



# CONNEKT

## COUNTRY PAPER ON MACRO-LEVEL DRIVERS

Drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism  
in the light of state dynamics in MENA and the Balkans

### TUNISIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism in Tunisia is not considered a new phenomenon as the country experienced a series of violent extremist incidents at various periods before the revolution. With the outbreak of the revolution against the Ben Ali regime, and in the atmosphere of democratic transition, the country witnessed a very changing and eventful climate, including a series of successive violent operations targeting security forces, soldiers and civilians. Although military and security institutions succeeded in dealing with most of these operations, this approach was not a viable solution that breaks with the phenomenon by treating it at its roots. It was necessary to join the efforts of the various state institutions and civil society institutions to address the root causes of the phenomenon rather than only addressing the manifestations of the threat.

This paper seeks to understand the relationship between policies, state institutions involved in countering radicalisation and violent extremism, including their strategic role and their daily routine practices, and the drivers of the phenomena of radicalisation and violent extremism. This understanding is based on an analysis of the results of field research consisting of a group of semi-structured individual interviews with a diverse sample of representatives of state institutions, academics and civil society activists, in addition to a stakeholders' workshop that brought these representatives together. The research outputs were analysed via a qualitative data matrix.

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The paper outlines the role of state institutions in addressing the economic, political and social dynamics that feed the drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism. The paper concludes that the failures of the developmental model in terms of regional and class disparities, and the political grievances caused by the state's exclusion of individuals, groups and regions, represent the main drivers of violent extremism in Tunisia. The analysis of the research outputs also led to an explanation of the limitations to the institutions' role in combating the driving factors of the phenomenon due to the slow pace of change in the approaches followed and the practices of institutions in the context of democratic transition.

The results presented are based on research work done in Tunisia within the framework of a wider research project (CONNEKT: "Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies") aiming to build an integrated map of the drivers of violent extremism (VE) in these regions, in order to achieve effective prevention. The CONNEKT project explores seven factors that are considered potential drivers of VE (not as exclusive drivers but rather as a starting point for research) by analysing them at three levels: the state level, the community level and the individual level, and then looking at the interaction between the three levels. This paper addresses the first analytical level, which is the analysis of state policies and the work of its institutions in connection with the phenomenon within the Tunisian context.

The neo-institutionalism approach is used in order to analyse the impact of institutions and policies on the phenomenon of VE. This approach considers institutions as the locus of influence and change, and therefore explores the effect of the institutional system on the dynamics of change. It also defines the

institution as a set of rules and practices that are arranged and embedded in structures of meaning and resources. On the one hand, these structures are relatively stable in contrast to the high turnover of individual actors, and, on the other, they are relatively flexible with individuals' expectations and changing external circumstances (March and Olsen, 2008).

In this paper, an attempt is made to answer the following two questions:

- What is the role of Tunisian state institutions in preventing and combating the phenomena of radicalisation and VE and their relationship with the factors driving the phenomena?
- What are the most significant macro-drivers<sup>1</sup> of VE in the Tunisian context?

These questions are answered based on an analysis of the results of the qualitative fieldwork conducted by the research team at the Jasmine Foundation for Research and Communication (JFRC) over a period of three months (from December 2020 to March 2021). The research was launched through two exploration focus groups and 20 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with a sample of institutional representatives, academics and civil society actors.

**SEGMENTATION OF PARTICIPANTS IN STAKEHOLDERS' WORKSHOP**

Category of stakeholders	Number of participants
Civil society	6
Academic	2
State institutions	7

This sample represents an important group of parties involved in addressing the phenomenon. Following these interviews, the CONNEKT research team at the Jasmine Foundation engaged a diverse group of stakeholders in a workshop aimed at discussing the results of the one-on-one interviews in order to test the findings and explore their validity further. The workshop also made it possible to collect information from the sample about the role of the seven factors in driving the phenomenon of radicalisation and VE and the degree of influence of each factor on the phenomenon.

After completing the fieldwork, we moved to the stage of analysing the results by placing them in an analytical matrix that contributed to generating correlations and inferences that help understand the drivers of the phenomenon at the macro-level. This analysis enabled us to clarify the role of institutions in mapping the potential drivers of VE by showing the institutional process between the impact of policies and the effect of external conditions on institutional capacity.

<sup>1</sup> The macro level refers here to the level of policies, covering the role of the state and official institutions whose interventions cover the whole of Tunisian territory, understanding that the CONNEKT consortium considers that "macro-level analysis of drivers refers to those push/pull factors that can be identified within the domain of historical trends and at state and supra-state level, sometimes considered structural factors."

**MATRIX OF INTERVIEWS**

	Driver	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	
	Question	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	
<b>Representative of State Institutions</b>	Interview 1								Analysis of role of impact of each driver in VE phenomenon
	Interview 2								
	Interview 3								
	Interview 4								
	Interview 5								
<b>Academics</b>	Interview 6								
	Interview 7								
	Interview 8								
	Interview 9								
	Interview 10								
<b>Representative Civil society</b>	Interview 11								
	Interview 12								
	Interview 13								
	Interview 14								
	Interview 15								
		Analysis of drivers' role/impact by category of stakeholders/institutions							

## INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

This section presents the main state institutions involved in addressing the phenomenon of VE, whose role was highlighted by the stakeholders we contacted during our fieldwork and the institutions covered in our previous report within the framework of the CONNEKT project on approaches to VE in Tunisia (Chrichi, Ghribi and Kherigi, 2020). These are considered the most influential institutions in setting public policies and implementing state programmes related to the phenomenon of VE.

### **PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE: THE NATIONAL COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE**

As part of a national evaluation that took place in Tunisia in 2015, and specifically the evaluation and amendment of the anti-money laundering and terrorist financing framework, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee was created as an institutional structure specialised in countering violent extremism (CVE) within the Prime Minister's Office under Organic Law No. 26 issued in August 2015. The committee was effectively established with the issuance of a governmental decision in March 2016 as its activities were launched in the first meeting chaired by the Prime Minister.

The committee has 22 members who are representatives of ministries and experts. The committee has five main functions: strategic functions (issuing guidelines, analysing data, and contributing to research and studies for more effective legislation and policy measures), organisational functions, awareness-raising tasks, and coordination and advisory functions (Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme, 2020). The National Strategy to Counter Extremism and Terrorism was issued within the National Committee in November 2016, and a group of public structures and civil society actors supervised its preparation. This strategy is based on four pillars: prevention, protection, tracking and response.

As part of its organisational mission, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee has established a set of financial sanctions related to preventing terrorist financing and financing for weapons of mass destruction (Ibid.).<sup>2</sup> In this context, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee issued for the first time, on 9 November 2018, 23 decisions to freeze funds and economic resources held by people associated with terrorism. This decision was the focus of the National Committee's cooperation with the European Union (EU).

One of the most important projects implemented by the Committee in the field of preventing VE is the project "Tarabott: Cohesion to Prevent Violence", which was launched in 2018 and will be concluded in 2021. This project is executed within the framework of the Committee's partnership with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). One of the most prominent points on which this project is based is the promotion of scientific research in the field of prevention as it is built on launching a fund to support local research on preventing radicalisation. The project also seeks to support local associations by financing their initiatives in the field of strengthening the resilience of local communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Through this system, the Committee has contributed to the transfer of Tunisia from the list of "high risk" countries to the list of "controlled" countries.

Among the most prominent recommendations in the field of prevention, which was contained in the first report issued in November 2020 by the National Counter-Terrorism Committee, is to enhance youth participation in national affairs by supporting youth participation in decision-making processes at the local and national levels.

