



CONNEKT COUNTRY REPORTS

National Approaches to Extremism

TUNISIA

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COUNTRY REPORTS ON NATIONAL APPROACHES TO EXTREMISM

Framing Violent Extremism in the MENA region and the Balkans

TUNISIA

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Overview¹

COUNTRY PROFILE

Government system

During the period between Tunisia's independence in 1956 and the 2011 Revolution, the Tunisian political system was a republican presidential system based on a single ruling party (the Neo-Destour Party, during Bourguiba's period, and the Democratic and Constitutional Rally (RCD) party under Ben Ali's era). The 1959 Constitution granted the President extensive executive and legislative powers, while imposing restrictions on prerogatives of elected legislative and judicial bodies.

After the revolution of 17 December 2010-14 January 2011, the Constituent Assembly (Parliament) drafted a new Constitution that was ratified and formally adopted on 27 January 2014. After the ratification of the new Constitution, the political regime took a new shape. From an authoritarian presidential system to a republican representative democratic system with a strong focus on participatory democracy (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Preamble). This new political system is a mixed system (semi-presidential/semi-parliamentary) or a "modified parliamentary system" that distributes the executive power between its two heads (the President of the Republic and the Head of the Government), a distribution that is designed to guarantee power sharing and checks and balances. Constitutional and legal experts have confirmed that the post-revolution political system has unique characteristics, which make its traditional classification as parliamentary, presidential or dual difficult.

The President directly elected by the people (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 75) represents the unity of the state and controls public policies in the areas of defence, foreign relations and national security. The President assumes the supreme command of the armed forces and the presidency of the National Security Council. He is responsible for military, diplomatic and national security officials' appointments. Moreover, the President of the Republic has the right to dissolve the Parliament in special cases stipulated by the Constitution (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 77).

The Head of the Government is appointed by a parliamentary majority. He is responsible for forming the Government, which should be approved by the Parliament. If the proposed government fails to gain the Parliament's confidence, the Constitution stipulates that the President of the Republic shall entrust another figure to form a new government (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 89). The principal responsibilities of the Head of the Government include setting general policies (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 91),

¹ For the preparation of this paper, a desk research as well as six interviews and roundtable discussions were conducted during the initial phase. The interviewees were selected among actors from academia, politics and civil society spheres. The interviews were conducted with Mr. Sami Brahem (university professor who contributed to the National Strategy to Counter Terrorism), and Mr. Bouraoui Ouni (security expert), Mr. Hamza Meddeb (senior researcher with Carnegie Center and visiting professor at European and Arabic universities), Mr. Jihad al-Hajj Salim (researcher in Sociology, who wrote a number of research papers on the violent extremism topic), Mr. Abdul Latif Al Makki (member of the Tunisian Parliament and former President of the Parliamentary Commission for Defence and Security), and Mr. Aslam Soli (chairman of a Tunisian NGO called "Badeer," which works on countering and preventing violent extremism among young people). Roundtable discussions were organised among members of the research team of the Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication.

appointing ministers and relieving them of their duties, and appointing senior officials in the public administration (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 92).

The Members of Parliament are elected by universal suffrage during regular legislative elections (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 55). The Assembly of People's Representatives (ARP) represents the legislative authority in the country, including approving the government and adopting the country's budget and laws (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 66). The ARP discusses and approves international conventions and treaties in trade, financial commitments and issues related to borders (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 67). It also monitors the Government's work and questions its members. It can withdraw confidence from one of the members of the Government or the whole Government in accordance with the constitutional framework.

Population

According to the National Institute of Statistics (INS), the size of the Tunisian population at the beginning of July 2019 was 11,722,038 inhabitants. The number of births per a thousand inhabitants was 18.2, compared to six deaths per 1,000 inhabitants (the latest statistics in 2017). Unemployment reached 14.9% in the latest trimester of 2019, the lowest recorded rate since the second half of 2014. Since then, it has ranged between 15% and 15.6%.

Main ethnic/religious groups

According to the first article of the Tunisian Constitution, "Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign country. Islam is its religion and Arabic is its language" (Tunisian Constitution, 2014: Chapter 1).

Historically, Tunisia has been known as a majority-Muslim society based on the Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence and the Ash'arism school. However, the results of a study issued by the Believers Without Borders Foundation (Mabkhout, 2018) claims that this harmony conceals a diversity that presents complex problems. These problems are mainly due to the relationship between religious attitudes and societal transformation and the effects of globalisation.

There are various religious communities in Tunisian society, including small Jewish and Christian communities. In terms of Muslim groups, other than the majority Maliki school, the most prominent sub-groups are:

- The "preaching and advocacy group": a group limited in number and influence. It was one of the active religious groups during the authoritarian regime within the limits of the legal framework. It is characterised by a preaching discourse, not a juristic one.
- Salafism, both the so-called "scientific" ('ilmi) Salafism and Salafi Jihadist. These are linked to active Salafist groups abroad.
- Shiites: In Tunisia, they are mainly linked to the Iranian revolution and their intellectual and social support base is very limited.

CONTEXTUALISATION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION IN THE COUNTRY

General overview of radicalisation and violent extremism

[Citizens reported to have joined ISIS and other violent movements inside and outside the country](#)

In August 2012, the Tunisian security authorities estimated that around 500 Tunisians had received military

training within Salafi Jihadist groups in Tunisia (CSIS, 2016). In recent years, no official information has been published on the number of those who were/are part of violent movements in Tunisia.

Ansar al-Sharia is one of the most prominent violent extremist groups active in recent years. Reports on membership of the organisation, classified as a terrorist group by the Tunisian authorities in 2013 (more details about this organisation are in the following section), show that this ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 Tunisians in 2012 (ibid).

However, it should be noted that not all those members were involved in violent activities. A large support base, sympathetic to the organisation's cause, joined its social activities following several social, economic and psychological considerations. After its proscription, most Tunisians belonging to violent organisations went to fight outside the country by joining violent groups that were active regionally or internationally.

Some international organisations have reported that, since 2011, between 6,000 (The Soufan Group, 2020) and 7,000 (UNHR, 2015) Tunisian fighters went to Iraq, Syria and Libya to fight with Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda. However, Tunisian authorities have stated that these figures are exaggerated and that the number of Tunisians who joined ISIS is between 2,800 and 3,000, while about 12,000 Tunisians were prevented from going to Syria and Turkey to join ISIS (Marsad Tunisie, 2015). However, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy estimates that 27,000 Tunisians were prevented from joining violent extremist groups in Libya and Syria and 1,000 to 1,500 Tunisians were believed to have joined jihadist organisations in Libya (Zelin, 2018).

Presence of radical and violent groups in the country

Although the Scientific Salafist Movement in Tunisia (Braham, 2014: 23-24) is often classified as an extremist group, it remains a doctrinal and devotional movement, while stating that political affairs should be left to the "ruler". The movement's ideology stipulates that, whatever the conditions, believers should never disobey the ruler. Therefore, the group did not enter into violent conflicts with the Tunisian state (during Ben Ali's era). Under Ben Ali, the regime did not see it as a threat but perhaps even as a useful mechanism since its activities were limited to religious worship and rituals, encouraging people to leave politics and public affairs to the ruler.

