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Traditional Authority and Local Community Resilience: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, and Syria

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In a global context where violent extremists exploit the vulnera-bilities of weak and divided states to extend their reach across different regions, specific communities have demonstrated notable resilience in comparison to others. Despite the presence of enabling environments, violent extremism does not take root (EU Research 2023). This observation has sparked the interest of policymakers and scholars in understanding the role of local agents of resilience. In particular, there is a keen focus on uncovering the potential contributions of traditional community leaders in fostering these favorable outcomes. It is assumed that conventional authorities can play a constructive role in preventing the rise of violent extremism by leveraging their moral weight, influence, and community connections. In this chapter, we compare empirical evidence from the Western Balkans, Iraqi Kurdistan, and northeastern Syria to evaluate to what extent this assumption holds. Then, we discuss the conditions under which interventions from traditional authorities are likely to be effective.

Focusing on community leaders makes sense because communities are the locus of most violent extremist activity. Extremist groups exploit local grievances and divisions to establish a presence in communities, making it essential to address these issues at the grassroots level (Van Metre and Scherer 2023). However, traditional authorities' presence is no panacea because they cannot always protect communities effectively. Understanding why they fail in some contexts is essential. It is also important to acknowledge that community leaders can contribute to the problem if they lack inclusivity, practice corruption, or misuse their authority in other ways. Research suggests that the main factor generating violent extremism is the systematic exclusion of young people from power (Mercy Corps 2022b).

The Jihadi Assault and Traditional Authorities' Ability to Strike Back

The struggle to contain violent extremism is, in part, a contest over authority in Islam and in society in which traditional community leaders have come under attack from proponents of jihadism coupled with Salafism. We define *jihadism* as the belief that "armed confrontation with political rivals is a theologically legitimate and instrumentally efficient method for sociopolitical change" (Ashour 2011, 379), and Salafism as the idea that believers should "exclusively and meticulously adhere to the example of the *salaf* [the first generations of Muslims] while rejecting all other sources of influence" (Wagemakers 2016, 1). Salafi-jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) represent a revolt against conventional religious interpretations, established forms of social organization, and people of authority in both the Muslim and the Western world. Their doctrines, recruitment patterns, and ruling practices pose multiple challenges to community leaders.

Starting with doctrine, the Salafi-jihadi project is based on the ideological judgment that the current sociopolitical order is "un-Islamic" and that fighting it is a religious obligation. Its warriors denounce not only the states and societies of "infidels" but also the Muslim communities and leaders they believe have "fallen from Islam." Jihadis differ in how radically they practice excommunication (*takfir*), which ranges from targeting "tyrannical" Muslim rulers to targeting society as a whole (Stenersen 2020). But all are instinctively opposed to the wielders of power in this "pagan" world. Above all, they decry religious leaders who collaborate with and thereby legitimize nonreligious states. Jihadi ideologues encourage religious interpretation (*ijtihad*) independently of the *ulama*, evoking the individual's direct relationship with God (Lahoud 2010). This individualization of *ijtihad* undermines religious hierarchies and leads to spiraling clashes among competing groups and actors over issues such as who is considered a true Muslim and who is not.

In its sociological dimension, the global jihad phenomenon bears the signs of a youth revolt. In Roy's (2008, 2017b) assessment, it is a youth movement aiming for the authority of elders. Salafi-jihadist organizations recruit individuals who feel alienated by and have a grudge against the societies they live in. They offer rootless youth a sense of purpose and belonging through adherence to an ideological community, which aims to turn the tables on the mainstream (Byman 2013; Postel 2013). Writing about Europe, Khosrokhavar (2021) argues that the crisis of Muslim families lies beneath this movement. In his view, youngsters protest their fathers' (fallen) status by stating that they recognize no other authority than God.

The generational conflict and revolt against community leaders are also evident in situations where Salafi-jihadi groups gain control over territories and build the embryos of state structures. As Lia (2017) notes, the ruling class in jihadi proto-states is almost exclusively composed of young men. There is precious little room for traditional religious authorities, clan leaders, and heads of tribes in the higher echelons of power. In Lia's words, "the traditional holders of power in patriarchal societies—elderly men and tribal shaykhs—are relegated to the role of bystanders, subjects, or propaganda mascots" (5). This upending of traditional authority structures is in part a consequence of Salafi-jihadi ideology emphasizing the equality of believers before God and the rejection of kinship-based structures (Maher 2016). However, it also results from sociological shifts within the tribe propelled by the Salafi-jihadi organizations' ruling tactics. Jihadi groups frequently infiltrate tribes to establish a foothold in the territories they conquer. In doing so, they ally themselves with new and younger leaders within the tribe who use Salafi-jihadi ideology to wrest power from the older generation (Collombier and Roy 2017, 10–12).

The ability of traditional leaders to repel these attacks and become an effective shield against violent extremism depends on their authority, which, again, is influenced by developments in society and the state.[1] Traditional authority rests on a belief in the sacredness of tradition; legitimacy is claimed on the basis of the sanctity of order and the powers of control handed down from the past (Matheson 1987, 207). Conforming to this reasoning, traditional leaders counterattack jihadists, decrying their break with long-established customs, conventions, and norms. They refute their trustworthiness by dismissing them as "self-styled preachers." The challenge religious leaders face is that Salafism is grounded in its claim to tradition and orthodoxy. Salafists charge that current practices of Islam are perverted and that believers must return to the example of the first generation of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*). Thus, a battle has broken out over whose interpretations of Islam align with tradition or whose tradition is correct.

To prevail in this narrative battle, traditional leaders must stand firmly in their communities. Such good standing can, in part, emanate from their personal qualities and behavior, but, just as importantly, it is contingent on the state of society itself. In situations where traditional forms of social organization are upended, the authority of traditional leaders is naturally diminished. If society is falling apart, traditional authorities will lose ground as well. The point is that the extent to which traditional leaders can stem the spread of Salafi-jihadi ideas is influenced by the underlying social structure—and whether it helps sustain their claims to authority or not. This further means that the role of the state is a crucial factor. A state may help preserve the traditional order or undercut it through its policies. It may ally with or turn against community leaders. Where the state grows ties with traditional

community leaders, the state's legitimacy (or lack thereof) also affects the standing of traditional authorities. Finally, a state may cease to work and leave power vacuums in society that violent extremists fill.

These observations imply that scholarly investigations of traditional leaders' role in preventing violent extremism must be grounded in careful assessments of the social and political contexts in which these leaders operate. What helps contain the propagation of Salafi-jihadi thought and organizations in one place may have a different effect in another. In the remainder of this chapter, we compare the role of traditional leaders in preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkans, Iraqi Kurdistan, and northeastern Syria and discuss explanations for the differences we observe between these contexts.

Religious Leaders and the Occurrence or Nonoccurrence of Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans

From Ottoman times, Muslims in the Balkans have traditionally practiced the Hanafi interpretation of Islam, which remains the prevalent religious orientation among Sunni Muslims in the region. Notably, the majority of citizens in these countries, regardless of their religious affiliations, view themselves as part of secular societies. The recent rise of Islamist extremism in the Western Balkans, particularly in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, has been accompanied by the spread of Salafism. In countries where national and religious identities are deeply intertwined and ethnoreligious nationalism prevails, radical ethnonationalism and Islamist extremism either feed off each other or evolve as separate and opposing forms of ideological and social radicalization, depending on the specific context. Consequently, the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) as a form of supra- and transnational Islamist extremism is nurtured and conditioned, both psychologically and socially, by often politically exploited ethnoreligious grievances. Conversely, Islam in the region has often been instrumentalized and manipulated in the service of local ethnonationalist political objectives.

During and after the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, Islamist relief organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), primarily from or supported by the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, established branch offices across the region. Often operating under the guise of humanitarian aid, they funded mosques and educational facilities disseminating the conservative Salafi interpretation of Islam and provided scholarships for Muslims to study in the Middle East (Bešlin and Ignjatijević 2017). Over the years, especially following the wars in Bosnia (1992–

1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999), several *para-jamaats*, or parallel "underground" mosque communities of Salafi Muslims, were established in all these countries and attracted disillusioned youth in some areas. Operating beyond the reach of official Islamic institutions recognized by the states, these *para-jamaats* became hubs for radical indoctrination and the recruitment of potential foreign fighters.

The first instances of the FTF phenomenon were also a result of the Yugoslav Wars. FTFs from Middle Eastern countries supported or joined Muslim fighters in the region, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The emergence of ISIS once again fueled extremism in the region, with approximately a thousand citizens from Western Balkan countries joining militant jihadi groups in the Middle East and participating in conflicts in Iraq and Syria. The return of some of these individuals to their homelands was generally seen as posing a direct threat to national security and led to the introduction of laws criminalizing foreign fighting in all these countries by 2015 (Shtuni 2019; Azinović and Bećirević 2017). The threat of violent Islamist extremism has significantly diminished in recent years, primarily because of the weakening of pull factors.

Against this backdrop, it is instructive to comprehend the role played by traditional religious leaders and institutions in furthering or preventing violent extremism in the Western Balkan countries.

