

Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

Tunisia

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This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation - and resilience to it - in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices. This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

Countries covered in this series:

Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eu.eu>



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The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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Introduction

Within the Arab world, Tunisia, a country of almost 12 million inhabitants, very close geographically to Italy and also, like Morocco, under French protectorate until 1956, represents a kind of political exception within the Arab world, and even among the entire Muslim world. As such, Tunisia is in the Maghreb as among the countries of the Middle East the only country to act from its independence for the establishment of a secular state, to seek to marginalize the religious component in the administration of the affairs of society, to recognize many rights for women and even to proclaim, by the voice of its first president Habib Bourguiba, that fasting the month of Ramadan goes against economic and social development.

In the same direction, Tunisia, probably because of all the structural reforms carried out by Bourguiba from the end of the 1950s and during the following years, including the generalization of education and the promotion of rights of women, will escape the political chaos born out of the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

So, even as what will be known as the Arab Spring will start in Tunisia in December 2010, this country will avoid the civil war started after this event and which will continue until today (2020) in Syria, Yemen and neighboring Libya, after also strongly threatening Egypt in 2013. However, not only Tunisians did not take up arms against each other, but they will end up adopting in 2014 a constitution which can be considered, as regards relations to religion, as the most advanced in the region, and which is among the most advanced in terms of public and political freedoms.

However, political contingencies in the Mediterranean, the continuation of the occupation of the Palestinian territories by Israel, the war in the Balkans during the 1990s, like the wars started in Afghanistan since the end of the 1970s will provoke in Tunisia, as in many Arab-Muslim countries, a rise in radicalization and a desire to fight all those who are supposed to resent the Muslims. This is why an increasing number of young Tunisians - also a little pushed in this by their degraded social situation, in particular due to unemployment which affects them in their country or the decline in their purchasing power - will join the ranks of armed combatants to confront the "enemies of Islam" as much in their own country as in different regions of the world, in Europe, in Asia as in Africa, and even in the United States of America, with the terrible attacks on American soil in the month of September 2001.

This text briefly describes the general demographic, economic and social data which include, somewhere, some of the reasons behind the rise in social discontent and also anger in Tunisian society. It also contains a short presentation of the reasons of external origin explaining the violent radicalization among certain categories of Tunisians, including the youngest, as it introduces the policies and actions implemented by the Tunisian authorities, before as after the revolution of 2011, to manage the religious sphere and deal with violent Jihadism in Tunisia.

Methodology

This paper builds on critical analysis of literature and documents, as well as materials gathered during two fieldwork trips to Tunisia in March 2019 and February 2020,

where more than 20 interviews have been conducted with researchers, political activists, policy makers, as well as civil society activists.

Conceptualization of radicalisation

The concept of Radicalism is often used in research on the Middle East to refer to Salafi Jihadism. However, this concept could be misleading. Radicalism is not connected to a certain religion or political ideology per se, and it does not in itself lead to violence. It is an ideology that challenges the legitimacy of established norms and policies. As argued by Della Porta and LaFree, “groups voicing the most radical aims are not necessarily the first to engage in violence” (Della Porta and LaFree 2012: 7).

Radicalism might be as well an expression of legitimate political actors as is the case with the Salafi political parties such as the Reform Front or Hizb-ut-Tahrir in Tunisia. While Salafi political parties embrace radical ideas about how society needs to be organized according to the Islamic Sharia, they reject the use of violence and call for a gradual path to introduce these changes.

In 19th century Europe, radicalism was part of ‘regular’ political life. Often, radical movements militated for democracy and democratic principles rather than against them. Hence, when discussing radicalization, there is a need to distinguish between the level of values and that of behavior. Holding radical views does not necessarily lead to violent behavior.

Astrid Bötticher highlights this distinction between Radicalism and Extremism. According to Bötticher “Radicalism is a political doctrine of socio-political movements favouring freedom, and emancipation from the rule of authoritarian regimes and hierarchically-structured societies. It is hostile against the status quo and its establishment. “ While she defines extremism as “anti-establishment movements that fight for absolute rule in politics, espouse exclusivist narratives of us vs. them, inciting fear of others and fighting diversity of opinions. Extremism is intolerant and engages in aggressive militancy, including mass violence. Its goal is an anti-pluralistic political system.” (Bötticher, 2017)

Bötticher points out to a number of differences that differentiate Radicalism and extremism. First, while radicals may use violence pragmatically and selectively, extremists espouse violence on principle. Second, Radicals do not look to the past glory – like extremists do – their goal is a future for all. And third, although radicals stand against the establishment, they embrace universal morality, while extremism fights both establishment and everyone who is against its particularistic dogmas. (Bötticher, 2017)

When bringing this distinction between radicalism and extremism to the Tunisian case:

The ideology of ISIS or Al-Qaeda can be called extremist, even if defining the ideology of Salafi political parties becomes more problematic. Religious inspiration for political action does not have to result in extremism. There can be religious radicals, who want sweeping political change, do not resort to violence, and advocate egalitarian ideals (as is the case with many religious groups understanding of Islam).

This distinction doesn’t mean that radicals cannot transform into extremists. However in the case of post 2011 Tunisia, this transition is less likely given the democratic

political environment that allows radical religious groups to establish their own parties and compete in elections, as is the case with the *Itilaf al-Karama* (Coalition of Dignity) that has surprisingly emerged as the 4th largest political force with 21 seats in the last legislative elections held in September and October 2019. The coalition has been depicted as embodying the new radical Islamist challenger. *Itilaf al-Karama* is led by a Seif Eddine Makhoul, known as the “Jihadis’ lawyer”, and supported by the dissolved “Salafi” Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (Blanc and Sigillò, 2019).

However, this risk of radicals turning to extremists is greater under undemocratic contexts as authoritarian regimes don’t allow for the inclusion of a radical discourse in the public sphere. Under such undemocratic contexts, more often than under democratic systems, radical movements might make a specific calculation that taking up arms will give them a chance to change the autocratic regime, or might lead them to drop their radical ideology altogether and join other extremist groups.

Country background

The current population of Tunisia (on April 23, 2020) is 11,795,007, based on the latest United Nations data. This population is supposed to be – like in Morocco - almost entirely Muslim (at 99%). In fact, Islam is the official religion of the state, and the president is required to be Muslim.

Tunisia is often regarded as a homogenous society given its overwhelmingly Arab Sunni population, however the Tunisian society knows both religious and ethnic diversity. On the religious level, Tunisia has Sunni, Ibādī, Baha’i, Christian and Jewish communities. On the ethnic level, the country contains: Arab, Amazigh and black communities. However, the only minorities currently recognized are the Christian and Jewish communities. Nearly all of the Muslims are Sunni, and a small indigenous population is Shia. There are also small populations of Christians (7,000), Jews (about 1,500 in 2003), and Baha’i (likely in their hundreds, but the exact number is unknown).

70.1 % of the population is urban (8,280,799 people in 2020), a rate which represents, in the context of a labour market marked by a high level of unemployment, as is the case in Tunisia, an extremely important social risk factor. And this factor is more sensitive in the situation of a young population, like that of the Tunisian one, among which the median age is 32.8 years (World population review, 2019).

Tunisia achieved its full independence from France in March 1956. In July 1957, the Tunisian republic was declared, and one of the most prominent figure of the struggle for independence, Habib Bourguiba became Tunisia’s first president and stayed in power for 30 years. Bourguiba led a process of modernization in all sectors, including in terms of religion-state relations. He understood secularism not as separation between religion and the state, but rather as placing religion under the strict control of state institutions. He adopted several measures in order to ensure all religious institutions in the country were dependent on and subordinate to the political institutions of the new republic.

In contrast to Morocco, where the king, “Prince of believers” (M. Lahlou & M. Zouiten, 2019), has historical and political legitimacy not only to administer but also to have the leadership on the religious sphere, the first two Tunisian presidents, who ruled the country after its independence in 1956, had, a priori, no power in this direction. The policies adopted by both former presidents of Tunisia, Bourguiba and Ben Ali relied on

putting the religious sphere under the strict control of the security services (G. Fahmi, 2019).

Bourguiba as early as in 1956/1957 proclaimed his desire to secularize the state by announcing to take a Western-style political orientation (A. Wolf, 2020). It is in this same sense that he subsequently decided to generalize education to all school-age children. And, because he considered that this was the main means for enabling the economic development of a country without great natural resources.

This is also why he did everything to give more rights to women, by aiming for their equal rights with men. Thus, Bourguiba announced in the summer of 1956, the drafting of a Personal Status Code (CSP) which proclaims "the principle of the equality of men and women" in Tunisia. This code entered into force on January 1, 1957, as a part of an "extensive program for modernizing society" which also includes the abolition (in May 31, 1956) of the system of Habous (endowments)¹, and that of the rights of Zaouïas (religious brotherhoods) whose administrators were appointed by the bey; the abolition (in August 3, 1956) of religious courts and their integration into secular courts; the ban on wearing the veil in schools (in January 10, 1957); the recognition of the right to vote for women (in March 14, 1957); the abolition of the monarchy and the proclamation of the Republic (in July 25, 1957); the dismantling of the University of Zitouna, a center for religious learning (like the University/mosque of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco); the adoption of astronomical calculation to replace the vision of the crescent for the fixing of lunar months and religious holidays; the establishment of family planning (in 1962) and the right to free abortion and free pills (R. Kéfi, 2006).

By the way, Bourguiba also tackled the question of fasting during the month of Ramadan (29 to 30 days). In this sense, he made during the winter of 1960 three speeches on the question of the fast during such a month to call for a "Jihad for development". He asked then the Mufti of Tunisia, present during one of these speeches (February 5, 1960), to authorize the workers to break the fast (F. Charfi, 2019).

In the 1960s, the Tunisian government introduced, under the initiative of President Habib Bourguiba, the first family Planning program in Africa and the Arab World to decrease population growth and to improve the socio-economic development of the country. Such a program was combined with the raising of the age at first marriage and the generalization of the school. Thus, Bourguiba's policies succeeded in reducing Tunisia's total fertility rate from about 7 children per woman in 1960 to only 2 in 2018, with an average annual population growth rate between 2010 and 2017 of around 1%, that is to say a rate almost identical to the standards known in developed countries.

According to the World population review Tunisia's population growth rate from 2019 to 2020 is 1.06%. This rate will continue to decrease as Tunisia approaches its peak population in 2058. Tunisia's fertility rate is just above the population replacement rate at 2.2 births per woman, which is declining slowly, and the country experiences negative net migration each year. These two factors will continue to bring down the population growth rate until it is zero and the population begins to decline in the years following.

Also, and compared to Egypt (where the population growth rate was equal to 2% in 2018) for example, or even Morocco (1.3% in the same year), the rate of population

¹ A system that the Moroccan authorities not only maintain, but strengthen until today. See "Radicalisation and Resilience, Moroccan Case Study" (M. Lahlou & M. Zouiten).

growth no longer constitutes - a priori - and by itself, a social or political risk. What induces such a risk would rather be the combination between the youth of the Tunisian population and the prevalence of a high level of unemployment within it, and, probably also, the deterioration of the economic situation that Tunisia has recorded in recent years.

Most of the measures cited above indicate that Tunisians and Moroccans have followed almost diametrically opposite directions regarding their relations with the religious sphere. While the Moroccan authorities, the king at the head, acted in the direction of the reinforcement of the religious structures in place and their total maintenance under their close supervision, the Tunisian State, under the impulse of its first president - also lawyer of profession -, did everything to contain the dominance of religion within society.

This is probably for something in the appearance of institutional modernity that Tunisia enjoys today compared to Morocco. But it cannot explain why, the two countries having followed two different paths as regards the management of the religious sphere they had to face - practically from the same moment, that is to say by the end of the 20th century - the rise in power of religious radicalism in both countries. However, this can only be explained by the absence of a true democratic system in Tunisia, in particular between 1987 and until the revolution of 2011, and in Morocco, until today. It can also be explained by the effects on the two societies of the different wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, as well as by the political interventions in the two countries of the Gulf monarchies.

After taking the place of Bourguiba - of whom he was the Prime Minister (since October 2, 1987) after having been his Minister of the Interior - on November 7, 1987, