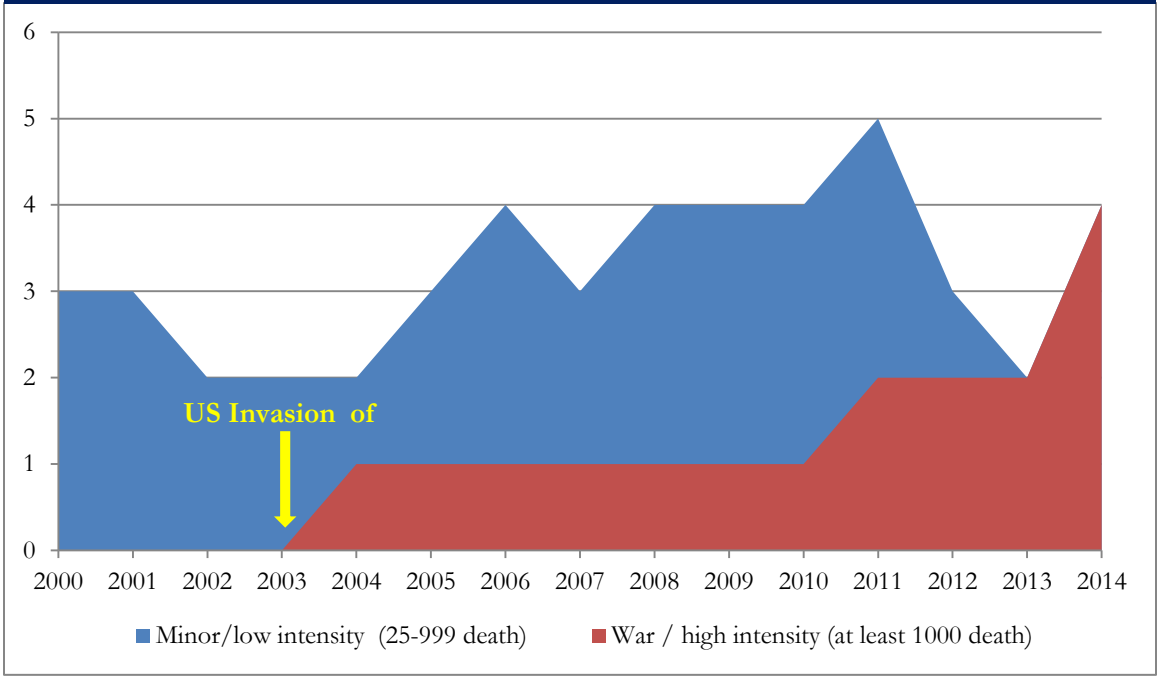


***Source**: Author's calculations based on the Uppsala Conflict Database*

Figure 9 shows that the intensity of conflicts in MENA has been on the rise since 2003. Furthermore, the number of people killed and wounded globally due to terrorism started to dramatically increase increasing since 2003 (Figure 10).