An important finding of this analysis is that mainstream Muslim communities in the Western Balkans associate the resurgence of Islam and political Islam, as well as related phenomena such as radical Islamic fundamentalism, jihadism, and Salafi Wahhabism, with the transnational mobilization, penetration, and adaptation of "alien" Islamic doctrines. This finding was confirmed during the fieldwork of the Preventing Violent Extremism in the Balkans and the MENA (PREVEX) Western Balkan teams in the summer of 2022. These doctrines, primarily imported from the Arab Middle East, denounce local Muslim tradition as "deviant" as a result of the folk elements added over time to the original, "pristine" normative core. Referred to as "Arab" Islam by its detractors, this interpretation claims to spearhead a return to Islam's doctrinal roots and to strengthen a sense of belonging to the global *umma*—the "imagined community" of Sunni Islam.[2] In contrast, many local Muslims tend to perceive these Middle Eastern influences as foreign and a "distortion" of the Islam they traditionally practice in the Balkan context. As a Bosnian Islamic Community official and professor on the Islamic Faculty in Bihać put it,

> Salafi activities run counter to our culture and the Bosnian Muslim interpretation of Islam. Even those who went to Syria, it is known exactly what kind of congregations they attended and who led them, and none of those congregations belong to the [official] Islamic Community.[3]

Traditional (Hanafi) Islam has long been institutionalized in the form of state-authorized Islamic Communities in the respective Western Balkan countries. It is considered a vital facet of Balkan Muslims' ethnic identity and culture. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, where the infiltration of proselytizing Salafists was most intense, Islamic Community officials have made sustained efforts to counter the spread of radical religious doctrines that were formally unknown to the local populations. The curricula in religious colleges and madrassas in Bosnia and Herzegovina were amended to include modules on preventing radicalization. The Islamic Community (IC) there organizes conferences on coexistence and tolerance. It cooperates with various international organizations to host seminars to raise awareness about the dangers of radicalization and violent extremism. At the height of global attention on Salafism, when FTF departures to Syria and Iraq from Bosnia and Herzegovina peaked in 2014, the Islamic Community established an office to coordinate its cooperation with NGOs, which helped it better monitor the network of NGOs with a Salafi orientation.[4] Despite the formal separation between state and religion, the Islamic Community of Kosovo demanded resolute government intervention in preventing the opening of new mosques and masjids operating outside its jurisdiction, where extremist imams preached (Jakupi and Kraja 2018).[5] In contrast, the parallel existence and action of two official religious institutions in Serbia—the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS) based in Novi Pazar, the center of the Muslim-majority-dominated region of Sandžak; and the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) based in Belgrade—has been seen as creating a vacuum suitable for exploitation by alternative religious groups and hampering efforts to tackle radicalization (Petrović and Stakić 2018).

In all Western Balkan countries under examination, the role of individual mainstream imams and religious instructors from the official Islamic Communities is found to be significant in achieving community resilience to violent extremism. This role primarily involves providing religious counternarratives to radical interpretations of Islam and strengthening social cohesion within the *jamaat*, making it difficult for radicals to infiltrate. Our fieldwork in countries less affected by manifestations of violent extremism, such as Albania, indicates that the work of imams there has mainly been oriented toward preventing Salafi preachers and radicalized individuals from gaining access to mosques under their jurisdiction and raising awareness of the violent extremism (VE) phenomenon through regular and, in some cases, daily informative sessions. In countries more exposed to the risks of violent extremism, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, cultivating resilience requires more comprehensive and imaginative approaches. Given that Salafists have shown particular agility on social media, with better outreach to youths, the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina saw the need to activate its media platforms. At the

Islamic Pedagogical Faculty at the University of Bihać, the IC established a media department to meet the demand of young people "for something that is fast, flexible, alive, for real, live authorities who are ready for discussion and willing to stay up all night in online conversations with them."[6] Though the Islamic Community currently has only a handful of young representatives active on social media, several recent graduates of the Islamic Faculty in Bihać have begun contributing to progressive media platforms, where imams from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina collaborate to produce modern and dynamic religious content accessible to Muslim youths.[7] Plans are also in place to begin social media training for young imams in the Islamic Community to prepare them for engaging online in countering extremist narratives.

In Kosovo, imams and community representatives have also been found crucial for building community resilience. Data from both the Kosovo Police Anti-Terror Unit and our fieldwork indicate that major radicalization drivers were neutralized in areas such as Podujeva and Prizren because imams refused to let in groups that promoted such ideas. Kosovar imams belonging to the official Islamic Community and lecturers in its educational bodies strongly and openly oppose radical narratives and activities, even at the risk of verbal or physical attacks. However, like elsewhere in the region, the Islamic Community of Kosovo cannot control sermons and materials broadcast on the internet by imams who were expelled by the community or who are active in other countries.