### **MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR: THE SECURITY POLE TO COMBAT TERRORISM AND ORGANISED CRIME**

The Ministry of the Interior supervises the Security Pole to Combat Terrorism and Organised Crime, which was created on 13 October 2014 (which only became operational at the beginning of 2015) on the basis of Decree Number 246 issued on 15 August 2007 Regarding the Revision and Completion of Organising Internal Security Force Structures at the Ministry of Interior and Local Development. The Pole is the only integrated centre in the fight against terrorism in the Arab countries that works on coordination between security, the military, the judiciary, and the administration. It also works on analysing data, formulating forecasts, raising recommendations, and preparing a strategy to prevent against the threat of VE. The Pole has accomplished several projects, including establishing a geographical database, producing national statistics and compiling studies issued by international and national centres, supporting the state in achieving its policies, and activating the principle of positive discrimination in regions where there is a greater risk of extremism. Interventions were also carried out in the entertainment and cultural fields in these regions.

7 It should be noted that the Pole's executive agency demanded the issuance of a ministerial circular that controls the coordination mechanisms between the security pole and the rest of the security structures regarding information exchange. Its request indicated the existence of obstacles to the exchange of information within the ministry. This also pushed those in charge of the Judicial Pole on Combatting Terrorism and Crime to demand for the Pole to have administrative and financial independence in order to be able to complete its projects and carry out the necessary recruitment.

### **MINISTRY OF YOUTH AND SPORTS: THE NATIONAL YOUTH OBSERVATORY (ONJ)**

The "Observatoire National de la Jeunesse" (ONJ) is an institution with administrative and financial independence operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. It has three departments: Youth Observatory, Research and Studies Department, and Media and Documentation Department, in addition to a scientific council with an international cooperation office. The Observatory states that its main task is "listening to young people, monitoring their concerns and aspirations and following them, conducting research and future-oriented studies on the youth sector, and organizing consultations that will be used in preparing development plans." (ONJ, n.d)

One of the most important programmes carried out by the Observatory is the National Youth Survey 2018-2019, which aims to identify the opinions of young people about the phenomenon of violence and their perceptions of its causes while identifying their recommendations to confront it and VE.<sup>3</sup> This is considered the first national survey on youth to include a diagnosis of the phenomena of violence and

<sup>3</sup> It reached 10,000 young people (ages 15-29), distributed over the country's geography, in terms of gender, educational and professional levels (ONJ - UNFPA, 2021).

VE, which was carried out on a large representative sample of youth in Tunisia. Based on an analysis of the data contained in the survey, an analytical study entitled “Youth in the Face of Violence” was issued in partnership between the Observatory and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Tunisia. Within the framework of its partnership with the international organisation Search for Common Ground, in October 2015 the Observatory held a national youth forum with the aim of gathering and engaging young people from all regions of the country in order to formulate and think about proposals and recommendations to prevent the phenomenon of VE by reducing exclusion and strengthening social cohesion (Tuniscoppe, 2018).

### **MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS**

The Ministry of Religious Affairs oversees mosques and imams and religious preachers in Tunisia. One of the most prominent roles played by the Ministry of Religious Affairs to prevent and combat the phenomenon of VE in Tunisia is its role in spreading a moderate religious discourse as an alternative to the violent extremist discourse. In this context, the Ministry has launched a campaign against violent extremist narratives targeting youth on social media. The campaign consisted of launching an electronic portal to spread the correct moderate Islamic values by adopting the moderate Al-Zaytounah Mosque approach. The campaign also included the intensification of lessons in mosques and meetings with young people in different spaces (Al-Jazeera, 2016).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has regularly organised a series of seminars, forums and school days on the issue of preventing violent extremism (PVE) focusing on the centrality of youth in the prevention process. Among these forums we can mention the national seminar “Youth Against Terrorism” (2019), which presented various approaches (intellectual, legal, psychological, social, security, legal, and media). In addition, it has held forums such as the national symposium “The Role of Women in Preventing Violent Extremism” (2018) and the seminar on “Mechanisms to Confront Takfirist Thought and the Need to Upgrade the Religious Affairs Sector”, organised by the Ministry in cooperation with the Higher Institute of Sharia.

Within the framework of the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ strategy on combating extremism, the ministry organised a study day entitled “Religious Tolerance: In Support of Coexistence and Rejecting Extremism” (2017), which affirmed the role of religion in contemporary life and in ensuring spiritual stability.

## MACRO-LEVEL CONTEXT IN TUNISIA

### THE ROLE OF STATE INSTITUTIONS IN ADDRESSING THE DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

One of the most prominent victories of the post-independence state in Tunisia after 1956 and during the first decade of its founding was spreading education, thus enabling social mobility, which led to the expansion of the middle class in society, minimising social inequalities and reducing poverty. However, the shortcomings and limitations of this system in providing job security (a lack of harmony between the specialisations produced by public education and the skills demanded by the labour market) were soon revealed, in addition to the system's inability to formulate an inclusive economic vision and development policies and projects that encompass all regions of the country and develop their resources and areas of potential.

The post-independence state in Tunisia was based on a model of highly centralised governance, which for more than half a century has regulated the state's relationship with all sectors, producing an unbalanced developmental model that gives favour to the centre (the capital and coastal areas) at the expense of the peripheries (the interior regions). It also invests in economic sectors that do not value the capabilities of all regions of the country. The post-independence state also adopted an urban policy that focused on building major cities, neglecting the development of rural areas, which continued to suffer from marginalisation and the absence of development and public services (Work Bank Group, 2014).

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This model was established through the imbalance in the ruling regime's relationship with territory. This centralised model led to clear economic and social disparities between the regions of the country, as public investments, services and economic activities were concentrated in the big coastal cities, which deepened poverty in the interior regions of Tunisia and marginalised them not just on the economic level but also on the political and cultural ones, thus excluding them from decision-making and participation. Economically, this centralised system was characterised by shifting economic policies and models, although these have been characterised by liberalisation and privatisation since the end of the eighties in attempts to make the Tunisian economy open to foreign investment.

Despite the image of openness that the regime was keen to build externally, it adopted laws and procedures that limited competition and restricted private initiative and investment. The Tunisian economy remained monopolised – in terms of production and investment – by state-owned companies exploited by the regime and a small circle of private actors.

This system relied on a developmental model that contributed to limiting wealth creation. This monopolistic model of initiative, production and wealth grew during the Ben Ali regime, when the level of clientelism and patronage deepened. The regime was able to extend its hegemony over state institutions through the monopolistic model, making their work limited to achieving the interests of the ruling circle and its allies through a system of corruption and privileges (Sadiqui, 2011: 7; Lewis, 2011).

With time, the sense of injustice increased among Tunisians, especially educated youth (those with university degrees), who the labour market was unable to absorb and provide with a decent job that ensures dignity. The feeling of injustice has also increased among the general population due to the

severe lack of freedom, transparency and the state's responsibility in achieving social justice. The growing sense of injustice led to the outbreak of a popular revolution in 2010-2011 against a regime that had exhausted its power to fulfil the basic demands of its citizens.

What follows is an analysis, based on the results of field research, of the relationship of the regime's functioning and its impact on state institutions, with the drivers of the phenomenon of radicalisation and VE in Tunisia.

### THE IMPACT OF THE POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE MODEL ON SOCIAL DISPARITIES BETWEEN REGIONS

The institutional mindset in Tunisia continued to operate after the revolution based on the idea of the "prestige" or authority of the state, which derives legitimacy from the post-independence state and governs in a vertical, hierarchical way. In this approach, the state sets a hegemonic model for society, imposing on all citizens to adhere to it (Salhi, 2017). However, as much as that model created high expectations in the minds of Tunisians regarding the role of the state in creating development, providing jobs and improving the quality of their lives, state institutions remained unable to address those needs and meet those expectations with the efficiency and speed needed.

In their answers to our research questions regarding economic and social grievances, academics considered that the absence of the state's role in recognising, treating and dealing with these grievances created a vacuum that formed the basis for the VE discourse. Interviewees from state and civil society institutions<sup>4</sup> mentioned that it is possible to identify several distinctive regions that are more vulnerable to VE discourses. They mentioned for example that this was the case for some regions in central and southern Tunisia, which they had observed during their activities in these regions. They state that they observed a greater degree of readiness to accept the arguments used in extremist discourse. We point out here that almost two-thirds of the surface of these regions belong to "tribes" (عروش) or contains shrines, an area estimated at more than three and a half million hectares out of five million hectares of usable land (Al-Hadi Al-Hajji, 2020). The issue of tribal lands has contributed to deepening regional disparities between territories (Boutaleb, 2002). This was complicated by the fact that these territories were not efficiently managed and the state will not allow communities to manage them themselves.

The post-independence state also established an economic system based on a complex system of authorisations that enabled it to control all economic activity, giving state institutions absolute power and exclusive prerogatives over who can or cannot engage in economic activity through a wide plethora of security, administrative and political limitations. Tedious and long procedures formed a screening process that allowed the exclusion of those who were not loyal to those in power, or were not established economic actors with privileged access to the state, or who had engaged in criticism of state policies or opposition to the regime.<sup>5</sup> This has led to severe restrictions on economic initiatives and produced a continuously

<sup>4</sup> In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament. Tunis, 03/02/2021; In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Culture JFRC office. Tunis, 05/02/2021; and stakeholders' workshop discussion, a male head of a local association, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>5</sup> In-person interview with a male professor in political sociology, Tunis, 01/03/2021.

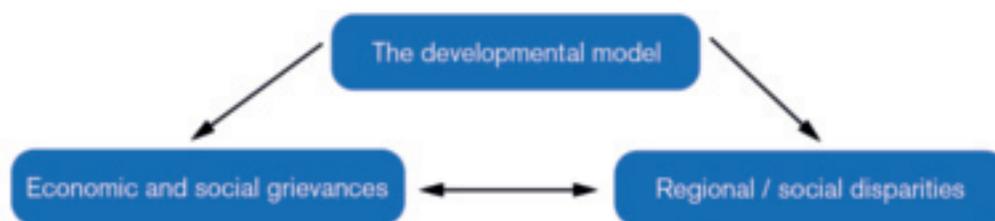
growing field of informal economic activities, sectors and actors (World Bank Group, 2014). These wide informal sectors and actors have spread all over Tunisia particularly during the last 30 years, but they are especially located in the popular neighbourhoods of the capital, the suburbs and the interior regions.

All of this has resulted in a precarious situation for a large number of those who are engaged in informal economic activity, especially those from marginalised neighbourhoods around the capital, and those adjacent to major coastal cities, in addition to populations that migrated to the capital from the centre-west and south.<sup>6</sup> The marginalised areas suffer from poor infrastructure – inherited from the colonial era – and this structure directly affects access to education, culture and entertainment, which further exacerbates the impact of regional disparities. The interviews with the representatives of official institutions during our research confirmed these main features of the development model and all more or less agreed on the impacts of the aforementioned policies on excluding large swathes of society. It is worth noting that the state policies, administrative procedures and institutional rules described above operate in Tunisia not just as ways for organising economic activities, but also as a form of control over society (March and Olsen, 2008). This resulted in building a social and political exclusion system, whereby an ever-growing number and variety of social groups were pushed into marginality (out of the official arenas formally recognised by the state) and in successive waves, thus transforming this marginal flow into the mainstream, not just in the economy but also in the whole of society in culture, and in politics. In the last 30 years this has built a system of production and reproduction of marginalisation, where not just individuals but also entire territories, social groups and regions have become victims of exclusion and deprivation. This was exacerbated by the use of state authority to curtail dissent and participation in proposing alternative policies, transforming the country into a dictatorship underneath the Eldorado façade that the regime tried to project.

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At the basis of this marginalisation and deprivation system we find a set of factors and dynamics that could be schematically represented by a triangle, whose elements are: regional disparities, economic and political grievances, and the vertical and hierarchical implementation of the developmental model in all fields, which contributed to the construction of a rentier state, society and culture.

**FIGURE 1.** Marginalisation and deprivation system in Tunisia



Own production

<sup>6</sup> Online interview with the head (male) of a local cultural association, 19/01/2021; and stakeholders' workshop discussion, male representative of a local association working on security, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

## THE EFFECTS ON POLICY APPROACHES ON INSTITUTIONS

These failures of the state in upholding its promises to promote development and social justice gradually led to the erosion of its political legitimacy not just within society but also, in a subtle and gradual way, within state institutions themselves. Some of the interviewees spoke about the erosion of the foundational principles on which the administration had been constructed, as the state was no longer able to play a role in assuring the economic and social integration of all segments of society. The slogans, objectives and principles of the post-independence state were emptied of meaning, leaving a gap in institutional culture gradually filled by alternative logics stemming from non-official collective interpretations of members of the administration informed by new informal rules based on self-interest and clientelism as well as non-compliance with orders except in their formal sense.

Some of the representatives of the institutions that we interviewed attributed the ineffectiveness of state institutions in managing public affairs in the last decade before the revolution to problems within the administration, which are problems that occurred in the relationship between political decision-makers and the administration, resulting in flaws in executing policies and transforming them into a tangible reality.<sup>7</sup> One of the respondents attributes the beginning of the disruption of the relationship to the decade before the revolution, as this period, especially the last five years, witnessed the collapse of confidence of the administration in the legal system and the founding rules.<sup>8</sup> As one respondent put it: "The administration no longer went along with authoritarian political decisions."

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This collapse of confidence led to the formation of new administrative behaviours (Ouannes, 2010) represented in rejection and reluctance to implement orders from the highest levels of the state to the administration and translate them into routine practices.

The recurrence of this behaviour produced a pattern that continued in the 10 years after the revolution, which was exacerbated, as explained by other interviewees, by the absence of a new clear institutional culture, norms and rules matching the new democratic legitimacy of the state (after the revolution), as no change was observed on the level of daily institutional and administrative practices, as well as in terms of the performance of public services.

## INSTITUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

After the revolution, the administration faced a flurry of demands for change in its traditional practices, which made those inside the administration become aware of these demands. This could be seen in the responses of the administration's and state institutions' representatives when asked about the problems in their institution's handling of the phenomenon of VE, which provoked very animated discussions about the importance of change inside the administration.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Culture, JFRC office, Tunis, 05/02/2021; In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021; In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry, Tunis, 15/12/2020.

<sup>8</sup> In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021.

<sup>9</sup> Noted in all interviews with representatives of state institutions and particularly in stakeholders' workshop, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

*The contradiction between policies and daily practices in Countering Violent Extremism*

Most of the representatives of state institutions<sup>10</sup> in the interviewed sample consider that the state apparatus is undergoing transformation, but in the form of a difficult labour process or a very slow transformation, to the point that external observers think that little is changing. These transformations affect the practices and behaviours of the technical staff of the administration and the policies followed. Below we will explain these transformations based on the analysis of the data gathered.