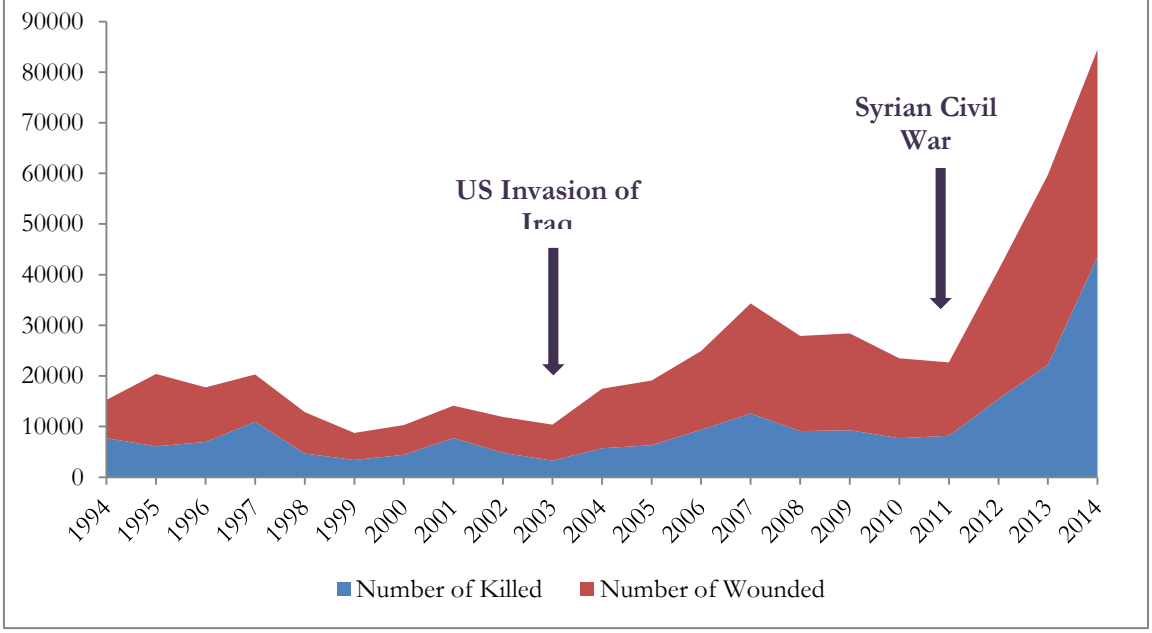
The US invasion of Iraq took place under the banner of "Global War on Terror"; however, in truth this war did nothing to end terrorism. On the contrary, it unleashed a new wave of radicalism and terrorism. In a report entitled *Iraq: Taking stock: The Arming of Islamic State*, Amnesty International concludes that the rise of ISIL is a direct result of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The above figures and analyses point to a general, strong causality between Western military interventionism in the MENA, and the rise of radicalism.

Figure 9: Conflict Intensity in MENA



Source: *Author's calculations based on the Uppsala Conflict Database*

Figure 10: Casualties (killed and wounded) from Terrorism



Source: *Author's calculations based on the START GTD Databse*

Ideology

Does an individual's or group's ideology contribute to the process of radicalism? Do radical ideologies lead to violent extremism and acts of terrorism? The answer to these questions are controversial and an area of dispute. There is no consensus regarding how ideology is defined and what it entails. Although the various definitions of radicalism do not necessarily require an ideological framework, it can be argued that one of the root causes of radicalism in MENA is ideology, instrumentalized by radical movements to attract the susceptible and manipulate them. This section explores ideologies leading to radicalism in the MENA region, commonly underpinned by a distorted interpretation of Islam.

In recent years, the number of terror attacks and casualties resulting from them (see Figure 10) has increased globally, giving rise to debates surrounding the nature of the link between radicalism and ideology. Conceptually, ideology is a means of understanding the world and events by linking beliefs, ideas and narratives for collective or particular actions. The construction of an ideological framework is rooted in the social code (culture, tradition, history and religion) of a referent community. Ideologies are: distinctive; can be instrumentalized and used by radical groups and movements; and can be easily adapted, and modified without losing their justificatory essence to maintain explanatory efficacy and fit evolving circumstances[27]. This renders studying ideologies of radicalization a highly complex and multidimensional challenge.

Ideologies and ideological narratives have been adopted by a broad range of violent radical organizations and movements throughout world history. Accordingly, they have been used as attractors for radical ideas and recruits. Ideologies have varied across regions depending on cultural, social and geographical characteristics. Many radical movements have formed new constituencies to encourage national or class consciousness to channel support and recruit from it[28]. Throughout the majority of countries in Latin America and South-West Europe for instance, Marxism was the primary ideological contender to the primacy of Western capitalism. Self-determination

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[27] The Change Institute, *Studies into Violent Radicalization; Lot 2 The Beliefs, Ideologies and Narratives of Violent Radicalization*, February 2008. Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://bit.ly/2iHOYlr

[28] Mark Sedgwick, "Al-Qaeda and the Nature of Religious Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 4 (December 2004): pp.795-814.

or nationalist movements have also taken on prominent roles in the majority of post-colonial countries throughout the 20th century.

The MENA region on the other hand, is characterized by a certain exceptionalism with regards to ideological movements. Since its chosen constituency –Muslims– is already very conscious of its existence; it can easily be changed into a cohesive political constituency through the use of community settings such as mosques, prisons and universities; and more recently, social media[29]. Radicalism in MENA has therefore not necessitated the creation of new constituencies as in the case of other ideological-based radical movements in aforementioned regions. Rather, ideological mindsets based on an extremist and marginalized readings of Islamic texts are easily instrumentalized to attract the chosen constituency: Muslims.