The region of Sandžak in Serbia presents an interesting case in this respect. Several influential imams, such as Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, Sead Islamović, and Bekir Makić, who were previously active in spreading Salafism and even suspected of recruiting foreign fighters, have played a crucial role in alleviating their communities. They are now openly distancing themselves from political and militant interpretations of Islam and directing their activities toward humanitarian community aid, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, and solving local community problems.[8] Various interpretations exist regarding this change of heart. Some emphasize external factors, such as political and religious reforms in Saudi Arabia or pressure from the United States and other countries. In contrast, others attribute it to persecution by security services inside and outside Serbia. Still others hold that these imams realized that they had to change their approach to avoid doing more harm than good to Muslims.

All in all, while we believe that resilience is systemic and depends on the interconnection of factors, it can be argued that in the Western Balkan context, two elements have played a paramount role in preventing violent extremism. The first is the prevalence of what has often been designated as "moderate Islam" among Muslims, leading the local population to reject intrusive and violent interpretations of Islam brought by Salafi jihadis.

Our fieldwork across the region suggests that the existence of sufficiently stable local traditions of tolerance and their reproduction in the cultural memory have a strong preventive effect on processes of radicalization. We may indeed argue that in the Western Balkan context, traditional Muslim identity, safeguarded by relatively stable states, acts as the primary brake on the adoption of radical versions of Islam. The second crucial element is the indispensable role of religious officials, such as muftis or imams, in creating close-knit communities, where radical elements are quickly identified, and in preventing, countering, and raising awareness about violent extremism. As a rule, and often with support from the state, imams in Albania, Sandžak, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who espouse the Hanafi strain of Sunni Islam, restrict access to radical recruiters in their mosques and make it difficult for recruiters to connect with believers in other ways. In some cases, such as Sandžak and Bosnia and Herzegovina, imams and individuals of authority over Salafi groups have played an essential role in radicalized individuals' relocalization and integration into the moderate local community or the *jamaats* belonging to the official Islamic Community.

The Role of Religious Authorities in Countering Violent Extremism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Between 2011 and 2017, more than five hundred Kurds joined violent extremist organizations in Syria and Iraq. With the emergence of ISIS in 2014 and the concern that hundreds of young Kurds might join its ranks, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) adopted a policy to support traditional and new religious scholars and leaders in countering violent extremist campaigns. This included a quietist Salafist movement and efforts by several conventional and new Kurdish Islamic intellectuals and authorities to strengthen the relationship between religion and Kurdish nationalism. There exists a fundamental divergence between quietist Salafism and traditional religious nationalism, and their empowerment may lead to conflicting religious practices. However, these two ideologies share a joint alignment with the interests of the Kurdish ruling authorities.

There are eight religious communities in Kurdistan, all of which are regulated by law within the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs of the Kurdistan Regional Government.[9] These communities carry out their activities within a directorate called Religious Coexistence. Most Iraqi Kurds are Sunni Muslims and broadly follow the Shafi'i school (Van Bruinessen 1992, 23). However, the traditional and dominant religious type in the KRI is also influenced by Sufi tribal and conservative practices.

Since the establishment of the Kurdistan government in 1992, the authorities have sought to integrate traditional religious authorities into government and state-like institutions. Gradually, traditional religious authorities have come under the control of the Kurdish political authorities. Traditional religious authorities are now represented by imams and scholars who are dominant within the Islamic Scholars' Union of Kurdistan and the Ministry of Endowments and its associated institutions.[10]

With the ISIS threat looming in 2014, Kurdistan introduced several countermeasures. A significant change within the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs was the unifying and centralizing of Friday sermons. The ministry aims to counter hate speech, prevent extremism, and promote tolerance. Before 2014, Friday sermons and the process of becoming an imam were not subject to systematic regulation and centralized procedures. After 2014, the ministry organized both Friday sermons and the requirements to become an imam. The ministry ensures that the sermons are aligned with two key policy priorities: (1) KRI national interests, and (2) coexistence and tolerance among the various ethnoreligious communities. Many preachers were banned or warned from delivering Friday sermons for charges related to disrespecting ethnoreligious minorities in Kurdistan.

One of the primary policies of the ministry is to transition the role of imams from being sacred and unique figures in society to that of government employees with both rights and duties. The ministry has made progress in this area but still needs to improve because some imams defy the ministry and use different platforms, such as social media, an exceedingly difficult space for the ministry to regulate. Here, it is essential to mention that the Ministry of Endowments and other religious institutions in Kurdistan are under the influence of Kurdistan's two leading parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Some imams and preachers view the ministry and other Islamic institutions as part of KDP's and PUK's broader governing and power structure. Moreover, the challenge lies in the idea that the excessive centralization and regulation of religious institutions, including mosques, will engender a legitimacy problem for these centers, because trust (real or perceived) in government institutions is low (Palani 2021, 233).

Over the last decade, specifically since the rise of ISIS in 2014, a new generation of Kurdish Islamic intellectuals has contributed to the effort to renegotiate the relationship between religion and Kurdish statehood. These intellectuals are inspired by Kurdish identity, culture, and nationalism and seek to reformulate Islam in consideration of the Kurdish national struggle for independence (Gade and Palani 2022; Mustafa 2020). They have close relations with the traditional Kurdish religious institutions and authorities. The leading proponents of this Kurdish Islam are Abdulrahman Saddiq,[11] Tahsin Hama Gharib,[12] Abubakir Karwani,[13] and Mohammad Sharif.[14]

Many Kurds have an opinion about the distinction of Kurdistan religious practice and religious understanding, arguing that Kurdish Islam differs from "Arab Islam." The most prominent feature of religious nationalism in Kurdistan is the attempt to erect clear discursive boundaries between a supposedly "radical" Arab Islam and a presumably "moderate" Kurdish Islam in Iraq. It is pretty standard for the supporters of Kurdish Islam to define it as more focused on spiritual aspects (*batiniyya*) (Gharib 2013). One of the main aims of the politicians' Kurdish Islam discourse is to prevent violent extremism and promote coexistence between the various religious and ethnic components of Kurdistan (Mamakani 2016). In this context, Kurdish Islam's narrative appealed to the authorities and is seen as the antidote to violent extremism. According to supporters of Kurdish Islam, the relationship between religion and authority is based on partnership, not separation (Gharib 2013).

Salafism is a branch of Islamism with a growing popular appeal, as quietist Salafism has been on a steady rise in Kurdistan for many years. The most famous scholar is Dr. Abdul Latif Salafi, a shaikh in Sulaymaniyah. Abdul Latif is an example of a scholar who focuses on proselytizing through lessons and sermons while refraining from politics or from establishing a political party, thus leaving it to the authorities in place (Ahmed 2017). He preaches support for the Kurdish rulers because they are Muslims, and the alternative would be worse and more chaotic. He often refers to violence and instability in Yemen, Syria, and the region. Abdul Latif's movement is the most widespread Salafi current in Kurdistan.

Salafist figures have existed in Kurdistan for decades, but Salafism as a visible movement with clear and systematic discourses is a recent phenomenon. Salafis benefit from a good relationship with the authorities because it has allowed them to proselytize and establish institutes across Kurdistan. Abdul Latif was an important government ally in the struggle against ISIS (NRT 2016; Jalal and Ahram 2021; Rudaw 2014). The jihadi threat at the time also came from within, as Kurdistan faced the challenge of homegrown radicalization. Salafis believe that they had a significant role in preventing radicalization and extremism among Kurdish youths during the rise and rule of ISIS (2014–2017). Abdul Latif supported the military operations against ISIS: "Without our rejection of Daesh, thousands of young Kurds would have joined Daesh" (Mahmod 2018

Abdul Latif preaches the Salafi version of Islam in the Bahasht Mosque in Sulaymaniyah. Bahasht has become one of the most crowded mosques in Kurdistan, where hundreds of youths attend regularly. Women also attend the Friday sermons and wear Salafi-style niqab, which is uncommon among the residents in the region. In addition, Abdul Latif owns a popular TV station, Amozhgary, as well as a Quran memorization center and, recently, an Academy in Sulaymaniyah. The Amozhgary Academy

seeks to provide education about Islam to children and youths in different districts and towns of Sulaymaniyah. Abdul Latif's opponents claim that his movement is supported by the Kurdish authorities (KDP and PUK) to weaken the Islamist parties in parliament.[15] They see his movement benefiting the government because he tells followers not to protest but to be more careful and patient and protect the stability and the status quo.

Although Salafis played an influential role in preventing young Kurds from joining ISIS and other extremist groups, many carry negative views especially of non-Muslim groups in Kurdistan, such as the Yezidis. Their growing role might undermine existing tolerance and coexistence in the region. Moreover, the KRI's security institutions are distrustful of Salafis, maintaining that these groups have the potential to radicalize youth and thus showing that the KRI's support for Salafis is conditional and limited. The authorities have provided this conditional support to Salafis and religious nationalists to both prevent support for extremist organizations and ideology and weaken the Islamist opposition parties. However, there is growing concern that the continuation of policies that may be designed to marginalize and fragment the Islamist organization threaten coexistence and social peace in the KRI and pave the way for future extremism.

Tribal Leaders' Ineffectiveness in Preventing Violent Extremism in the Eastern Countryside of Deir ez-Zor

Tribal figures have historically played a prominent role in the sociopolitical landscape of Deir ez-Zor and eastern Syria. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, this role underwent a series of transformations due to interventions by the central state. The tribes were forced to abandon their nomadic lifestyles, own land, and pay taxes. Nevertheless, the tribe remained significant, with the tribal leader serving as a symbol expected to unify and lead during times of crisis.[16] The central authorities continued to recognize tribal leaders as symbolic figures with powers to mediate in the event of intratribal conflicts (al-Mnadi not dated, 11) or conflicts with the state. Although traditional leaders maintained their social status, they were gradually forced to compete with others who could fulfill the same role, such as mayors, wealthy businessmen, Baath Party officials, and tribesmen with ties to state security (Khattab 2017).

From the time Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, Deir ez-Zor, which today has a population of approximately 1.6 million, remained one of the most neglected and poorest provinces in Syria (El Laithy and Abu-Ismail 2005). Its population was one of the least educated, and economic desperation triggered massive waves of migration out of the province, especially in

the 1990s. Despite the province's considerable oil and gas reserves, residents saw comparatively few investments in public services, infrastructure, or the local economy. The region's poverty and historic neglect contributed to high levels of popular support for the Syrian uprising that began in the spring of 2011.

The Syrian uprising shattered the broadly accepted notion that a tribal leader maintains authority over his tribesmen and determines the tribe's political orientation. Although the Syrian regime went to great lengths to push tribal leaders to influence their tribesmen in its favor, these efforts were largely futile (Mashhour 2017, 28). Some stood behind the regime, while others stayed neutral. However, the positions tribesmen adopted toward the uprising rarely mirrored those of the traditional leadership. Many who joined the demonstrations were outraged at the tribal leaders' failure to exhibit relevance and agency. At a time of severe political upheaval, tribal leaders were largely absent from public life, even as violence escalated against protesters and armed groups were established under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to oppose the regime.

Most tribal leaders also refrained from taking sides or engaging in the events that unfolded after the regime's withdrawal from northeastern Syria in late 2012 and appeared to virtually resign from public affairs. Their low profile was not surprising, considering that the FSA and many tribal commoners viewed tribal leaders as regime affiliates.

Following the collapse of the regime in Deir ez-Zor, FSA and opposition-affiliated groups failed to address the security and governance challenges generated by the political vacuum. As a result, opportunists began to seize control of oil and gas wells, most located in tribal territories belonging to the Ageidat, east of the Euphrates, in an area referred to as the eastern countryside (Ayn Al-Madina Magazine 2015, 6).

A new power structure emerged among tribesmen based on the wealth and power associated with controlling oil resources and revenues. By early 2013, the majority of oil and gas wells were controlled by tribal groups, whether by a small armed group operating in the name of the FSA or by a family or group of families in a village that agreed to take turns benefiting from the wells. The seizure of oil wells—and the tremendous amount of wealth amassed by a few along tribal lines—revealed the continued strength of tribal ties but reinforced a localization of these identities (Khaddour and Mazur 2017, 11). It also triggered intertribal competition and bloody conflicts that fragmented the tribes. These micro-tribal identities came at the expense of a broader tribal identity and led to a wider sidelining of the traditional leadership.

Jihadist groups began injecting themselves into Deir ez-Zor's local conflicts in early 2013, starting with the rise of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The village of Ash Shail offered a natural base for the group's

operations because many of the Buchamel tribesmen there had ties to al-Qaeda in Iraq (Awad 2018, 10). Nusra used its alliance with the Buchamel to mobilize support, gain protection, and secure access to a share in oil resources and revenues. The coalition offered the Buchamel power and influence but also put Ash Shail at odds with several neighbors. Internal grievances split Jabhat al-Nusra. In April 2013, the influential Bkair commander, Amir al-Rafdan, who headed a group of Bkair tribesmen and controlled the Conoco gas plant, broke away from Al-Nusra to join ISIS after disputes with influential Buchamel in the ranks of Al-Nusra. Rafdan shifted control of the gas plant to ISIS (Ayn Al-Madina Magazine 2015, 11). At the time, ISIS did not have a robust military presence, and therefore, Rafdan could not withstand attacks from Al-Nusra and the Buchamel, so he called the Bkair tribal elders and dignitaries to a meeting in the village of Hussain in September 2013 to garner tribal support (Mashhour 2017, 50). To the surprise of the invitees, most of whom were unaware of Rafdan's intentions, the prominent Iraqi ISIS leader Abu Ossama was at Rafdan's side and asked for Bkair leaders to support ISIS to counter the Buchamel's monopoly over resources, promising oil and an end to the economic hardship from which Bkair tribesmen had long suffered.

Abdelaziz al-Hummada, a prominent Bkair leader, left the meeting as soon as Rafdan's intent was defined and asked his tribesmen to steer clear of the conflicts. He warned that joining Rafdan and ISIS to ally against Al-Nusra and the Buchamel would bring nothing but destruction. al-Hummada tried to reach out to other notables and armed leaders from the Bkair to prevent Rafdan from deploying the tribe in support of ISIS.[17] He also visited Ash Shail and held meetings with several Buchamel notables in an attempt to separate the tribes, both of which belong to the Ageidat tribal federation, from the conflict between Al-Nusra and ISIS.