As for violent extremist groups in Tunisia, there is a kind of consensus that limits them exclusively to Salafi Jihadist groups. Only after 11 September 2001, and the war on Iraq, did extremist jihadist groups start to be more active. Significant numbers of Tunisian fighters went to join the jihadist movements in Iraq. Hundreds of alleged members of the jihadist movement in Tunisia were tried under the terrorism law under Ben Ali, but given the lack of judicial independence and conditions for a fair trial, it is impossible to state whether these can be taken to have been genuine members of these movements or politically-motivated trials.

After the revolution, the Jihadist Salafist movement emerged into the spotlight, especially after the amnesty issued in February 2011 by the interim government headed by the Ben Ali-era Prime Minister who had remained in place (General Amnesty, 2011). The amnesty included all those who had been tried for civil or military crimes if their cases were related to political and/or trade union activities. Among those included in the amnesty were the leaders of the Salafist movement, such as Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, later to become the founder

of Ansar al-Sharia. At first, he called for Tunisia to be a “land of preaching, not for Jihad” (Lakhal, 2012). However, the post-revolution transitional situation, which was characterised by a changing political and social context and reduced state and security capacity, represented a fertile environment for the growth of various organisations, including the Salafi Jihadist movement that expanded its popular support base.

Among the most important of these organisations is “Ansar al-Sharia”, (Adel bin, 2014: 79) which was established in April 2011 by the Salafi Jihadist veteran combatant (in Afghanistan, Mali and Iraq) and former prisoner during the ousted Tunisian President Ben Ali’s regime, Saif Allah bin Hussein, known as “Abu Iyad”. The latter disagreed with the spiritual father of the Salafi Jihadist movement in Tunisia, Al-Khatib Al-Idrisi, in urging for pushing the jihadist project in Tunisia towards militarisation and declaring political allegiance and organisational loyalty to Al-Qaeda while Al-Idrisi called for a focus on preaching and the expansion of popular support for the movement. Ansar al-Sharia took a charitable and service-oriented approach based on a propagandist religious discourse in a Tunisian environment thirsty for freedom of speech and new ideas after a long period of authoritarian rule.

Ansar al-Sharia won popular sympathy at the beginning, especially amongst frustrated young people whose expectations of the revolution were shattered when they were faced with the complex realities inherited from dictatorship. While young people’s aspirations were to eradicate corruption and enjoy social and economic opportunities, they saw little change after the revolution in a very complex and difficult political, social and economic climate. The Salafi Jihadist group utilised this and provided them with a puritanical discourse and lifestyle based on an idealised imagination of an Islamic caliphate in which they would enjoy justice, social solidarity and economic empowerment. This imagined alternative found interest among those who felt excluded and stigmatised by the state, and those who felt intense disappointment after the high expectations generated by the revolution.

The Tunisian Government classified Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist organisation in 2013 following two political assassinations and other terrorist incidents, which it was shown to have a hand in. Subsequently, many of its leaders headed to fight outside the country, especially in Libya, Syria and Iraq. The Oqba Bin Nafi Brigade emerged as the main domestic terrorist organisation, with a discourse and activities focused on attacking Tunisian security and military personnel (Sü and Aakhunzzada, 2019). Between 2015 and 2016 Tunisia also witnessed a rise in the activities of local terrorist groups and members of the Islamic State (IS) in Jebel Chaambi on the Tunisian-Algerian border and on the Tunisian-Libyan border. The activities of these extremist groups have been shown to overlap with criminal and smuggling networks.

A distinction is made in some of the literature on the members of the terrorist groups mentioned above between two profiles (Ayari, 2017). The first group engages in acts of violence with a political dimension, while the second is involved in acts of banditry and smuggling that are perpetrated by desperate individuals who do not have an ideological dimension and cannot be described as activists but are rather individuals who live outside the law. It is this type of individual that is commonly mobilised in violent operations, known as “lone wolf” operations, acting as “mercenaries”.

Ethnicity is not considered a significant factor for identifying violent groups in Tunisia. The main violent groups in Tunisia are not based on a specific ethnicity and most violent extremist groups claim belonging to a wider

and supranational community like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Also, violent religious groups are essentially extremist Muslim groups (cited above).

Framing radicalisation and violent extremism

Scientific and academic state of the art

Under dictatorship, policy-making was done in a very closed circle within the regime, far from independent experts and the public. The presidential, one-party system involved extremely centralised decision-making processes. Therefore, the academic world and the production of knowledge in the field of humanities were completely disconnected from the sphere of political action, apart from where individual professors may be called on by the regime to help draft laws or advise. Knowledge production was subject to rigorous and strict control, and prevented from challenging the authoritarian regime. This estrangement between the world of politics and academia did not disappear after the revolution. Tunisian academia's participation in shaping public policies remains modest, despite the quality, experience and expertise of many Tunisian professors in Tunisian universities. This lack of policy-relevant studies also applies to the field of extremism and violent extremism,² despite the fact that it is widely recognised domestically as posing a real threat to Tunisian society, the economy and the political transition.

Violent extremism is not a topic of significant research activity even within state institutions. After the launch of an in-depth scientific research unit in 2014 in a state research institution, the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (ITES, affiliated with the Presidency of the Republic), the unit's work was suspended in 2016 and its results neglected for various reasons.³ The most important efforts of the unit have been its contributions to the national counter-terrorism strategy (discussed in detail in the second part of the report) and a study on Jihadist Salafism (discussed below).

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A significant recent development is the partnership signed in July 2019 by the National Committee for Countering Terrorism, within the framework of its project "Interconnection" on "Preventing Violent Extremism in Tunisia"⁴, with the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, with the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). The project launched a fund dedicated to supporting scientific research related to violent extremism in Tunisia (MHESR, 2019).

In this context, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has opened a call for researchers and civil society organizations (CSOs) to apply for funding for "research projects aiming at analyzing the phenomenon of violent extremism and produce recommendations helping to develop strategies and programmes for prevention and comprehensive treatment" (Babnet Tunisie, 2019). The initial selection of researchers was announced in November 2019 but no research results have been shared to date.

² Interview, academic researcher Sami Braham.

³ Tariq Al-Kahlawi, President of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies (2012-2014), states that "many studies were ignored, among them a study on sustainable development in Tunisia and a study on decentralisation that was accomplished during his presidency of the institute and the study on Jihadi Salafism, which was disfigured." Mr. Sami Braham states that a strategy was prepared after extensive research but was left on the shelf due to the change in political leadership and the lack of continuity at the state level. He claims that the key study conducted by the unit, which was prepared by hundreds of Tunisian experts, was suspended and its results distorted.

⁴ "Tarabott" project

There is a huge difference in investment in scientific research related to violent extremism between the Tunisian state, on the one hand, and international organisations and foreign think tanks, on the other, which are allocating abundant funds in this area. This is not due only to differences in terms of capabilities but also to the Tunisian state's long-standing lack of adequate investment in scientific research related to humanities and social sciences. As a result, research on violent extremism in Tunisia is mainly produced by international or foreign organisations.

Below, we set out the most important academic studies carried out on violent extremism in Tunisia. We discuss the most important results and methodologies, as well as presenting the definitions of extremism and violent extremism adopted when analysing the phenomenon.⁵

Defining violent extremism and radicalisation

- "Salafiya Jihadiya in Tunisia" (Hajj Salem, M. et al., 2014)

This book, published by the ITES, consists of seven main chapters. Each chapter is based on theoretical research or fieldwork carried out by young researchers and academics in the research unit established in 2012-2014 at the ITES, under the Presidency of the Republic. The Salafism Research Unit was supervised by Dr. Muhammad Al-Haj Salem. The aim of this work was to study the Salafist Jihadist phenomenon in Tunisia empirically, including its religious, cultural, social and political dimensions. This book provides an important and in-depth reading of the Salafist Jihadist movement's evolution in Tunisia, retracing its historical and intellectual developments. It deconstructs its relationship with the various components of society and state institutions, and its implications for Tunisian policy-makers, in terms of how to address the phenomenon through a combination of hard security and integration approaches.