Due to the this "exceptionalism", most of radicals in MENA come from Muslim backgrounds, framing the issue from the lenses of ideological perspective in which misinterpreted or purposely manipulated sacred sources and principles are used as a moral justification of radicalism, and the violent actions of individuals or extremist groups. They are articulated by religious narratives, particularly Islamic doctrines, which are instrumentalized and often misinterpreted to legitimize the action of radicals. In this sense, the instrumentalization of Islamic concepts such as Jihad, occupies a central place in debates. As asserted by Roy[30], Radicalism in the MENA is not the uprising of a Muslim community that is a victim to poverty and racism. It is jihad, a noble and global cause, which is instrumentalized by radical organizations (al Qaeda, ISIL), to serve their strategic agenda.

The instrumentalization and selective interpretation of Islam enflames the debate, not on religious principles or the teachings themselves, but rather the actualization of such religious principles by means of detailed legal interpretations. The centrality and importance of interpretation of sacred principles highlights the critical role of the

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[29] Ibid., 63.

[30] Olivier Roy, "What is the Driving Force behind Jihadist Terrorism? A Scientific Perspective on the Causes/Circumstances of Joining the Scene", Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) Autumn Conference (November 18-19, 2015). Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://bit.ly/2aQ8zwe

religious elites (Ulamah in particular for MENA case) and their active role in enabling or preventing the radicalization process. In Islamic tradition, Ulamah are mandated with legal analysis of Islamic rules (Sharia) and issuing jurisprudential rulings (Fatwa) accordingly. In this manner, Fatwa channeling selective or distorted interpretations of Islamic law vis-à-vis jihad contribute significantly to radicalization; legitimizing, encouraging and appealing to many. The brand of Salafism, a theological movement in Sunni Islam aimed at restoring and purifying the religion, and its violent interpretation Jihadi-Salafism presents an appealing and rational ideology for many. When coupled with socio-economic and political conditions, instability in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and foreign interventions, the Jihadi-Salafi ideology continues to gain more and more supporters.

Alongside the deep rooted effects felt by ideology, narratives are equally critical to examining radicalization throughout MENA. Socio-economic, political and personal grievances, while common to radical or violent movements, are effectively used by radical groups in MENA to crystallize public opinion, disseminate messages, gain new recruits, and elicit sympathy. These narratives are mostly combined with distinctive terms rooted in issues of political instability, socio-economic stagnation, civic strife, and, in some cases, war. In order to attract the attention of exceptional and primed constituency in MENA, radical movements commonly use eye-catching narratives, promoting golden age thinking, re-establishment or restoration of preeminence, glory and honor of Muslims. In this regard, ideological narratives commonly find avenues to express themselves in religious terms (such as Jihad, Dar-al-Harb (the Abode of War) and Takfir (excommunication form the faith) in the MENA. As reflected in the literature, core narratives of radical movements in MENA region can be summarized in a number of base precepts[31]:

- Identify and critique certain social injustices, offences, or threats affecting a radical's referent community
- Identify a collective enemy as responsible for said injustices, offences or threats and insults. Such arguments and beliefs configure a stereotype devaluing the 'Other', even to the point of dehumanization

[31] Luis De La Corte, "Explaining Terrorism: A Psychosocial Approach", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 1, no. 2 (2007). Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/8/html

- Construct a positive social identity shared by radicals and their referent community
- Link collective goals with the values and interests of the radical's reference community;
- Justify violence as the only effective means to achieving collective goals
- Envision a normative, ideal future state in which radicals have reached collective goals through violence

Awareness of the ideological roots of radicalization in MENA vis-à-vis the instrumentalization of Islam and selective interpretation of sacred texts is critical to effectively combating radicalism. As a framework of analysis, this complex phenomenon ought to be examined alongside the distinctive constituency in the case of MENA. Thus, beyond political and socio-economic measures, which are certainly crucial in this process, developing counter and alternative narratives by scholars and policy-makers would be effective in combating radicalism. As a final point, it should be emphasized that in the case of MENA: it is not Islam that has radicalized Muslims, but rather radicals that have radicalized Islam.[32]

Modernity

In the context of the MENA region, radicalism is often depicted as a form of traditionalist reactionism, or a cultural-religious monolithic intolerance of the 'Other'. A coherent understanding of radicalism throughout the region however, cannot be achieved through reductionist approaches positioning traditionalism against modernity and all that it entails.