It is noticeable that new policy approaches are often based on recommendations from international organisations, but without adapting the policy to the nature of the institution’s practices and rules. Similarly, the required policy change is not supported by an authentic change in institutional working rules in a manner that fits the objectives expected from the recommendations or the implementation of policies. As one of the respondents put it: “To implement project A, for example, affiliated to a donor... an order is issued to the administration for implementation. You find that senior administrative officials have no understanding of the approach and the phenomenon, and sometimes even the minister has no understanding so he passes the matter – that is, disposes of it – to the administrative bureaucracy – of course the “old one”, which is the same administration that was part of the former regime – so a conflict of behaviours occurs between the technical side (of the administration) and the new approach.” However, the interviewee still thinks that slow change is taking place despite this affirmation: “I believe there is a relative change happening as accumulative action generates fundamental change.”

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Moreover, it appears that the policies and approaches adopted in institutions are based on a weak understanding of the phenomenon and the absence of clear rules of practice, in addition to a clear lack of responsibility by decision-makers, leaving assessment of the phenomenon to bureaucratic officials. One of the interviewees thus claims that: “The technical side is purely security-focused. A protocol on how to behave in the case of protests is the same in the whole world. A political order comes to control the protests. The protocol is used according to the practices dictated... The result is repression.”<sup>11</sup> This results in the same mechanisms of communication continuing to be used with the public, with youth and social groups who articulate social and economic demands as institutions continue to translate various and different approaches into the same traditional practice.

On the other hand, efforts to design a comprehensive and participatory preventive approach (for example involving culture) between the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and other ministries (like the Ministry of Culture) do not yield clear structures to translate objectives into realistic and sustainable initiatives. The interviewees stated that this could be explained by the fact that the bureaucracy is accustomed to ambiguity, within an institution or between institutions, in converting political decisions into regulatory orders and work outputs. This is how, for example, one of the interviewees describes this tendency: “They organised a session in order to combine efforts to find a comprehensive preventive approach but, as usually happens, we do not find the structures that will work on that.”

<sup>10</sup> In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021; In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry, Tunis, 15/12/2021; In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, JFRC office, Tunis, 08/01/2021 ; In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Culture, JFRC office, Tunis, 05/02/2021.

<sup>11</sup> In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry, Tunis, 15/12/2021.

In addition, the interviewees indicated that the necessary data to be able to implement policies is not always readily available to members of the administration, and not just to the general public who have a right to access information. A bureaucratic internal system continues to monopolise information and limits sharing it even internally,<sup>12</sup> which is indicated by the absence of mechanisms of access to data as well as of the necessary mechanisms that translate political will in the form of structures tasked with follow-up of the policy implementation and of the relevant rules and routine practices within the state apparatus (March and Olsen, 2008). This situation results in a lack of effectiveness, in addition to the lack of inter-agency communication (that is, between the various institutions), and contributes to producing structural vacuums that curtail policy implementation, with inadequate procedural arrangements weakening executive bodies and limiting intervention to a purely formalistic approach that is not conducive to producing preventive impacts that address the factors driving the phenomenon of VE.

As for implementing programmes, the mandatory rules of the administration take a vertical hierarchical form, whereby programmes are set from the top to the bottom. As one of the interviewees puts it: “I coordinate with the regional branches of the Ministry of Culture ... [political orders are issued down from the centre] ... and then we inform the localities in the region [a policy of indirect communication].”<sup>13</sup> Thus, it becomes clear to us that the administration adopts the participatory approach only as a slogan and theme, but the rules and practices are still subject to the traditional mentality, as administrative arrangements have not been adapted according to new approaches.

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In light of the aforementioned unsuitability of post-revolution policies in preventing and combating VE with the bureaucratic mode of execution (based on implementing orders), we note the decline in the role of routine administrative practices in achieving an impact and addressing the phenomenon. This weakens the capacity of institutions even more than in the past. The old approach, even if limited (due to its hierarchical and centralised nature), was previously achieving its goals effectively due to harmony between political decisions and the rules of practice within the administration, meaning that previous policy approaches developed rules of practice that were consistent with its approach. But it is no longer equally effective as it is faced with a contradiction between the still effective “old” institutional culture and the new comprehensive and participatory policy approaches. Thus, policies and political decision-making after the revolution have been operating within a system of old working rules developed in a very different context and based on an old approach to combating the phenomenon of VE focused on the sole use of “hard power”.

This is evident in the technical implementation tools used, which appear to contribute to creating an atmosphere that feeds VE, and transforms these implementation tools into an obstacle or hindrance to responding to the security needs of citizens and society and even sometimes turning them into tools for serving the interests of “clients”. This means that the belief in the need for change expressed by bureaucratic officials does not find, in response, any substitute for the old institutional practices and

<sup>12</sup> Here, we can refer to stakeholders’ workshop discussion, a female representative of a state institution according to a situation he went through: “For example, I stayed late after work for a meeting with the head of the minister’s cabinet... I didn’t meet him and I couldn’t even reach him.” Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>13</sup> In-person interview with a female representative of culture ministry, JFRC office, Tunis, 05/02/2021.

regulations or, at a minimum, the appropriate guidelines for translating political will into new institutional norms and practices.

#### *The contradictory roles of institutions in Countering Violent Extremism*

Many representatives of the institutions interviewed considered, based on their experiences, that the policy adopted by state institutions of supporting the role of civil society in CVE is not consistent with the desired goals of prevention and control. For example, grants are awarded on the basis of the population of the target region, which is a criterion that takes into account quantity rather than quality, meaning that it does not give priority to the most vulnerable groups and those in need of support. The respondents also considered that the quality of the programmes and activities presented according to this criterion, in addition to their number, do not meet the needs of these regions, which contradicts what was stipulated in the 2014 Constitution regarding the necessity of achieving positive discrimination for regions that suffer from low development indicators. Consequently, the criteria adopted are inconsistent with the intended goal of CVE.

On the other hand, some of the interviewees indicated that the relationship between international donors and civil society is often governed by ideological considerations rather than objective ones, which leads to the exclusion of many civil society organisations (CSOs) from receiving such funds in the field of culture, whose distribution is supervised and overseen by various ministries. Some interviewees also considered that donors' policy of requiring partial self-funding or withholding funding until after proof of expenditure intimidated and excluded many associations. It is useful to point out here that the inequalities and inconsistencies in funding criteria and other policies relating to VE are not limited to the intervening institutions that this research covers, but are rather problems that most ministries that are working to confront the phenomenon suffer from.

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Through the aforementioned, we note that institutions, instead of solving problems related to the phenomenon, deepen them, as they contribute to reproducing and creating disparities between regions and social groups when it comes to access to culture and entertainment through the unfair distribution of funds and projects that aim to address VE.

On the other hand, other interviewees pointed out the issue of school dropouts whose number reached more than a million students without ever receiving any integration or coaching.<sup>14</sup> The streets have turned into an incubator of crime, delinquency and addiction for them due to lack of alternatives and the weaknesses of public programmes efficiently addressing this issue and capable of supporting children and adolescents' case by case. In the same context, another interviewee<sup>15</sup> confirmed that the majority of young people who are detained in prisons and correctional facilities come from marginalised urban spaces where social and family ties are experiencing collapse resulting in early dropout from school. The respondent added that nearly two-thirds of the inmates in correctional facilities, who are children and adolescents, do not last long outside before returning to prison with new and more

<sup>14</sup> In-person interview with a male doctor working with young drugs addicts and civil society activist on the issue of drugs addiction amongst youth and youth delinquency, Tunis, 20/01/ 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Stakeholders' workshop, male representative of a public agency managing the prisons and rehabilitation system, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

dangerous convictions. The education system as well as prison institutions thus appear to constitute “incubators of violence” as they fail to strengthen youth resilience to violence and provide solutions of social integration and positive socialisation for youth in urban communities that are stricken with poverty, crime and marginalisation.

State institutions appear in the interviewees’ testimonies as being unable to support young people or invest in their future, particularly in regions where the state is absent in terms of basic services, culture, entertainment, and jobs. This gap between state and society has widened until its members lose their sense of belonging, which is replaced by strong feelings of resentment and expressed in their rejection of symbols of authority and of official mainstream culture and processes.

#### *Lack of coordination: Separate Strategies and Action Plans*

Most of the interviewees stated that mechanisms and forms of cooperation and coordination between institutions and individuals concerned with VE do not exist. However, a small number of the interviewees tried to relativise this, recalling some unsuccessful attempts or initiatives such as the “Alternative Narratives Platform”.

It should be noted here that this platform, which was supposed to collect civil society initiatives working on producing alternative narratives to VE (Espace Manager, 2019) was not open to all the actors who are implementing projects or actions in this field as it was revealed that several actors, including the representatives of religious institutions, were not aware of the platform.

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In addition, one of the experts interviewed considered that the National Committee for Countering Terrorism, which was supposed to play the role of coordinating efforts between the various actors and institutions working on VE, did not possess the tools required to fulfil this role. This committee in fact suffers from insufficient material resources and lacks authority over the various institutions. “Ministries are like an archipelago in which every island is isolated from the other,” according to a researcher from an official public research institution explaining that public institutions do not share information with each other or cooperate with researchers.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the interviewees considered that forms of cooperation, even where they exist, are so weak that they do not have any impact, citing the duplication of similar programmes in many ministries, which is a waste of money, effort and time.<sup>17</sup> It was also evident to us, through the interviewees’ comments,<sup>18</sup> that ministries have very strong sectorial divisions and identities, which contributes to the emergence of values that weaken synergy in implementing common visions and policies.

<sup>16</sup> The researcher cites the refusal of ministries to give access to information to him. Stakeholders Workshop, male researcher in the strategic research center officially affiliated to the Presidency of the Republic, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>17</sup> Stakeholders workshop discussion, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND THE TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

A number of institutional representatives<sup>19</sup> focused on political instability throughout the last decade in Tunisia, since the country has seen 10 governments in 10 years. This, they argued, has resulted in obstacles to implementing political decisions and government initiatives aimed at combating VE. In addition, the action plans for these initiatives and their communication tools have not been updated in line with changes to VE.

The absence of institutional mechanisms ensuring continuity and communication, particularly important when there are changes to government – caused dysfunction and paralysis of state institutions. One of the interviewees explains that: “projects that are in progress are suspended [when there is a change in political leadership] so that the new official has enough time to take stock of the issues, tasks and data from the start.”<sup>20</sup> The frequent changes in institutional leadership have resulted in executive delays, as implementation and monitoring strategies are repeatedly changed according to the changing visions of new officials. This situation may sometimes even reach the point of suspending the flow of resources in order to avoid allegations of misconduct or corruption, causing effective paralysis of the flow of processes, which is exacerbated by a lack of readiness and flexibility in finding solutions.

Moreover, many of the interviewees stressed the role of another obstacle to institutional efficiency. Several of them highlighted that very often state officials adopt a policy of seeking to strike a balance between the actors within the administration in order to reduce conflict and obstructionism in the institutional environment. The effects of this power struggle among actors within the administration disrupt the implementation of orders for the sake of political considerations and interests. Thus, rather than being shaped by the objective of achieving specific goals, policies are shaped and constrained by these attempts to create a balance between influential actors such as trade unions, directors, party leaders and their respective constituencies. In addition, an opportunistic culture has spread within state institutions, as bureaucrats see projects as a way to gain personal interests and attain privileges that have become more widely accessible since 2011.

In the new context, shaped by the political transformations of the democratisation process, state institutions have adopted a mixture of innovative and traditional approaches. The new approach incorporates practices and concepts based on the 2014 Constitution, including “positive discrimination” in favour of deprived regions, and “free initiative” to adapt the economy to the development needs of the country. However, the translation of these approaches into laws and orders, as well as their implementation, is proving to be slow and insufficient.

As for old classical approaches, these are still in operation through the persistence of a traditional institutional culture, which continues to implement old administrative procedures. Thus, managing changes to public administration is governed by this tension between the progressive new principles enshrined in the 2014 Constitution (such as participatory approaches and preventive approaches based

<sup>19</sup> Stakeholders’ workshop discussion, a male representative of the National Youth Observatory (ONJ); a male representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs; and a female representative of the Ministry of Culture, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>20</sup> In-person interview with a male representative of the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Inclusion, JFRC office, Tunis, 28/01/2021.

on the concept of human security in CVE, and the traditional approach based on rigid rules and tools that adopt a very hierarchical and vertical approach to implementing policies, creating lack of communication between state institutions, and with other actors.

### **THE HARD SECURITY APPROACH AS THE CENTRE OF CVE STRATEGIES**

The respondents in both the focus groups and the individual interviews<sup>21</sup> considered that the state has directed most of its capacities and resources towards a hard security approach. Seven out of 10 interviewees considered that the state relies on a purely hard security approach to CVE. One of them justified this as being an approach that speeds up the elimination of this phenomenon, and is the least expensive approach compared to a more comprehensive one involving many stakeholders. In their responses to questions concerning institutional working patterns, they estimated that throughout the post-revolution period, institutions have been content with a pre-emptive military approach in confronting the phenomenon on the ground, thus neglecting the development of a multi-level preventive policy.

The academics interviewed attribute this to a limited understanding of the phenomenon, despite the state's cooperation with researchers, although they emphasised that this involvement does not result in the translation of research into policies. A civil society representative also considered that had it not been for international partners' support and funding of CVE and PVE projects, Tunisia would have suffered from a much higher number of VE attacks, since the state does not provide support to civil society to carry out this type of work. However, representatives of security institutions surprisingly considered civil society to be best placed to carry out preventive measures against the phenomenon due to the weak level of trust between state institutions (especially security institutions) and society, especially among youth.

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Some civil society interviewees attribute the dominance of the hard security approach over the comprehensive approach to the institutional culture in Tunisia, which is built on a repertoire of practices that rely on hard security solutions in various fields to impose authority and manage social, economic and political demands. This has caused the state to lose the ability to communicate with the various actors in other ways, resulting in an inability to develop its programmes and make them effective on the ground. The researchers interviewed argue that the hard security approach contributes to legitimising violent extremist discourse. The use of legitimate violence – that is, by the state – whether correctly or incorrectly, creates justifications for the practice of violence by young people in response to violence by the security forces against them. We find these arguments and justifications clearly expressed in street art, music and the songs of soccer fans, which frequently express grievances against treatment by the security forces. Thus, this hard security approach contributes to building the susceptibility of a wider group to accept and embrace violent extremist discourse and its key elements and logics.

Most of the interviewees stated that the hard security approach that has dominated CVE policies before and after the revolution is mainly based on addressing the violence used and those who use it, while neglecting the conditions in which extremist ideology and discourse flourish. Thus, the state only addresses the phenomenon through judicial processes and sanctions. Some laws even stipulate prison

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<sup>21</sup> The consensus among respondents was that most efforts are focused on a hard security strategy.

sentences for those who express admiration for violent extremist speech on social media. Minors who expressed such support on social media have indeed been subject to imprisonment.

Some representatives of state institutions and academics believe that it is logical to confront and prevent violent acts by using violence but that extremism, as a broader phenomenon, cannot be confronted with violence because "extremism is a distorted set of ideas, and it is the result of living conditions that encourage the emergence and spread of such ideas... These ideas are based on reward. This is the reality of living conditions. After interacting with this reality, these ideas adapt according to the grievances or sense of inferiority of each individual, so that he adopts extremist ideology, and in the end, it gives him an ideology that requires the practice of violence."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In-person interview with a female professor at Zaytounah University and senior researcher working on the analyses of violent extremism discourse, Tunis, Higher Institute of Islamic Civilization, 23/02/2021.