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Among the important results in this book is the study prepared by Dr. Muhammad Al-Hajj Salem, entitled "A Psychosocial Approach to the Salafist Phenomenon in Tunisia". It concludes that the Salafist Jihadist movement in Tunisia mainly attracts youth suffering from multidimensional poverty economic, educational and spiritual (religious). They are living marginalised lives mainly in marginalised urban spaces. They perceive the state and society purely through an exclusionary authoritarian image. This is confirmed by another study in the same book that traces the trajectories of youth who join jihadist groups. The study explores the impact of various factors that cause these individuals to be "vulnerable", with a focus on the sociological characteristics of jihadist youth in Douar Hicher (one of the poor suburbs of the capital). It also explores the causal relationship between vulnerability and the recruitment strategies of violent extremist groups based on converting marginalised spaces into protest spaces in which alternative or "self-excluding identities" are formed, including the identity advocated by the Salafist Jihadist movement. Another field study in the book concludes that "the affiliation of many Tunisians to the Salafist movement was not for intellectual and ideological reasons as much as it was for utilitarian and opportunistic reasons to improve their material and social conditions."

The chapters in this ITES publication attempt to present a holistic approach to studying the Salafist Jihadist phenomenon. After considering the phenomenon in its historical, social and political context, the research

⁵ It should be noted that due to limitations and the structure of the report, we have chosen to focus on the most important studies. The remaining studies are included in the references section.

goes on to analyse individual Jihadist “profiles” by adopting approaches in various fields. Despite the focus on formulating specific policy recommendations for decision-makers, the study has been left on the shelf, similarly to other studies that combine theoretical and experimental approaches. Its recommendations appear not to have been adopted by state institutions due to complicated political and institutional considerations. Throughout the book, no specific definition of extremism or violent extremism is provided. However, it is worth noting that in one of the studies (by the researcher Sami Brahem) we find a critical position regarding the use of the term “terrorism” by the international community to stigmatise a particular group or organisation. The term “terrorism” is criticised for being opaque, ambiguous and used to discredit or condemn political opposition. Sami Brahem describes violent extremism as “the use of physical armed violence under the name of Jihad, as a way to change the political and social reality in order to achieve what they believe is establishing the law of God in the state and society.”

- **“Terrorism in Tunisia: An Analysis of Judicial Cases” (TFESR, 2016)**

A study issued by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (October 2016) is considered one of the most famous quantitative and experimental Tunisian studies on terrorism. The study is based on analysing the judicial cases of individuals who were tried for terrorist offences between 2013 and 2016. The study is based on a sample of 1,000 (965 male and 35 female) cases. The researchers focus on socio-demographic characteristics to study the terrorist “profile”. For example, persons accused of terrorism are overrepresented in the governorate of Tunis and Sidi Bouzid, respectively 18.78% and 14.32%, out of a sample of 1,000. On the other hand, out of 400 persons brought before an examining magistrate between 2013 and 2016, 40% have a university degree, 36.33% have a level of secondary education, 13% have a vocational training diploma, and 4% have a baccalaureate.

It is worth noting that the study suffers from some methodological issues. It attempts to create a pattern for terrorist profiles in Tunisia but focuses on micro level individual characteristics without taking into account the individuals' social environment (parents' occupation and their geographical origin, for instance); nor does it draw on localised geographical data (the municipalities from which the extremists emerged). The study is thus very limited on the meso level (family and community structure) and on the macro level (cultural components, socio-economic factors and the relationship with the state).

The study does not adopt a reference definition of violent extremism and states that there is ambiguity in defining concepts. It argues that it is necessary to distinguish between two stages in the terrorist's trajectory: the first stage is an intellectual, psychological, theoretical and ideological stage specific to the individual, while the second stage is when those beliefs are transformed into material actions within the framework of a terrorist organisation.

- **“Assessing the Threat Posed by Tunisian Foreign Fighters” (Ben Arab, 2018)**

Another study issued by the ITES (2018), this one completed with the financial support of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was supervised by the principal researcher, professor of cultural studies, Amna bin Arab, with the contribution of Dr. Faisal Faisal, specialist in cognitive language, and Muhammad Iqbal Al-Loumi, a data analysis expert at the University of Quebec, in addition to three researchers. The study relies on individual interviews conducted by researchers with 83 Tunisian individuals (80 men and 3 women) convicted of terrorism-

related crimes. Some of them committed terrorist attacks between 2011 and 2016. Among them are 58 Tunisian fighters who have returned from conflict areas, or others who had sought to leave Tunisia with the intention of travelling to fight abroad. As part of this study, all of them were interviewed and participated in 18 focus groups where they were given the opportunity to interact with each other.

The research team built its questionnaire based on the ecological “Bronfenbrenner” model (Graph 1). It develops the hypothesis that the Tunisian fighter is at the centre of the model because of a set of factors (family and personal environment, ideology, societal environment, socio-economic and cultural factors and values). The aim was to outline a social and intellectual profile for the fighters. The study found some interesting data that would help with drawing terrorist profiles and analysing the phenomenon of extremism: around 55% of the fighters are young people (20-29 years) who are not married due to their young age, psychological instability and economic or professional status. It also shows that 40% of the fighters have limited formal education (with many not going beyond primary education), that they suffer from economic insecurity (7% are unemployed and the rest work in very insecure jobs) and 70% of the combatants interviewed said that they were drug or alcohol consumers. This high percentage may be linked to the findings in a previous study (Hajj Salem, 2014) that most of the young people involved in violent organisations have weak family and social ties and became involved in violent extremist groups when going through a difficult period characterised by failure and instability.

The study also posits, based on discussions with prisoners, that there is a relationship between the violence that the individuals in question experienced in their family or educational environment and the violence they adopted as part of a violent extremist group. The study shows that most of the offenders had experienced violence either within the family context, in their immediate social environment or in violent clashes with state security forces and had a criminal record before becoming involved in violent extremism.