At its heart, the grapple with modernity has long dominated intellectual-political discourse and thought in the Middle East. For well over three centuries, different approaches to and interpretations of modernity have been synthesized in attempts to respond to or create alternatives to what is arguably perceived as inimical to ways of life that had hitherto been rooted in religious tradition. It was inevitable however, that

[32] Mekhennet, Souad "What Are the Root Causes of Islamic Terrorism?" World Economic Forum. January 18, 2016. Accessed January 19, 2017athttps://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-are-the-root-causes-of-islamic-terrorism at: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/what-are-the-root-causes-of-islamic-terrorism/

modernity would come to dominate the socio-cultural fabric of the MENA region. This was particularly compounded given a deeply felt history of technological and political inferiority arising out of the successive colonization of the MENA by a monolithically perceived outsider, or 'West'. In this context, a blow deeply traumatic to the socio-cultural fabric of the region was the end of the Caliphate; a spiritual-political chain of leadership tracing its way back for over a thousand years to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) himself. The Caliphate as both institution and symbol was simultaneously an absolute referent traditional authority and a mark of common solidarity. With the collapse of the caliphate, successive new generations of intellectuals and political thinkers rose to the fore to resolve a rift between the absolute traditional collective social fabric of old and the perceived imposition of a modernity that seemed posed to remain.

In essence, there had been no conflict between Islam and modernization per se. The widely acclaimed and accepted classical political sociologist Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) distinguished between the primal state of *badawah* (tribalism) and *hadharah* (sedentary) civilization. He argued that the progressive development and transition from the former to the latter was a matter of natural law, and should rather be pursued. By definition, MENA societies are characterized as traditionalist societies, in that they rely on the transmission of culture from past to present; whether in the form of belief, institution or practice[33]. In this respect, traditionalist societies present features of ascriptiveness, diffuse patterns and deferential social stratification structures; all common social hallmarks throughout the MENA region[34]. Modernity in its contemporary connotation arose economically with the industrial revolution and politically with the onset of the French revolutions. While its conception remains broad, modernity has come to be identified with the West, monolithically perhaps, and often through association with high levels of development[35]. Both implicit and explicit throughout the discourse on modernity, is the base assumption that traditional societies are required to alter practices to be identified as 'modern', in explicit disregard for all non-Western socio-cultural structures and value systems.

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[33] Edward Shils, *Tradition*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[34] Francis X. Sutton, "Social theory and Comparative Politics", in Harry Eckstein and David Apter (eds.), *Comparative Politics: A Reader*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), pp. 67-81.

[35] Alex Inkeles, "The Modernization of Man", *The Center for International Affairs*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1966): 353.

The process of evolution into modernity is in itself a violent disconnection with referent past tradition and guiding values; noted by Karl Deutsch as an act that erodes old social and psychological commitments to prepare society for new patterns of social behavior[36]. In this respect, tradition and modernity would seem to be at complete odds. This need not necessarily be the case however. 'The Modernity of Tradition' argues that such a dichotomy of mutual exclusiveness is born of a misunderstanding of modernity[37]. Applebaum argues that on the contrary, this is an erroneous dichotomy, but that a symbiotic relationship can exist between the two, both informing the other and synthesizing new structures[38].

It would seem that the misrepresentation of modernity however, is a lasting one; and will prove difficult to change given the extent to which it is rooted in orientalist renditions of traditional societies as less developed and backwards. The concept of development in the West's image has been further entrenched by social scientists, policy makers and a lengthy history of Western interventionism often touting just cause, and the implicit advantage and moral burden of modern, developed, democratic states. Such interventionism in itself comes on the heels of equally intensive campaigns of colonization that have left their mark to the present day throughout the MENA region in terms of language, law, and culture.