However, al-Hummada's requests were disregarded. Many Bkair were discontent and criticized their leader for paying no heed to the abuses of the Buchamel and Al-Nusra. By the beginning of 2014, not only had al-Hummada failed to convince his tribesmen of the risks of joining ISIS, but also his tribe no longer guaranteed his safety, and he was forced to leave Deir ez-Zor as ISIS closed in on his home region. Many Bkair saw Rafdan's promised benefits as too good to turn down. Rafdan continued to mobilize support from Bkair tribesmen by framing the Al-Nusra–ISIS conflict in tribal terms, using the Al-Nusra siege on Busayrah in March 2014, which prompted massive clashes between the Buchamel and Bkair, to seal Bkair support for ISIS. Exploiting and investing in the tribal dynamics, ISIS took complete control of Deir ez-Zor by mid-2014. Long after the defeat of ISIS, some Bkair tribesmen continued to insist that al-Hummada lacked credibility as a tribal leader because his calls to resist ISIS were not in the Bkair's interest.[18]

Since entering Deir ez-Zor in late 2017 to confront ISIS, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and later the Autonomous Administration for Northern and Eastern Syria (AA) made repeated attempts to mobilize Deir ez-Zor's tribes to pursue its political project and counter ISIS, including appealing to the traditional leadership. The SDF established the Deir ez-Zor Military Council and later the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council. Local tribal dynamics largely determined a tribe's participation in the Military Council, similar to past alliances formed with Al-Nusra and ISIS. By early 2018, most areas east of the Euphrates were liberated from ISIS.

Despite its territorial defeat in Baguz in the spring of 2019 and concerted efforts by the International Coalition and SDF to close the chapter of ISIS rule in eastern Syria, the jihadi group continued to maintain a significant presence and influence in Deir ez-Zor's eastern countryside. Turmoil and insecurity from ISIS cell activity began to affect some areas, prompting the SDF to conduct security raids that often resulted in the death of civilians and arbitrary arrests. A cycle of ISIS attacks and security raids left communities trapped and cut off from the stabilization efforts underway elsewhere in northeastern Syria. As living conditions deteriorated, locals in these villages expressed severe frustration with the SDF and AA, blaming the authorities for their economic and security woes. ISIS expanded by creating and exploiting governance vacuums, spreading fear, and fueling local rejection of the SDF and AA. In many parts of the eastern countryside, nascent institutions collapsed altogether (Haenni and Quesnay 2020, 14). The authorities' presence dwindled to soldiers operating checkpoints and security patrols entering villages to conduct anti-ISIS operations. The SDF and AA continued to engage tribal leaders, believing tribesmen would fall in line, but their engagement did not reflect positively in countering ISIS and stabilizing the region.

In August 2020, several tribal figures were assassinated in the eastern countryside, with Shaikh Motashar al-Hifl being the most prominent among them. A member of the leading family of the Ageidat tribal federation, Motashar was targeted in his car, together with his nephew Shaikh Ibrahim al-Hifl, the acting general leader of the Ageidat, who survived the attack. Motashar's assassination triggered severe unrest in the eastern countryside (Abu Nabut 2020). After the assassination, Ibrahim al-Hifl called for the formation of a political project that would help the tribal federation escape from the security crisis. He invited Ageidat tribesmen to a conference that was attended by hundreds of people, including representatives of tribes from more than a half dozen villages in the eastern countryside (Al-Ali 2020). Al-Hifl did not address the threat of ISIS directly but urged unity and called for inviting the International Coalition to partner with tribes to address the insecurity plaguing the region. His efforts failed almost imme-

diately, once again reflecting the marginal influence of the region's traditional leadership and the fragmentation of tribes. Al-Hifl himself commented that the Ageidat disappointed him because they were not willing to listen to the tribal leadership.[19]

Conclusion

In sum, our three cases leave a mixed picture of traditional authorities' ability to curb the spike in violent extremism represented by ISIS. Whereas religious leaders made essential contributions to upholding stability in the Western Balkans, tribal leaders were unable to prevent jihadism from taking root in Deir ez-Zor. The achievements in Iraqi Kurdistan ranked somewhere in the middle, but of note is that the region produced a relatively limited number of recruits for ISIS, considering its geographical proximity to the epicenter of the "caliphate."

To explain these differences, we must look at the broader political context. As described in the analytical framework, the authority of traditional leaders is affected by developments in society and the state. Syria has experienced extreme volatility on both levels, which is reflected in tribal leaders' faltering position. The micro-tribal identities that emerged amid revolt and state collapse have undermined the influence that the traditional leadership once enjoyed. The Syrian uprising constituted a turning point for the tribes in Deir ez-Zor, with conflict, displacement, multiple loyalties, and disputes over resources leading to divisions in which traditional leaders lost their functional and symbolic roles. Tribal divisions were also instrumentalized by jihadist groups, which pitted rival tribesmen against each other. Today, weak governance, a deteriorating economic situation, and chaos and abuses in many tribal areas continue to provide fertile ground for violent extremism. ISIS remains active and continues to capitalize on the tribal feuds that persist to maintain its presence.