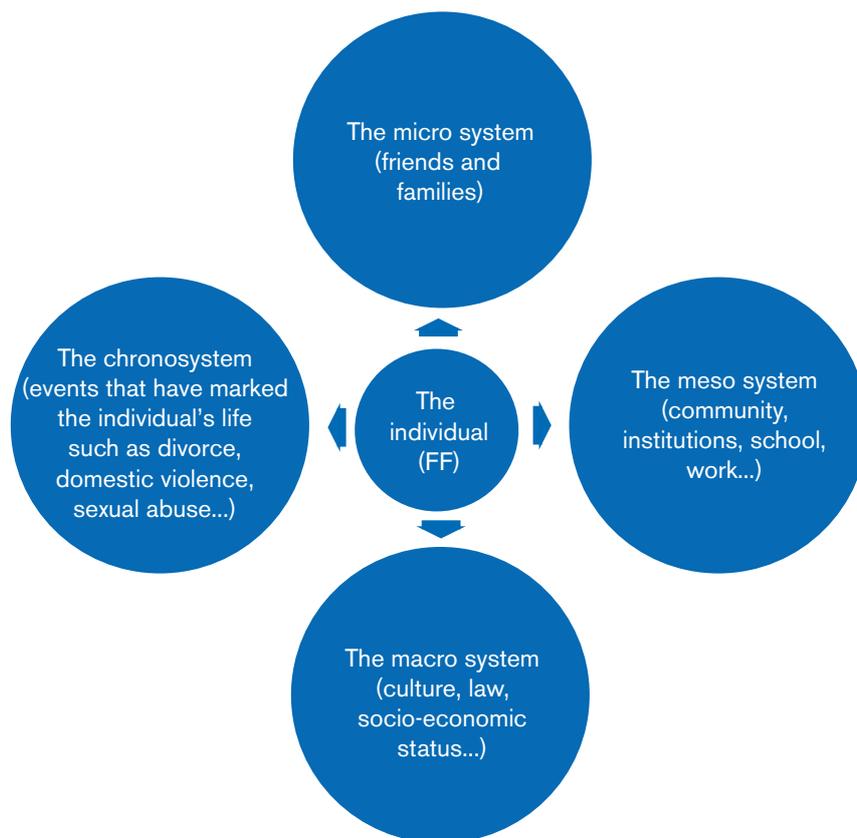
By using the area of residence of the combatant individuals as a variable, the study concludes that there is a direct relationship between deprivation (employment opportunities, infrastructure, leisure opportunities, etc.) and the number of foreign fighters in an area. But it highlights that some interior regions that have suffered from poor social and economic indicators for decades have not produced a large number of foreign fighters compared to other regions like Greater Tunis or Bizerte (on the coast). This confirms the dangers of drawing direct causal relationships between individual-level factors and social structures in understanding the phenomenon of violent extremism.

The study concludes that there is no specific pattern for a standard individual combatant because of their different life pathways. Moreover, there is no unique identifier that distinguishes foreign fighters from other individuals who choose to engage in terrorist activity inside Tunisia. However, there is a consensus that a set of factors was critical to pushing them towards extremism, the most important of which are an identity crisis in their relationship with their state and country, and deep disappointment in the revolution that failed to fulfil promises of employment, development and economic opportunities. The education system was also perceived as a failure and has affected the individuals' choices, as well as their tense relationship with state institutions, especially the security forces.

This study relies on unique access to the central actors in the phenomenon of violent extremism, through direct conversations with them and tracking their life pathways through questions that go beyond the micro level dimension of the phenomenon to the macro level and meso level, while seeking to avoid simplistic

explanations. However, legal conditions and procedures prevented the research team from accessing a bigger sample and increasing the number of meetings (58 individual conversations). The study has adopted a non-representative sample for interviewing the foreign fighters. Therefore, its results cannot be generalised but do provide an in-depth understanding of specific cases of violent extremism.

GRAPH 1. Ecological Model of Foreign Fighter. The FF Ecosystem



Source: Ben Arab et al., 2018.

- "Violent Extremism and its Motivating Factors in Tunisia in the 2010s" (Ayari, 2017)

This study was published by the UNDP in Tunis in 2017, written by researcher Michel Ayari, who is the senior analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG) in Tunisia. The study represents an analytical literature review on violent extremism in Tunisia. It aims to identify and rank factors that might increase extremism and violent extremism. The study's goal is to produce recommendations to the United Nations (UN) agencies to better coordinate their efforts in responding to national prevention needs.

The study defines violent extremism as "the activity of individuals and groups who defend or justify violence for economic, social or political purposes and reject the universal values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights by spreading the message of religious, cultural and social intolerance." It provides an important theoretical contribution, as it presents two typical differentiated descriptions of violent extremist individuals (ideological combatant and "desperate outsiders"), depending on individual and social factors. The author

argues that most violent extremists in Tunisia are outsiders, living in situations of informality and showing a high level of readiness to engage in various forms of violence.

The author notes that most of the research carried out on violent extremism does not classify causal factors according to their nature (individual level and social), which leads to confusion in prevention strategies. A distinction between levels of analysis allows a distinction in levels of interventions to prevent violent extremism. The first level of intervention aims to increase the state and society's resilience in facing violent extremism. The second level aims to reduce the risks of extremism on the individual level.

The study identifies 33 factors for violent extremism. It describes them and assesses their impact on the social and individual levels for the two different profiles – “ideological combatants” and “desperate outsiders”. The study distinguishes between seven categories for organising the factors of violent extremism: ideological factors, social and cultural factors, economic and social factors, individual perceptions, religious factors, institutional factors and situational factors. It produces a “qualitative risk analysis” matrix to show the causal weight of each factor and their categories in order to prioritise violent extremism prevention activities in Tunisia according to their potential impact on the social level (state and society) and individual level (the most vulnerable individuals).

- **“Rethinking the Concept of Human Security and Its Approaches to Preventing and Combating Violent Extremism in Tunisia” (Zoghalmi and Toumi, 2019)**

This report was produced as part of a research project called “Towards a more effective approach to human security in the context of the emerging threat of violent extremism in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia”, implemented in Tunisia by the Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication in partnership with the West Asia and North Africa Institute (WANA) and funded by the Dutch Research Council. It provides an analysis of human security approaches in preventing violent extremism, containing social tensions, and enhancing the resilience of local communities.

The study is based on in-depth fieldwork (desk research, focus groups, workshops and interviews) in six localities: Djerba and Ben Guerdane in the South, Carthage and Douar Hicher in the capital, and Menzel Bourguiba and Teborsoq in the North. Each region examined contained one “hotspot” where incidents of violent extremism had been common, and control areas where incidents of violent extremism did not occur. Dividing the chosen localities in this way enabled the development of hypotheses regarding locally-specific patterns of violent extremism, and the analysis of the relationship between local social structure and the phenomenon.

The study also presents policy recommendations for developing a new conception of security that integrates human security at the heart of all policy approaches, and moves away from purely hard security approaches. The research starts by defining extremism and violent extremism before moving on to analyse their motives and causes. We quote here definitions as they were cited in the report:

- Extremism: The belief in ideas that are very far from what most people consider to be true or reasonable and supporting these ideas. It involves positions and behaviours that go beyond what is ordinary and familiar among the members of a group. It can be considered as any adoption or development of beliefs

or ideologies that challenge the status quo and reject dialogue and mutual understanding and are usually followed by profound behavioural changes.

- Violent extremism: A concept that refers to the beliefs and actions of people who support and use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political aims. It is usually considered as the use of violence with ideological motives against the present situation and against the political and moral values of the group.

- “The Socio-economic Dimension of Islamist Radicalization in Egypt and Tunisia” (Süß and Aakhunzzada, 2019)

This paper was produced by the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) in 2019. It provides an analytical review of academic and non-academic studies that have worked on assessing extremism causes and dynamics in Tunisia and Egypt during the post-Arab Spring period. The paper also provides a developed theoretical model that identifies and reveals mechanisms linking economic and social factors to Islamic extremism. It identifies three general aspects about how social and economic factors affect extremism: (1) social and economic grievances; (2) social and economic opportunities, which are usually the absence of the state or its services; and (3) framing processes based on social and economic narratives.

Regarding the methodology, it combines qualitative analysis of the most important existing studies on the relationship between extremism and the socio-economic dimension with an experimental approach to analysing the jihadist scene in Tunisia and Egypt, and how Salafist groups – the most dominant – turned into violent groups.