## DRIVERS

### MANAGING RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS: BETWEEN RESTRICTIONS AND LAXITY

Some interviewees, especially those who defined the phenomenon of VE from a historical point of view, consider that the phenomenon has to be linked to global crises. One interviewee stated: "With the crisis in the 1960s, there were some armed leftist movements that represented VE" and mentioned the division of the left into political movements and cross-border armed movements.<sup>23</sup> According to this understanding, the world witnesses the emergence of radicalisation with every crisis. In the same context, the Arab revolutions came as an extension of a crisis that Arab societies had been living in their relationship with their regimes, which are experiencing regional transformations and major transnational dynamics. This leads to viewing terrorist movements as a manifestation of the current crisis in the region and in its relationship with the international system. With the latest crisis in modern societies, radicalism is this time dressed up in Islamic garb, or "the Islamisation of radicalism." (Roy, 2017).

Despite this so-called "Islamisation", what is remarkable is that, as many interviewees observed, those who are recruited by violent extremist groups do not possess significant religious knowledge and are not practising (i.e., committed to obligatory acts of worship such as fasting and prayer). This is confirmed by studies showing that non-practising youth represent the bulk of the target groups of extremist recruiters (Hassaini, 2018).<sup>24</sup> One of the interviewees from the Ministry of Religious Affairs<sup>25</sup> also cited a study according to which six years of religious education is effective in creating resilience against the discourse used by terrorists when seeking to recruit members (Scientific American, 2017). Another academic interviewed<sup>26</sup> indicated that rather than being related to an interpretation of religion, VE reflects the lived reality (or social and economic conditions) of members of extremist groups (Kepel, 2015), as well as a particular interpretation of their positioning within the national and international political contexts. He explains that discourse analysis shows that at the basis of the religious views adopted by VE groups justifying violence we find perceptions of grievances, injustices and inequalities blamed on the subordination and subservience of the ruling regime in the country to the "West" (or "the infidel West" as extremist groups call it) and explains this subordination as being due to "Muslims not practising their religion", thus creating a political narrative (Fottorino, 2015).

In support of the argument that vulnerability to recruitment by terrorist and violent extremist groups is higher among those with limited religious knowledge, a representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs who was interviewed stated that, throughout its history, Tunisia has generated a moderate understanding of religion, which was produced by Al-Zaytounah Mosque. These teachings were opposed to the doctrines of Takfirism, which is considered to be the ideological basis of religious extremism. Other interviewees affiliated to the Religious Affairs Ministry also confirmed that Takfirism emerged in Tunisia during a period

<sup>23</sup> In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament and specialist in psychology, Tunis, 15/02/2021.

<sup>24</sup> The author mentions that 82% of those targeted by terrorist recruiters are not religious individuals.

<sup>25</sup> Stakeholders' workshop discussion, a male representative from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>26</sup> In-person interview with a male senior researcher in a government research agency, and formerly at the Strategic Research Center officially affiliated with the Presidency of the Republic, Tunis, 20/12/2020.

when mainstream religious teaching and discourse were severely restricted due to secularisation policies adopted by the state. They argue that this discourse was also emptied of its practical dimensions that relate to lived reality, causing a spiritual void, the absence of clear religious references and the collapse of young people's trust in the religious establishment, which was co-opted by the regime. One of the interviewees also considered that social media and new communication technologies had enabled the spread of extremist discourse at a speed that exceeded the speed of the response to it. He considered that the religious establishment had not received sufficient support to enable it to compete with this extremist discourse, which enjoys sophisticated and large-scale production and dissemination methods.

### THE STAKES DRIVING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

When analysing the map of regional disparities and linking it to the regions most concerned with the phenomenon of VE that the interviews raised, we can notice a clear correspondence between them. The participants to a stakeholders' roundtable agreed that there is a strong correlation between regional disparities and the geographical distribution of social injustice and inequalities, on the one hand, and VE in Tunisia, on the other. The areas most affected by VE are the same areas where basic public services (as well as cultural facilities) are particularly poor. The state is only present in these areas through symbols of legitimate violence: police stations and a hard security presence.

In addition to this, it is noticeable that these areas also have high rates of school dropouts (Boukhars, 2017; ADO+, 219). We observe similar regional inequalities when it comes to educational opportunities and attainment, access to leisure facilities and cultural activities, and the resulting sense of injustice and deprivation, which affect mainly the interior regions as well as marginalised neighbourhoods in the capital. Although most of the stakeholders participating in the research agreed that these regional disparities and social injustices draw a map of social exclusion that is at the root cause of radicalisation and VE, some of them<sup>27</sup> thought that social exclusion and social grievances are not necessary conditions for radicalisation and VE. They think that this can be proven by the fact that several persons who were drawn to VE and were caught into its webs in Tunisia are actually from affluent families and neighbourhoods as well as being high academic achievers or from highly skilled professions. As one of the participants explains based on a conclusion drawn from the "Alternative Narratives" platform project (Amouri, 2019), the attraction to extremist rhetoric extends beyond economically or socially marginalised classes or regions: "The image of the Islamic State was impressive and attractive by responding to the psychological pressure and frustration young people go through... These groups' discourse on social media provided a sense of emotional fulfilment for youth by promoting a sense of belonging."<sup>28</sup>

Based on the aforementioned, we conclude that the driving factors for engagement in extremist groups took two forms:

The first form are community-level drivers linked to geographical disparities, evidenced by the overlap between high prevalence of VE and the map of social, economic and developmental inequalities. One study confirms that "three quarters of people who have been radicalised are from interior regions,"

<sup>27</sup> Stakeholders' workshop discussion, Tunis, 02/03/2021.

<sup>28</sup> In person interview with a female representative of women Ministry of Women, Family and Children, JFRC office, Tunis, 08/01/2021.

(Hassaini, 2018) which shows that collective or community-level issues are the most important drivers of the phenomenon in the Tunisian case without neglecting individual-level drivers. According to one of the academics interviewed, “the threat of VE still exists – even though the frequency of the phenomenon has decreased, this does not mean the decline of the phenomenon overall. It always finds arguments according to different issues and grievances related to the conditions of the regions”<sup>29</sup> and that is why prevention is key to CVE.

As for individual-level drivers, they are affected by factors such as digitalisation (modern technology and the means of communication it provides), which makes it easier for extremist groups to reach all social categories, either by targeting specific accounts or through social media strategies to attract certain types of individuals. Digitalisation is not a collective driver but rather increases the appeal of VE to some individuals, according to many of the interviewees.

### MAP OF DRIVERS

We noticed that most of the surveyed sampled agree that the seven factors that the CONNEKT project is testing are factors that drive extremism and VE, but their assessment of the relative importance of these drivers varied. When looking at the geographical distribution of the interviewees, whether based on the place where they work, carry out their activities or their regional origins, it becomes evident that the variation in their assessment of the relative importance of different drivers is related to the different social conditions and historical legacies of the interviewees’ regions.

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Based on the statements by the state officials, academics and civil society representatives interviewed, we can conclude that there are four distinct regions when it comes to views on the relative importance of different drivers in the phenomenon of VE, as follows:

- the Centre West;
- the South;
- marginalised areas of the governorate of Bizerte; and
- low-income neighbourhoods of the capital.

In these regions, the drivers of VE vary according to the different social conditions and geographical and historical legacies, as described in further detail below.