Due to a predominance of Islamic creed throughout the region, the MENA area reflects a unique intellectual juridical history that touches on the very core of the modernity debate. The raging debate on modernity has often taken one of two stands; either that of imitation (*taqlid*) or renewal (*tajdid*). Imitation was often espoused by liberal ideologues and leaders, often educated in the West; usually accompanied by major pushes for modernization and industrialization in imitation of Western modernization models. This included for instance the inclusion of civil codes of law and the reconfiguration of religious juristic structures within existing secular state structures,

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[36] Karl W. Deutsch, "Social Mobilization and Political Development", *American Political Science Review* 55, no. 3 (September 1961), 494.

[37] Lloyd I. Rudolph, and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[38] David Appelbaum, "The Moment of Modernity", *Sacred Web*, 2 (December 1998). Accessed January 19, 2017 at: http://www.sacredweb.com/online_articles/sw2_appelbaum.pdf

often rendering them obsolete. This was problematic. The role of the traditional jurist in Islam was not merely a reference for age-old law, but rather an innovator of law and regulator of social norms within the confines of Maqasid al-Shar'iah, or Guiding Precepts of Law. In this respect, jurists and scholars had acted as intermediaries between public opinion, authority and order; informing and defining social expectations, behaviors and interactions in the face of the new. More critically, they anchored norms, belief and public imagination hand-in-hand with state authority to create stability.

Having been relegated to the sidelines, traditional religious authority atrophied; and came to be associated only with the preservation of tradition without innovation, devoid of their normal function as agents of change and social interaction, or as checks against radicalism and the growth of deviant thought. With the successive traumas of colonization and the collapse of the caliphate itself, the dynamism and adaptability of traditionalism was called into question by a growing school of tajdid (renewal) thinkers that spanned a broad range of thought, some political, others not. Some were inclined to radicalism, while others sought more peaceful channels for change. All were united however, in the understanding that the nature of modernity was inimical to Islam and traditional societies in some manner or form and demanded an answer. This was specifically the case with modernity's emphasis on scientific inevitability of progress and the near sacred status ascribed to human rationality. The concept of a historical singular narrative of development that continuously did away with the past was at direct odds with Islam, where authority, morality, norms and behavior were linked to an absolute narrative, divine by nature and universally applicable for all generations to come.

As broad as the range of reactions and engagements with modernity were and remain throughout the MENA region, the simple reality remains that modernity is the current norm throughout the region. In many respects, the efforts of thinkers and ideologues to contend with modernity came far too late, after it had already been imposed on them. Significantly, the large majority of thinkers, philosophers and intellectuals who sought to revise traditionalism in the face of modernity or derived solutions and proposals to engaging with the new status quo were often left ignored and marginalized, with devastating effects on the region leading up to the rise of radicalism in the present day.

As a rule of thumb, distinction was made between thinkers and political thinkers who were critical of the West, often excluding the latter by force from ongoing discourse. This approach was shortsighted, given that it left out valuable voices. More relevantly, revivalist or modernist thinkers throughout the region had never isolated their thought

and intellectualism from political issues surrounding them as a matter of norm, their ideas rooted in social circumstance and history. The label of 'Islamic' theory or philosophy however, was ignored in totality from participating and engaging in the transition to modernity. This was based in simple reductionism, and the assumption that 'Islamic' thought was not valid in and of itself. Another reason was the perception that Islamic thought was no equal to Western ideals, socio-political mechanisms and thought. Whether intentional or not, this came to be accepted as a methodology for understanding predominantly Islamic societies across the MENA region. Had the discourse been framed differently and had it taken an inclusive approach to endogenous thought, the current status quo and the seemingly deadlocked struggle between traditionalist reactionary radicalism and violent extremism against democratic modernity might have been avoided altogether.

Instead, through marginalization of critical voices by blanket reductionism, modernity came to be the norm; and through its resulting products a host of social issues rose to the forefront. This was the time of anomie! Etymologically, 'anomie' denotes a state of 'a' (without) 'nomos' (laws). Norms here refer to far more than simple law, but rather govern the entire range of social expectation and interaction defining the socio-cultural fabric of any society. It was first proposed as a sociological theory by Emile Durkheim to identify the social void left in place of rapid transformation. He defined it as social instability resulting from the devolution of order establishing and supporting norms. Along this parallel, Susanne Karstedt links increased homicide and violence following democratic transitions to anomie, arguing that their effects are not minute as expected with the end of autocratic rule, but are rather persistent for long periods of time through anomie. Such a phenomenon has been repetitively identified in cases of post-communist social transitioning and in the case of South African regime change for instance. Karstedt argues that when the 'nomos' of authoritarian, traditionalist regimes are dissolved with no gradual replacement or process of socialization and acculturation, violence erupts in the form of conflict and crime[39]. Durkheim himself proposes this, arguing that it is the incessant desire of man that knows no boundaries which results in the condition of 'anomie', and a state of recurrent conflict and violence[40].

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[39] Susanne Karstedt, "Democracy, Values, and Violence: Paradoxes, Tensions, and Comparative Advantages of Liberal Inclusion", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605, no. 1 (2006): pp. 50-81.

[40] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), (New York: Free Press, 1964).

The cause behind this, though multivariate in nature, is attributed by Durkheim to rapid or traumatic social change, an implicit byproduct of modernity, which not only leads to the breakdown of norms and social regulation mechanisms, but results in delegitimization and mistrust of referent authority. In this context, it is worthy to note that Durkheim asserts that the only force which can assert norms on the individual is an external one based in collective conscience, reflected in conceptions, beliefs and ideas of culture[41]. More critically, he asserts that traditional cultures reflect a high level of moral and social norm integration and group consciousness, usually through religion, and countered by the rise of individualism as an inevitable byproduct of modernity. This is usually at the utter expense of the normative structures of a society.

Taking the concept of anomie further, Robert Merton sets this into a more relevant context, asserting that anomie results in a fatal error of the social institution, where discrepancies arise between societal goals, such as change for instance, and legitimate means of realizing them[42]. Seismic societal shifts prevent the legitimate realization of desired goals, easing the way for illegitimate measures towards the same. This is perhaps most comparable to the rise of political radicalism and often violent extremism as a means of affecting change in society, given the actor's relative marginalization from the discourse of modernity and social structures by authoritarian repression or foreign interventionism. In such a scenario, violent radicalism is perceived as an effective mechanism for change through a disruption of prior norms. This is directly relevant to MENA societies, where entire branches of jurisprudence existed to regulate and guide public demand for change, and disavow deviant social unrest that threatened the integrity of public well-being. In this respect, empowered traditional religious authority was a medium between the state and the public sphere; keeping both in check. With the growing irrelevance of these traditional authority structures and their lack of state affirmation, deviations within the traditional structure itself occurs, presenting increasingly radical narratives, if only to achieve the goal of self-actualization or reestablishing relevance. Cloward and Ohlin[43] add to this, asserting it is not merely

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, (Glencoe, IL: Free Press 1957).

[43] H.M "Critical Notice: Richard A. Cloward and Lloyd E. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity. A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*, (Glencoe, IL: Free Press 1960); and T. R. Fyvel, *The Insecure Offenders: Rebellious Youth in The Welfare State* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961)", *The British Journal of Criminology* 3, n. 1, (July 1962), 91-93.

enough for legitimate opportunities for change and socially valued goals to be blocked, but rather that illegitimate opportunities for violence must have instigating reasons; something easily provided through the myriad reasons and catalysts for disillusionment found in MENA regions ranging from abuse of power to foreign interventionism and the like.

Anomie is arguably the current norm of the MENA region in the present day. Under traditional social structures, violent extremism and even radicalism was perceived as a deviation from the norm; and quickly rectified. Failing the stabilizing agency this once provided, the intensity of radicalism is only set to increase through normalization of conflict and strife. Even more worrying perhaps, is the normalization of armed violent extremism as a mechanism to bring about social change. This demands urgent and immediate action, if only to prevent a lasting radicalization of the very societal norms that define the public perception of social and political engagement.