It might be concluded that academic and scientific research in the field of violent extremism in Tunisia after the revolution is active and dynamic. Its utility and policy relevance remain dependent on decision-makers' ability to translate its findings into policies, as well as their commitment to engage with research in a serious and objective way, away from political or narrow agendas. The fact that much of the above research cited was carried out by think tanks, CSOs and state institutions with bilateral or multilateral funding and foreign research centres makes the research outputs not entirely independent since they may be subject to the views of these agencies. The shortage of funding and its short-term nature means that in-depth research on violent extremism is still limited. Further research is required on different factors, levels of interaction and local contexts in order to help develop more contextualised and effective prevention methods.

It is also worth noting that for the majority of studies the terms of radicalisation and violent extremism are used as obvious terms for which no formal definitions were formulated.

Strategies to counter/prevent Violent Extremism and Radicalisation (C/PVE)

C/PVE INITIATIVES

Mapping of C/PVE actors

The state, activists in civil society and the religious sphere are the most prominent actors in combating extremism in Tunisia. Below we look at the role of each of them, with an analysis of the extent of their interaction and the degree to which their efforts are coordinated or complementary.

Public policies and programmes

Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has experienced difficult security conditions because of the increasing number of terrorist attacks. Tunisia has been through a difficult political transitional period, which has allowed a new open environment for freedom and individual liberties. The country has also witnessed turbulent periods characterised by deep social contestation. The political landscape suffered from instability and continuous changes of officials in important ministries and security institutions, and a questioned legitimacy of the state in an atmosphere full of criticism and public rejection. The state has lost some of its tools and capacity to impose order. However, after the deterioration of the security situation in Tunisia in 2013-2014 and the major terrorist attacks of 2015, the state managed to focus on dealing with the terrorism phenomenon, partly thanks to international support to strengthen the security sector capabilities in establishing a clear state approach to counter violent extremism.

The state national strategies in the fight against violent extremism

Work on a "National Strategy to Counter Terrorism" has been launched since President Moncef Marzouki's term by the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, headed by Tarek Kahlaoui, an academic researcher. Hundreds of experts from academia and state authority officials prepared this strategy, which was due to be finalised in December 2014. The public version of the document contains more than 150 pages, detailing two main parts: diagnosis and "principles and lines of action" (Al-Kahlaoui, 2016). This document provides a comprehensive security approach in dealing with terrorism, as it stresses that countering terrorism is a responsibility that should not be placed on the security sector alone, but rather a responsibility shared by all state institutions and public agencies including ministries. The document views terrorism as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It also considers that the dangers challenging Tunisia go beyond local violent groups, which are driven by social, political, educational and cultural conditions, to a global strategy that seeks to involve Tunisia in the "awaited Caliphate", a more global project mobilising extremist groups from all over the world.

In the aftermath of the 2014 elections, the strategy did not gain the attention of the ruling party. It was not published and its programmes and recommendations were not translated into clear procedures and policies, which was confirmed by the researcher and academic Sami Brahem, a contributor to drafting the strategy. This is despite the fact that Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa officially handed over the document to his successor Habib Essid before leaving his duties as Head of the Government during the succession ceremony. The strategy was

not concretised in a set of policies and programmes, as stated in an open letter from Tariq Kahlaoui addressed to the President of the Republic, Beji Caid Essebsi, which demanded: “Do not bury the counter terrorism strategy just because of political rivalry.”

The National Security Council on 12 February 2015, under the guidance of the President of the Republic, decided to ignore the strategy and to prepare a new one from scratch (SNLCET, 2016: 2). To this end, a group of multidisciplinary experts and representatives of civil society were involved in drafting a new strategy based on the work of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Counter-Terrorism Committee. The team in charge prepared a draft of the National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism, which was reviewed and finalised by the National Committee for Countering Extremism and Terrorism (Leaders, 2016). The committee was created under the Organic Law on Countering Terrorism and Prevention of Money Laundering of 7 August 2015 (OLCTPML, 2015). The same law stipulated the creation of the Judicial Pole to Combat Terrorism as a pole specialised in terrorist cases to ensure better investigation and efficiency in dealing with terrorist cases. It is worth noting here that this organic law aims to confront terrorism and money laundering and to prevent them, in line with the international effort in this field and according to international standards and within the framework of international, regional and bilateral agreements ratified by the Tunisian Republic.

Various aspects of this law face criticism, as it was quickly rushed through Government and Parliament in a charged political atmosphere, following the Bardo and Sousse terrorist attacks. Criticism also focuses on the fact that it was not based on a strategic approach to preventing and countering terrorism. Furthermore, the law relies mainly on a hard security approach that might restrict individual liberties and exclude thinking about solutions for social and economic problems to address terrorism in depth and in the long run.

The National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism adopted in November 2016 built on four central pillars: prevention, protection, tracking and response (SNLCET, 2016). However, the strategy did not receive approval from experts and activists, especially at the methodological level, which showed confusion in concepts and objectives and was superficial in dealing with the phenomenon (Winter et al., 2017: 6). The academic and researcher Tariq Kahlaoui argues in an article (2016) that this new document neglected the diagnostic phase and went directly to recommendations that did not touch the core of the phenomenon but remained at the level of generalisation.

The National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism stipulates that various ministries, especially those directly concerned by the phenomenon, such as the Ministry of Women and the Family, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Ministry of Culture, should be empowered by allocating a specific budget to counter extremism and terrorism. This decision has not been reflected in the ministries' programmes on the ground. Programmes conceived according to the strategy have not been implemented in those ministries.⁶ The adopted strategy has also maintained the traditional role of the security forces and left it hostage to “conflicting ideology” (in the words of the security expert we interviewed) inherited from the authoritarian regime.⁷

Because of its lack of clarity, the official state strategy to counter extremism and terrorism did not succeed in effectively tackling the terrorist phenomenon, which led to an absence of in-depth discussions on the community

⁶ Interview, researcher and academic Sami Braham.

⁷ Interview, security expert on Bouaroui Al-Awni.

level (meso level). It did not provide a clear strategic plan or a common action for the various ministries concerned, which illustrates an absence of a clear vision and a comprehensive approach for the state in countering and preventing extremism and violent extremism.

A variety of national programmes to combat radicalisation and violent extremism

Although the state programmes are not well reported in the media, and more than one activist and expert we interviewed emphasised the poor communication and exchange between state institutions and CSOs, it is worth noting the increase in projects and programmes on combating violent extremism during 2015. The increase continued but at a lower rate until 2017, and to a lesser extent to the present. Below, we will present the most prominent programmes announced by the government in the area of countering/preventing violent extremism.