In the Western Balkans, kinship-based structures like those in Syria and Iraq that fragment society and open opportunities for intervention by Salafi jihadists are absent, comparatively curtailing the scope of action of extremist groups. Outside social media, extremists in the Western Balkans can vie for control mainly by infiltrating the traditional religious communities, where they clash directly with the imams, who generally command the respect of their communities and, themselves, have vested interests in countering such interference. The largely accepted legitimacy and institutionalization of the official religious communities also narrow the space for intergenerational conflict. The state typically aligns with traditional leaders, and the communities then seek the state's support.

A similar, albeit more precarious, partnership between the state and community leaders is observed in Iraqi Kurdistan. The KRI has made conscious efforts to prop up certain actors' authority. The strategy is to combine nationalism with traditional "Kurdish" Islam, which is construed as being inherently peaceful. The KRI has also lent its support to Salafi preachers who are loyal to the political authorities. Some worry that this policy may inadvertently lay the ground for more conservative and potentially radical religious practices in the long term. A further concern is that the government's legitimacy deficit might weaken the authority of the actors it pushes forward to prevent the spread of violent extremism. As much as state support can help sustain the ascendancy of community leaders, it becomes a liability if the state is perceived to be corrupt.

When considering the local sources of resilience against violent extremism, a holistic view is therefore essential. Traditional leaders can serve as agents of resilience only when certain conditions are present. Our findings point to the contingent nature of traditional authority: it is not a force that works ex nihilo but rather a potential power that takes shape through interaction with the environment. In situations where social structures collapse under the long-term weight of a dysfunctional state, relying on "tradition" as a rescue is futile. Policymakers should take note of this conclusion and avoid supporting community leaders in a knee-jerk position.

Although traditional authorities contribute agency to the prevention of violent extremism and provide policymakers with someone to work with, there is a risk of reifying community leaders as "the solution." People in positions of authority may operate in ways that effectively hinder social mobility for youths. They may also lack genuine authority in the sense that commoners dispute their powers. The challenge represented by the Salafi-jihadi trend is precisely this, as explained. To deepen our understanding of community leaders' capacity to withstand such assaults, more research from concrete localities is needed.

Notes

1. *Authority* is defined as socially approved domination implying the "acceptance by subordinates of the right of those above them to give them orders or directives" (Giddens and Griffiths 2006, 581).

2. On the ubiquitous Balkan perceptions of a "traditional" as opposed to "non-traditional" Islam, see Evstatiev (2022).

3. Interview with an Islamic Community official in Bihać, July 25, 2021.

4. Interview with an Islamic Community employee in Bihać, July 27, 2021.

5. A masjid is essentially a mosque without the minaret, but it can be more informal, whereas mosques are only part of the official Islamic Community network.

6. Interview with a professor at the Islamic Faculty in Bihać, July 25, 2021.

7. See https://islamedu.ba.

8. See ((82) Muamer Zukorlić - YouTube, n.d.; Akademska inicijativa Forum 10, 2017; Islamović, n.d.). See https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=muamer+zukorli%C4%87, https://www.forum10.org.rs/, and S Islamovic (n.d) Facebook, https://facebook.com/profile.php?id=100067706756991&ref=page_internal.

9. The religious communities in Kurdistan are Islam, Christianity, Yezidis, Baha'is, Sabian Mandeans, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Kakais.

10. The Islamic Scholars' Union of Kurdistan was established in 1970 during the Kurdish national liberation movement. It has close relations with the KRI authorities.

11. Saddiq is an Islamic intellectual and former member of the Kurdistan Islamic Union, also a former Minister of Environment (2003–2004). In 2021, he was appointed Head of KRG's Environment Conservation and Improvement Board.

12. Gharib is a university professor in law and politics at the University of Human Development in Sulaymaniyah. He was among the first to theorize Kurdish religious nationalism of the 2000s.

13. Karwani is a senior member of the Islamic Union and a former KRG minister.

14. Dr. Sharif is an Islamic figure and intellectual who founded the Islamic Thought Forum in Kurdistan.

15. The Islamic Movement, Justice Group, and the Islamic Union of Kurdistan.

16. Interview with a tribal leader in eastern Deir ez-Zor, July 2022.

17. Interview with Hummada, Turkey, June 2017.

18. Interviews with tribesmen from Bkair, eastern Deir ez-Zor, June 2022.

19. Interview with Hifil, eastern Deir ez-Zor, August 2020.