Radicalism in the MENA region thrives from the friction between traditionalism and modernity, reinforcing a paradigm that was perhaps erroneous to begin with, yet has come to dominate nearly all spheres of life extending to politics, education, the role of religion in society and for the most radical; modernization itself. Given the lack of a genuine traditional referent authorities on what constitutes norms, and the state of anomie modernity has caused, combined with a natural impulse for coming to terms with it, radicalism becomes a simple answer to a complex equation. At its heart, radicalism therefore seeks to come to terms with the reality of modernity in much the same way other modernist reformist thinkers and movements attempted to engage with what they perceived as a reality inconsistent with traditionalism and requiring adjustment. Radical thought however, often reflects a lack of sophistication or interest in engaging with modernity itself, often choosing to adopt reductive monolithic archetypes of good versus evil, arguably more appealing to the less educated and youth. This often taps into attractive narratives touching on the heart of the West's engagement with the MENA region in some way or form; whether in terms of bemoaning resource exploitation, neo-colonialism, autocratic and oppressive regimes, or military intervention.

In this vein, it is worthy to note that the majority of Islamic reformist and modernist thinkers called for an end to 'blind imitation', emphasizing the need for a return to the dynamism and adaptability of early Islam, which witnessed much intellectual, scientific and civilizational growth. This was an argument for modernization, though rooted in tradition. Prominent reformist thinker Jamal al-din al-Afghani called for an Islamic

renaissance, emphasizing that Islam was in harmony with scientific reason. Mohammed Abdu, al-Afghani's pupil continued in his stead, arguing against dominant religious orthodoxy, and called for a reinterpretation of religious texts in light of mutable and immutable tradition, with a heavy emphasis on reform. This was a motif that would come to dominate reformist thought in generations to come, where appraisal encompassed what constituted religion or culture, and identifying which aspects of modernity were compatible with religion. Other notable leading intellectuals in this field included Rashid Reda, Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi, Ali Shari'ati, Hasan Turbani, and even contemporaries such as Rashid Ghannouche with his outstanding work on Islamic Democrat parties, and tangible results in the case of the Ennahda party of Tunisia.

The held contention against more controversial thinkers such as Syed Qutb, with their strong voices against injustice and the call for armed Jihad must be taken into context, given that all modernist and reformist streams of thought throughout the MENA region have never been apolitical. Issues of interpretation aside, there remains the considerable persecution and marginalization of these thinkers, alongside a general mistrust for self-perpetuating authoritarian regimes which led to this very outcome. The mistrust towards secular elites, often supported by external western actors extensively damaged channels of interaction and exchange, in spite of attempts at partnerships of convenience between nationalist projects and Islamism as in the case of Egypt, which witnessed a modern reoccurrence of fallout in today's post-revolutionary Egypt.

Irrespective of the specific doctrine espoused by streams of modernist or reformist thought, the marginalization of such critical groups and actors has done much to cordon off social engagement. Coupled with a receding religious traditional hierarchy, the effects of globalization and continuing fragmentation of old socio-cultural and traditional norms and values, the situation of anomie in the MENA region is one that elicits disillusionment. Given a lack of access to realizing change, and the easy alternative for violence, combined with sufficient catalysts for the same; the rise of radicalism is supported and not countered. More critically, the emasculation and marginalization of endogenous moderate Islamist intellectual streams of thought and movements that seek to engage with and manifest modernity, only serves to empower more active efforts at achieving social change such as ISIL and al-Qaeda who have hijacked a moderate reformist narrative left to gather dust by sidelined revivalist modernist streams of thought and ideology.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that radicalism poses the most critical challenge to the sociopolitical fabric and state integrity of the MENA region. Conventional narratives on the root causes of radicalism that do not take into account organic perceptions and catalysts for radicalization can only remain ungrounded, resorting to vague generalizations and opting for hard security approaches that are temporary at best, and are often rooted in reductionist frameworks of analysis.

Countering violent extremism must take place on the very field of socio-cultural, economic, and ideological engagement which generate narratives of radicalization, distort perceptions and instrumentalize religion and perception for violent extremism. In this respect, historical and cultural contexts and perceptions must be accounted for; taking into consideration the social imaginary, lingering continuity of tradition, vacuums of traditional referent authority, perceptions towards western interventionism, relative economic deprivation, de-legitimized state authority, lack of channels to effect social change, and the alienation of norms in societies experiencing rapid change.

Finally, and more critically, engagement should occur with endogenous Islamic reformist thought and public intellectualism, given their potential value in reasserting control over socio-ideological and religious narratives throughout the MENA region.

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