- As part of the state's policies in preventing violent extremism, the Ministry of Religious Affairs launched a campaign against violent narratives in 2015 entitled "We are Islam" targeting young people on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. "We are the ones who represent Islam. They are not. We need to use technology in the same way, meaning the way violent extremist groups use it to attract and recruit," said Mrs. Najat Al-Hammami, who is the Head of the Ministry's Media and Communications Department (Petré, 2015).
- In 2016, the General Administration of Prisons and Rehabilitation worked with the US Department of State on establishing community reintegration centres of extremism and violent extremism prisoners who were released (Counter Extremism Project, 2020).
- Since 2016, the Government, under the supervision of the Ministry for Relations with Constitutional Commissions, Civil Society and Human Rights, launched the "Alternative Narratives" platform (Amouri, 2019). The platform aims to develop, produce and promote alternative narratives to combat extremism and terrorism in partnership with civil society and the private sector through technology and modern means of communication in order to consolidate a culture of dialogue, tolerance, diversity and acceptance. The platform was able to produce media content that mainly addresses Tunisian youth, such as short movies that were shown in the City of Culture and photo stories illustrating how discourses of violence and hatred spread within society and the methods of polarisation practised by extremist groups, published on official social media pages affiliated with the Tunisian Government.
- In mid-2017, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research allocated 2.5 million Tunisian dinars over five years to support academic efforts to better understand the roots of extremism among young people and to develop plans and methods to face it. Four research projects were selected to be funded under this initiative one in the humanities and social sciences, and three in engineering and technology. This initiative is implemented in partnership between Tunisian research centres across the country, university professors and researchers from the Ministries of the Interior, Defence and Health. However, these projects will not be conducted before 2020 (Siliti, 2017).
- The National Counter-Terrorism Committee – a national structure tasked with developing guidelines for state institutions in countering/preventing violent extremism and developing state policies and programmes – also implemented a significant number of programmes within the framework of international cooperation. Among them are the Committee's programmes with the UN, such as the project "Preventing Violent Extremism in Tunisia through Human Rights-based Approaches for Development", launched in May 2018 and funded by the Swiss Government (US\$3 million). It aims to support the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and to strengthen national capabilities in building resilience to violent extremism by engaging

various actors, especially the private sector and civil society (NCCT, 2020). The National Committee also represented Tunisia on the Board of Directors of the Global Fund for Community Participation and Resilience (GCERF) and presented a project to prevent violent extremism at the local level, with a value of USD5 million.

In a similar context, the project “Supporting the Network of Active Experts in Countering Violent Extremism” was launched under the guidance of the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and sponsored by the Ministry of Youth and Sports with the support of the Government of Canada. The aim of this project is to develop a set of initiatives and projects in the field of preventing violent extremism in order to the support decision-making process and communication between practitioners (NCCT, 2020).

The aforementioned programmes demonstrate that determined efforts are being made by various state institutions in countering/preventing violent extremism. They also show that Tunisia has several partners in its fight against violent extremism. However, these various programmes are limited by weak coordination among the various actors involved in and between the different programmes in order to support effective implementation. They are also challenged by changes in ministry officials or when passing from one government to another, due to the unstable political situation in a newborn democratic system.⁸ Bureaucracy and red tape also disrupt the implementation of these programmes, especially since the Ministries of Defence and Interior do not provide adequate cooperation with programme participants even when it is the state institutions that launched them.

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Another aspect of poor coordination in these programmes was mentioned by the president of a non-governmental organization (NGO) – in an interview with our research team – who has conducted major projects in the field of violent extremism (Dr. Aslam Souli), which is a clash between state institutions and conflicts between their policies. Tensions have been raised between the Ministry of Human Rights and the National Counter-Terrorism Committee when the first received a British grant for one of its projects (based on the human security approach), while the second received US funding for one of its projects (based on the hard security approach). This leads to a lack of strategic focus and coherence.

Focus on hard security policies

Experts and activists believe that the weakness of the state’s policies is a systematic problem caused by the absence of participation mechanisms in setting and drafting policies. The committee that was formed to design the national strategy was not open to many stakeholders and actors in civil society, or to academia, which has many competent experts and provides a fertile environment for developing ideas. Moreover, hard security approaches are affected by a security sector that has not been subject to fundamental reforms since the end of dictatorship. It remains dependent on inherited experiences from the authoritarian system, and it remains unable to open up and engage and exchange with other actors. The security mentality is still rooted and affected by the authoritarian state climate, where the norm is to restrict information and consider everything related to security to be top secret and not open to discussion.⁹

⁸ Interviews, President of Beder association Aslam Souli, and academic researcher Sami Braham.

⁹ Interviews, academic Sami Braham and security expert on Bouaroui Awani.

The experts, parliamentarians and activists we interviewed unanimously agreed that the hard security solution is essential in confronting the terrorist phenomenon. However, they concurred that it is not a sufficient solution to the threat of extremism and violent extremism. The use of hard security approaches can often lead to a worsening of the situation unless accompanied by human security programmes to promote education, culture, development and tolerant religious values. There was a consensus that hard security and human security programmes are two mechanisms for different interventions in their respective fields. None of them can substitute the other and neither one of them works without having the other working.

While hard security approaches are still widespread, human security programmes are still deficient. For this reason, researchers and activists in local, national and international organisations continue to advocate for the need to develop systematic approaches that curb extremism and violent extremism by eradicating their preconditions. This can be achieved through programmes that work seriously to deal with socio-economic insecurity, address individual-level vulnerabilities and support local communities' resiliencies.

As for designing and implementing such programmes, interviewees emphasised that it is necessary to strengthen state institutions' capabilities and resources – such as the Parliament and the National Counter-Terrorism Committee – in order to design policies that take into consideration changing dynamics. Although state institutions have their methodologies and systems for assessing the impact of programmes on individuals and society, effective implementation requires opening up and building strong and sound relationships with CSOs of various specialisations (cultural, religious, educational, developmental, etc.) and think tanks and universities.

Official definitions of violent extremism and radicalisation

There is no clear and unique definition adopted by state institutions and by its officials in the National Strategy to Combat Extremism and Terrorism published by the Tunisian Government. The term “extremism” is mentioned 20 times without referring to a definition. Only at the beginning of the document do we find a reference to terrorism, which “represents a danger to all countries and peoples, and threatens the security of countries, the society's values, and citizens' rights and freedoms.” One of the participants in preparing the first strategy to combat terrorism stated during an interview¹⁰ that the Tunisian state does not adopt its own definition of violent extremism but rather adopts the UN definition like many other countries, knowing that the definitions of extremism, violent extremism, and terrorism are still controversial among member states.

Not having an agreed definition adopted by the state, civil society and other various components of the society is a systemic obstacle to designing clear policies that deal with core aspects of the phenomenon. The ambiguity in defining the concepts also contributes to the emergence of an area of interpretation based on personal views and interests in dealing with the phenomenon of extremism and violent extremism. It makes the state's policies confusing and driven purely by the views and interests of the political class that holds power during each mandate. Therefore, it is necessary for all national actors,

¹⁰ Interview, academic Sami Brahem.

governmental and non-governmental, to work on the phenomenon definition that would be a clear starting point for moving towards clear goals.

Civil society

After the revolution, the Tunisian political scene witnessed the development of a climate of freedom for institutions, groups and individuals. Among them are CSOs and associations that have played a critical role in the democratic transition process and in resolving the difficulties and challenges that accompanied it. In the area of combating violent extremism, experts and activists we interviewed emphasised the important preventive role that civil society plays in direct and indirect ways. Many experts indicated that civil society interventions, with their different cultural, social, economic and developmental natures, and the different targeted groups of youth, family, women and children, have a very important impact in facing individual and societal fragility factors, and thus in limiting extremism through developing individuals' capabilities and society's resilience. Therefore, it is essential for associations and NGOs to continue to work in their respective fields and support various efforts in countering/preventing violent extremism.

The most important functions of civil society also include, as some experts pointed out, analysing violent extremism phenomena, which all researchers think is complex and overlapping.¹¹ Civil society can also help in providing legislative proposals and informing decision-makers. This task requires a certain level of efficiency and quality in the work of civil society, which is still developing its capacities.