### DEVELOPMENTAL DEPRIVATION AS A DRIVER IN THE CENTRE WEST

Several participants who had closely studied individual cases of radicalisation highlighted the readiness of young people in particular regions to accept radical narratives. Cases in the North West and Centre West (e.g., Kasserine) of Tunisia were given as an example of this acceptance and readiness to view these narratives as legitimate. This acceptance was linked to the socio-economic grievances that these regions suffer from through the lack of opportunities, acute absence of access to basic social rights (employment, good public services, infrastructure, etc.) and hence the existence of collective grievances and strong feelings of exclusion from the centre (the capital and the state).

<sup>29</sup> In-person interview with a male senior researcher at International NGOs focusing his research on ethnographic analysis of the VE phenomenon, Tunis, 11/12/2020.

In this context, the willingness to accept radical narratives is not based on “Takfirism” or religious ideology but is instead rooted in narratives of material grievances and the desire for revenge against the central state. Regional disparities, which amplify social grievances and feelings of injustice, appear to be at the heart of what drives youth towards anger and hostility towards the state. The individuals recruited by extremist groups also find opportunities for individual validation and social integration in these groups, which provide financial support, a sense of self-esteem and embeddedness in new types of community.

The impact of the acute absence of services and of development in these areas, which is perceived as an absence of the state, is also exacerbated by the proximity of the Centre West and Northwest regions to the borders (International Crisis Group, 2013), resulting in the intersection of the interests of smugglers and terrorists (Ben Yahia, 2019).

### **THE SOUTH, THE PROCESS OF COLLECTIVE GRIEVANCES**

The geographical mapping of VE in Tunisia also identified the South as another particularly affected region (Meddeb, 2020). The history of collective political grievances that the region experienced extend to the beginnings of the post-independence state. They stem from long standing economic and developmental grievances, which shape the historical relationship between the state and this region. Just as in the Northwest, regional disparities, a sense of socio-economic exclusion, and the absence of policies that attempt to address these grievances all contribute to strengthening feelings of social injustice and marginalisation.

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The perception of marginalisation of their region and the absence of development therein is exacerbated by the concentration of a great number of multinational and foreign oil companies in the region, exploiting that resource without any economic and developmental return for the residents. This creates the perfect soil in which a sense of injustice intersects with the political narratives of terrorist groups “calling for the fight against the state that deals with faithless companies plundering their wealth.”<sup>30</sup> The region’s proximity to the conflict areas in Libya (Fahmi and Meddeb, 2015) also contributes to attracting young people to the dream of a fair state based on “the justice of Islamic law,” which confirms the importance of the cross-border factor as a clear contributor to the attraction process (International Crisis Group, 2014).

### **MENZEL BOURGUIBA, BIZERTE**

In addition to the two previous regions, another region was frequently identified by the stakeholders who participated in this research: the rural and interior areas of the governorate of Bizerte, most notably the city of Menzel Bourguiba. Analysis of the roots of radicalisation drivers there reveals the history of a failed economic development policy in the city through industrialisation and neglect of the agricultural and maritime economic potential coupled with the artificial urban design and building of the city around the steel industry during colonial times and in the first decades after independence, in ways that created social divisions and a very weak sense of social solidarity or community. Steel companies, which began abandoning the city with the decline of their industry, left deep environmental, social and economic impacts on the local community. Weak social ties between inhabitants of the city coming from all over the

<sup>30</sup> In-person interview with a male professor in political sciences whose research focuses on the political economy and drivers of conflicts across the MENA region, Tunis, 07/01/2021.

country to work in the steel industry and the absence of public services have weakened families' ability to provide the basic necessities for their children, contributing to making the town amongst the most affected by crime and violence in the country.

Several respondents confirmed that radical groups have found in criminal groups a good ally for their activities, with criminal and radical networks closely intersecting in the city. Security forces have frequently tracked criminals who transform themselves into terrorists or leaders of terrorist groups. The most important social drivers of criminality thus become also drivers of radicalisation and vulnerability to VE, adding religious cover as justification of violence and VE to the usual criminal pathways to facilitate access to money and social status.

### **DRIVING FACTORS IN THE URBAN SPACE**

Low-income neighbourhoods in the capital Tunis also suffer from social inequalities and marginalisation that have caused different tensions. These extreme inequalities in infrastructure, economic opportunities and services between neighbouring districts contribute to fuelling violence and weakening social cohesion, all of which provide fertile ground for perceptions of marginalisation and injustice, exacerbated by exclusion despite closeness to the centre of power. The feelings of exclusion and resentment (*hogra*) are heightened in this urban context where young people display the highest levels of frustration towards state institutions and symbols of power, especially towards security forces. This is expressed through acts of violence, but also slang, graffiti and underground music. Psychologists and representatives of state institutions responsible for youth rehabilitation highlighted the fact that as young people from these areas feel rejected by state institutions (educational, correctional, economic, etc.), they in turn reject these institutions, and become perfect prey for criminal and VE networks. Radical narratives become attractive in this context to many youths living in these conditions, who are spatially confined to these areas due to harassment by police who stop them in other neighbourhoods or in the centre of the capital and order them to leave.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, extremist narratives draw their acceptability in the eyes of youth from the failure of the traditional developmental model in the country, as well as of the authoritarian state, which contributed to the lack of both basic human security and social justice. In contrast, extremist narratives create hope for the possibility of individual and collective salvation through the justice of Islamic law and the attractiveness of the image of the strong Islamic state and as well as of heroism through the figure of the "Jihadi". This sense of strong heroism compensates for and promises to replace individual and collective feelings of inferiority and marginalisation. This narrative also derives its appeal from extremist groups' provision of financial support and opportunities to earn a livelihood and social protection within informal networks. Therefore, the VE narrative appears as an alternative that provides solutions to the failure of developmental policies in the urban sphere and compensates for the absence of real, effective and successful economic and social policies (as well as in the fields of education and culture) that invest in human security in its multiple and interrelated dimensions.

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<sup>31</sup> National ID cards, which can be requested by police officers in public, state the holder's place of residence.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of fieldwork results shows that the seven factors that CONNEKT is testing are present as drivers of VE in the Tunisian context. These factors are linked directly or indirectly, interacting within the framework of a very centralised political model. In what follows we present a summary of the role of the impact of each factor in the Tunisian context.

### **Territorial Inequalities**

The imbalance between state policies and territorial planning results in clear economic, cultural and social disparities between the regions of the country. Many research participants mentioned that the map of regional disparities overlaps with the regions most affected by the phenomenon of VE. Interviewees and participants in the stakeholder's workshop revealed that there is a strong correlation between regional disparities and the geographical distribution of social injustice and inequalities, on the one hand, and VE in Tunisia on the other.

### **Socio-political Demands**

Research participants' responses to the question of the role played by socio-political demands considered that the weak role of the state in managing and responding to these claims created an environment that favours the emergence and dissemination of narratives of VE. This factor also relates to the issue of regional inequalities, as socio-political grievances are particularly concentrated in poorer interior regions, which witness the highest levels of protest and social contestation. The post-independence state in Tunisia was based on a model of highly centralised governance that deepened poverty in the interior regions in Tunisia and marginalised them not just on the economic level but also on the political and cultural ones, thus excluding them from decision-making and participation.

### **Economic Exclusion**

Despite the image of openness that the regime was keen to build externally by making the Tunisian economy open to foreign investment since the seventies, the regime adopted laws and procedures that limited competition and restricted private initiative and investment. The Tunisian economy remained monopolised – in terms of production and investment – by state-owned companies exploited and mismanaged by the regime and a small circle of private actors close to those in power. This system contributed to limiting wealth creation. The post-independence state also established an economic system based on a complex system of authorisations that restrict access to economic activity through a wide plethora of security, administrative and political restrictions. These state policies have not only restricted economic inclusion but are also used as a form of control over society, leading not only to economic deprivation but also to social and political exclusion. This gap between state and society builds feelings of resentment and breeds frustration through society members leading to the rejection of the official authority and processes. This rejection can be found at the centre of radical narratives.

### **Educational, Cultural and Leisure Opportunities**

Research participants raised the issue of deep regional inequalities in educational opportunities and access to leisure facilities and cultural activities. The resulting sense of injustice and deprivation affects

mainly the interior regions as well as marginalised neighbourhoods in the capital. State institutions were critiqued for being unable to support young people or invest in their future, particularly in regions where the state is absent in terms of basic services, culture, entertainment, and jobs. This gap between state and society has widened until its members have lost their sense of belonging, which is replaced by strong feelings of resentment and expressed in their rejection of symbols of authority and of official mainstream culture and processes. The education system thus appears to constitute an “incubator of violence” and fails to strengthen youth resilience to violence or provide solutions for social integration and positive socialisation, particularly for youth in urban communities that are stricken with poverty, crime and marginalisation.

### **Digitalisation**

Social media and new communication technologies have enabled the spread of extremist discourse at a speed that exceeds the speed of the response to it. Participants noted that religious institutions in Tunisia have not received sufficient support to enable them to challenge or compete with this extremist discourse, which enjoys sophisticated and large-scale production and dissemination methods. Digitalisation makes it easier for extremist groups to reach all social groups, either by targeting specific accounts or through social media strategies to attract certain types of individuals. Digitalisation is not a collective driver but rather increases the appeal of VE to some individuals.

### **Religion**

Religious-based VE groups justify their violence through a political narrative that presents grievances, injustices and inequalities as a result of the subordination and enslavement of the ruling elite in the country to “the West”. Experts and researchers note that vulnerability to recruitment by VE groups is higher among those with limited religious knowledge. Participants note that Tunisia has produced its own moderate interpretations of religion, largely by the religious establishment within Al-Zaytunah. These teachings oppose the doctrines of Takfirism, which are considered to be the ideological basis of religious extremism. However, the limited reach of religious institutions in disseminating these moderate ideas is seen by experts as being a factor for the spread of extremist ideas.

### **Transnational Dynamics**

The cross-border factor is seen to play an important role in the recruitment process to VE. Transnational dynamics are particularly influential in the southern region of the country where the absence of adequate responses to socio-economic and political grievances contribute to accentuate the feeling of injustice and marginalisation. The South’s proximity to conflict areas in Libya contributes to attracting young people to the dream of a fair state based on “the justice of Islamic law”.

The fieldwork highlighted regional and socio-economic inequalities as particularly important community-level drivers of VE. A highly centralised governance model that was, for decades, based on social, economic and political control and exclusion, and an economic model that exacerbated regional disparities produced the social, economic and cultural marginalisation of entire regions and social groups, creating long standing grievances whose effects were not properly addressed through adequate policies ensuring equal access to basic services and rights covering the various dimensions of human security (healthcare, employment, quality education, etc.). These structural deficiencies in

public policies reinforced feelings of anger and perpetuated tensions and resentment in local communities in many regions of the country.

The triangle of the failed development model, regional disparities, and economic and social grievances have characterised the country's governance model and policies. This triangle has emerged as a major driver of both criminal violence and VE. The geographical map of developmental indicators is identical to that of the territorial distribution of networks and pockets of VE. The areas with low developmental indicators, employment rates and infrastructure are the same areas with high rates of crime, street violence and school dropouts. The fragile economic context in addition to deep social and political grievances contributed to feeding and strengthening these drivers of VE. Extremist discourse has identified and exploited these grievances and given expression to them.

Meanwhile, the effective implementation of policy responses by the state has faced various structural difficulties. The absence of a developmental approach capable of meeting the economic needs of large swathes of society (youth in particular) and many regions of the country has contributed to providing a fertile environment in which the drivers of extremism and VE grow.

Violent extremist narratives have adapted to the grievances found within each region according to its particular conditions, building on existing vulnerabilities (regional disparities, social and political grievances, as well as unequal access to culture, leisure, and lack of political participation). These narratives have transnational effects through the geographical proximity of Algeria and Libya, and become more easily accessible with the widening access in Tunisian society to digitalisation, which has accelerated the spread of the phenomenon by promoting extremist narratives through social media and the Internet. Meanwhile, these narratives face little competition from alternative narratives such as community values or moderate religious values such as those produced by Al-Zaytouna, which have not been empowered to play a role in countering extremist narratives.

The phenomenon of VE can only be addressed through institutions that are able to translate preventive, inclusive policies into everyday practices. However, the inability of government institutions to address the factors driving the phenomenon appears to have contributed to exacerbating existing drivers. This conclusion is built on the exchanges with representatives of several relevant public institutions, which revealed the different internal and external weaknesses that have affected these institutions – with the collapse of the old basis for political legitimacy, in addition to the lack of harmony between the new political and constitutional regime, on the one hand, with bureaucratic and technical implementation mechanisms within the post-revolution administration and institutions, on the other.

In addition, the implementation of CVE policies needs to be improved through strengthening coordination between the various actors involved in confronting and addressing the phenomenon. This requires political stability, giving greater priority to preventive approaches, formulating joint visions co-constructed with local communities, decision-makers, building clear and effective coordination mechanisms, and fostering effective communication within and between institutions. This is possible to achieve with stable international support and in-depth consultation with society and all stakeholders, centred on common interests to help co-define the priorities of PVE and CVE policies and programmes.

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## INTERVIEWS

### Representative of State Institutions

In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in the parliamentary institution. Tunis, 15/02/2021.

In-person interview with a female a representative of the Ministry of Culture, JFRC office. Tunis, 05/02/2021.

In-person interview with a male representative from the Ministry of Youth Sport and Inclusion, JFRC office. Tunis, 28/01/2021.

In-person interview with a female representative of the Ministry of Women, Family and Children, JFRC office. Tunis, 08/01/2021.

In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament and a specialist in psychology. Tunis, 15/02/2021.

In-person interview with a male a senior researcher in a government research agency, and formerly at the Strategic Research Center officially affiliated with the Presidency of the Republic. Tunis, 20/12/2020.

In-person interview with a male representative of a legislative committee in parliament. Tunis, 03/02/2021.

In-person interview with expert on security and representative of Interior Ministry. Tunis, 15/12/2020.

In-person interview with a male representative of the local authority in one of the popular areas adjacent to the capital. Tunis, 04/02/2021.

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### Academics

In-person interview with a male professor in political sociology. Tunis, 01/03/2021.

In-person interview with a female professor at Zaytounah University and senior researcher working on the analyses of violent extremism discourse. Tunis, Higher Institute of Islamic Civilization, 23/02/2021.

In-person interview with a male professor in political sciences whose research focuses on the political economy drivers of conflicts across the MENA region. Tunis, 07/01/2021.

In-person interview with a male senior researcher at International NGOs focusing his research on ethnographic analysis of the VE phenomenon. Tunis, 11/12/2020.

In-person interview with a male writer and researcher in Islamic thought working on religious discourse. Tunis, 23/02/2021.

On-line interview with researcher and expert on IT and defense whose research focuses on communications security, 06/02/2021.

### Representatives of Civil society

Online interview with the head (male) of a local cultural association, 19/01/2021.

In-person interview with a male doctor working with young drugs addicts and civil society activist on the issue of drugs addiction amongst youth and youth delinquency. Tunis, 20/01/ 2021.

In-person interview with a male head of local association. Tunis, 25/01/2021.

In-person interview with the vice President (male) of a local association working on youth issues. Tunis, 15/01/2020.

Head of youth organisation (male) and civil society activist who works mainly on projects of security and youth resilience. Tunis, 18/12/2020.



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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