Analysing the phenomenon and building a clear understanding that helps to formulate effective policies that are not limited to hard security policies but also include effective preventive policies were among the objectives of the Jasmine Foundation's project "Towards more effective human security approaches in the context of the emerging threat of violent extremism in Tunisia" (Jasmine Foundation, 2018). One of the most prominent findings of this project was the design of a model that illustrates the relationship between the material dimensions of human security (employment, economy, urban planning, etc.) and moral dimensions (culture, religion, identity, social ties, etc.). The research found that communities differ in their response to extremism and this response is not mechanical. It is subject to the degree of security that communities possess on several levels, whether material or moral. The results of the research emphasised that the approach to preventing violent extremism must be a localised one that takes into account the factors that characterise each community.

CSOs emphasised the importance of funding by international organisations to support the efforts of CSOs, as well as state institutions, in combating/preventing violent extremism. They noted that these challenges did not prevent civil society from playing an important role in training and developing youth and providing a positive atmosphere for encouraging active citizenship and participation, which helps them to channel and deal with frustration, anger and grievances, and thus contributes to reducing the potential attraction towards extremism and violence.

¹¹ Interview, security expert Bouaroui Awani, and Head of the Bader association Aslam Soleil.

Religious communities

For decades, the Tunisian regime imposed a unilateral understanding of religion and closely controlled and repressed religious institutions. The changes in 2011 have generated a broad public debate on the existence of a “religious vacuum” due to very weak official religious institutions, which contributes to “religious illiteracy” and the lack of effective mechanisms for providing sources of moderate religious thought. When the dictatorship ended, the opening up of political and public space exposed citizens, and especially young people, to new questions and debates as well as threats in an unstable and uncertain transitional domestic and regional climate. Among the most important threats that Tunisia experienced after the revolution was terrorism and violent extremism.

In order to prevent and limit these threats, a significant number of experts we interviewed pointed to a need to build a balanced religious discourse that promotes tolerance and dialogue. They argued that the immunity or resilience of youth and society against violent extremist narratives can be reinforced by reviving the values of the Reformist Tunisian Islamic School, which rejects *Takfir* and builds its vision on a *maqasid* approach that is flexible, moderate and urges coexistence.

Accordingly, experts and activists believe that strengthening the capabilities of religious actors including imams and officials of the Ministry of Religious Affairs is an urgent step to help them fulfil their social and institutional role in disseminating a moderate, persuasive and tolerant religious discourse that engages young people and different segments of society, and does not leave them with a lack of moderate sources, and spiritual, psychological and ideological confusion.

Some of those interviewed also argued that imams and preachers should develop their skills in using modern communication techniques as they are necessary for communicating with youth and for spreading positive messages on a large scale. Some also believe that religious actors should be trained in debating and public engagement, in order to conduct dialogue with young people and various social groups in a way that is persuasive.

Despite the role that religious institutions are expected to play in countering/preventing violent extremism, they remain largely absent from counter-terrorism strategies, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs is hugely under-resourced. It lacks the resources to train imams so that they can perform their important preventive role with young people in general and with young people whose vulnerability to extremism may be higher. One of those interviewed argued that Tunisia is the only Arab-Muslim country that does not have an official institute for training imams and that 65% of the imams in Tunisia did not even have a high school diploma.¹² This indicates that, to date, the state is not investing as it should in the role of the religious institutions in countering/preventing violent extremism policies.

¹² Interview, civil society activist, Research Archive of the Jasmine Foundation.

Methodologies

Stakeholders	Partners	Targeted populations	Implementation Mechanisms	Available Resources	Objectives (countering or prevention)
State institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Defense - The National Counter Terrorism Committee - Government - Parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Those who have or are planning to carry out terrorist acts. - Youth (18-35 years old) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism - Conviction, deterrence and imprisonment (security and judicial mechanisms) - Training workshops in partnership with civil society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International funding. The most prominent: * The United Nations * European Union * Foreign Embassies: Swiss, Dutch, German, French, British, American 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Countering is the first priority. Then prevention
Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International organisations (donors) - Tunisian CSOs - Tunisian research centres - Local associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Young people (18-35 years old) - Women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training workshops - Panel discussions and interviews with experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention
Activists in the religious field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Ministry of Religious Affairs -University Professors at Al Zaytounah University - Religious scholars and imams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Young people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training workshops/training courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publicly funded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention

Existence of critical evaluation systems

The experts and activists interviewed unanimously agreed that programmes to counter/prevent violent extremism lack evaluation by donors, as well as by national CSOs and state institutions. No papers or reports are available publicly or even to professionals explaining the impact achieved by countering/preventing violent extremism programmes at the individual and societal levels, and the challenges they faced.

The absence of evaluation of programmes related to violent extremism is an international problem and not specific to Tunisia. It has been stated in recent reports of international organisations such as the UN and the European Union (EU) that despite the dissemination of a set of guidelines for good practices in countering extremism/violent extremism prevention programmes in recent years, the methods and approaches for assessing the impact of these programmes remain without precise definition. This is due to a number of challenges:

- **Theoretical challenge:** The large number of variables, especially in complex and fragile environments, that can contribute to and influence the outcomes of countering/preventing violent extremism programmes. Hence, knowing and defining the relational links between various fields and involved stakeholders working on violent extremism needs a careful intervention design and the appropriate activities and efforts for each field or actor. The situation is further complicated by the local and contextual nature of the violent extremism drivers.

This analytical challenge requires a set of distinct, valid and accurate indicators to be designed or created for a specific local environment, which measures the impact of countering/preventing violent extremism programmes.

- **The practical challenge:** The sensitivity of the countering/preventing violent extremism programmes on the political level and regarding funding. Civil society actors often complained about the lack of time and funds given to completing the evaluation. On the political level, and for the sake of the security nature of these programmes, constraints on information and data are also reinforced by some international donors' short-term interventions. All of these factors disrupt the programmes and affect their results. Interviewees also pointed out the absence of a framework for those in charge of implementing programmes in order to be able to apply some precise and specialised evaluation methodologies. This demonstrates a gap between the traditional evaluation tools available and new tools being developed for evaluating the impact of programmes, and in particular countering/prevention of violent extremism programmes.

SPECIFIC INITIATIVES ADDRESSED TO WOMEN AND YOUTH

There are numerous countering/prevention violent extremism programmes especially targeting young people, given that they represent the most threatened category of being involved in extremism and most attractive to violent groups. Other programmes focused on women, considering their important role in countering and preventing violent extremism, but programmes and studies targeting women are still limited in Tunisia. Below, we set out examples of programmes designed for youth and women, which are the most cited in domestic media.

Active Citizens (2016-2017)

This was a social activism project carried out by the British Council in partnership with Tunisian CSOs, including the Jasmine Foundation. It was an eight-month programme targeting more than 300 young men and women from six Tunisian governorates. The beneficiaries are from popular neighbourhoods bordering the capital and deprived regions. The programme was based on social leadership training that encourages dialogue, non-formal education and individual and social leadership. Training focused on developing participants'

understanding of active citizenship and their individual roles as citizens, their abilities to design, plan and implement social action projects that address local challenges in their neighbourhoods, mobilise their communities and develop their sense of responsibility and local community so that they can achieve positive social change in their societies. After the training phase, participants were invited to develop and implement social action projects that meet the needs of their neighbourhoods. Therefore, the programme ranged between working on the individual cognitive level, practical skills, and social belonging.

According to the initial objectives, the Jasmine Foundation's evaluation of its own programme showed that it had succeeded in achieving the following goals:

- 300 young people were trained and educated in promoting a culture of peace, principles of citizenship, intercultural dialogue, leadership and social responsibility.
- 278 young people were trained in research methodology to diagnose challenges within their local communities using a participatory approach.
- 42 social action project proposals were submitted to a committee of experts. After their evaluation, 38 projects were approved.
- 35 social work projects were implemented.
- More than 100 partnerships have been signed with public authorities, with an average of three agreements per project.
- Nearly 70 local and national media outlets covered the young participants' social action projects, helping to promote the programme and developing the participants' self-confidence and status as local leaders.

Wise Women Voices against Violent Extremism in Tunisia (2018)

This was a project conducted by the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (Cawtar), in partnership with the National Committee for Countering Terrorism and the US Embassy, with the participation of NGOs and experts. It was a research project aimed at a regional exchange of best practices and learning lessons on gender and combating violent extremism. It also aimed at building dialogue between the main actors and civil society, and launching preventive programmes to confront violent extremism.

The project was implemented through a number of workshops and meetings focused on the phenomenon of extremism, with the aim of identifying the underlying causes and their psychological and social effects, and to find possible solutions and mechanisms to mitigate them. Then, a set of recommendations were aimed at policy-makers on the importance of incorporating a gender perspective to address violent extremism. Among the most important project outcomes are the creation of "Together Against Violent Extremism in Tunisia", a network including CSOs and several government institutions, and the publication of an important review containing recommendations, conclusions and the most important national and regional experiences within the project meetings.

United Tunisians against Extremism and Corruption, A New Generation of Young People of Tunisia Tomorrow (2020)

It is a project launched by the Center for Islam and Democracy in Tunisia in partnership with the Organization for Human Security. The project targeted 400 young people in 10 governorates of Tunisia. The main objective of the project was to combat violent extremist discourse and to train local religious leaders, civil society activists

and young leaders on moderate, comprehensive and contemporary interpretations of Islam based on peace and against violence and extremism, as well as educating the local population, especially young people and families, on the values and benefits of peaceful dialogue and democratic discourse. Participants are receiving training in advocacy, conflict management and citizenship, which they will use to implement initiatives and awareness campaigns in their local communities targeting the general public, after which a competition ceremony will be held to award prizes to the most innovative and effective citizen campaigns.

Conclusion

Observations on the research situation in Tunisia in the subject of violent extremism

- **The combination of levels of analysis:** The reasons/motives for violent extremism can be defined as a combination of ideological, social and personal factors that appear differently from one context to another and from one individual to another. Most studies have dealt with the phenomenon of violent extremism by exploring two or three levels of social analysis (micro/macro/meso), which further complicates the analysis.

We also note that most studies have rejected a direct, mechanical causal relationship between individual or social factors and violent extremism, such as the link between poverty or religion and violent extremism, which was rejected by the numerous studies. The same can be said for social conditions, which can be determinant in pushing some individuals to join extremist groups while not operating in the same way for other individuals.

There is a need to reflect on how to build an ontological relationship between the individual psychological structure and the social structure. Looking at the way in which the individual builds and reviews his or her representations or social perceptions from a set of contradictions such as the social characteristics of the individual, his or her cultural and economic environment, previous experiences and the situations faced might lead to more realistic understandings.

- **Methodological gaps:** The few studies that have adopted a quantitative methodology have not worked on large samples sufficient to reach reliable results for designing public policies. It would be useful to broaden quantitative studies and complete them with other methodologies. It is also noted that experimental studies are rare, and the focus is on the analytical side without the epistemological distinction between levels of analysis.
- **Failing to define the phenomenon:** analysing and addressing the phenomenon of extremism and violent extremism requires a clear definition. This would provide greater clarity for policies and programmes.
- **Limited policies and programmes:** The predominance of hard security approaches in state policies is reflected in state budgets and political discourses on terrorist attacks. In addition, the various state programmes suffer from poor coordination between the key actors, and there is poor communication for these programmes. Furthermore, state policies and programmes are not subject to clear or transparent evaluation methods.
- **Civil society is constrained by funding sources and the absence of national cooperation:** CSOs working on countering or preventing violent extremism are dependent on international donor priorities. If the donor's priority changes, funding in a specific area will be reduced and funds will be allocated to new issues. These changes affect civil society activities and their sustainability in countering/preventing violent extremism, and their ability to build expertise and capacity in core themes. The state is also restricting civil society

activity in this area, as it is linked to sensitive security issues. Tunisian civil society has faced security restrictions when working on the issue of violent extremism due to the continuing closed culture among the security sector. Researchers working on terrorism or violent extremism find it very difficult to gain access to information on sensitive security issues. Furthermore, CSOs lack logistical and financial support from Tunisian state institutions. They have relied heavily on foreign funding when carrying out projects to research or address violent extremism. The Jasmine Foundation carried out extensive interviews with CSOs working on violent extremism in the framework of a previous project, which raised a number of structural challenges facing them in this field:

- Changing priorities of CSOs according to the funding offered by international donors.
 - Adherence to the donor's agenda and amending approaches to understand and counter extremism to fit the donor's vision.
 - The ambiguity of some donors in international/foreign organisations about the goals of their programmes.
 - The ambiguous relationship between specific activities and countering/preventing violent extremism mechanisms.
- **The need to strengthen the role of religious actors:** Government policies in this area remain weak, and there is a significant need to increase training and support for imams to perform their role in communicating with young people and spreading a moderate religious discourse in Tunisian society.

What does the CONNEKT research project bring that is new compared to the research situation in Tunisia?

- **Multidimensional methodology:** CONNEKT's research differs from the research currently available in the Tunisian context in that it adopts a comprehensive multi-layered approach. The research is based on a quantitative-qualitative-experimental methodology that enables better interconnection between the research stages and aims to build a more complete picture of this complex phenomenon.

The CONNEKT research methodology also relies on a research workflow system. Each work package focuses on a single methodological block (quantitative, qualitative or experimental). The research is conducted by a group representing the project partners. Hence, the research is based on specialisation and integration.

- **Multiple variables, different and independent levels of analysis:** CONNEKT's research is based on the largest possible number of variables (religiosity, economic conditions, political ideas and grievances, access to services and leisure opportunities, regional disparities, online consumption and behaviour, and international dynamics), which allows the design of a model of the different contexts of violent extremism. The research is also keen on studying these variables according to the three levels of micro, meso and macro analysis, in order to deconstruct the phenomenon by distinguishing between these different levels, and building a model that seeks to reflect the roles and interaction of these levels.
- **Academic and field integration:** The project seeks to use rigorous research methodologies to understand the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism and transfer findings and recommendations to decision-makers on different levels (local, regional, national), and implement policy interventions involving local authorities and civil society. The CONNEKT project focuses not only on state strategies to prevent violent extremism but also on the community, social and local roles.

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What drives youth to violent extremism? How can they turn from being “the problem” into “the key” for a solution? By engaging youth in the research, CONNEKT will raise young voices to become stakeholders in the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism.

CONNEKT is a research and action project which analyses seven potential radicalisation factors among youth aged between 12 and 30: religion, digitalisation, economic deprivation, territorial inequalities, transnational dynamics, socio-political demands, and educational, cultural and leisure opportunities and evaluates them on three levels: transnational/state, community and individual.

Its aim is to establish a multi-dimensional map of drivers of extremism among youth in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and to identify the interplay between them. Based on the empirical research findings, the project will end up recommending tools and measures for the prevention of violent extremism from a social and community perspective both for the regions of study and the European Union.

Under the coordination of the European Institute of the Mediterranean, (IEMed), the project gathers a multidisciplinary Consortium involving 14 partners from MENA, the EU and the Balkans.



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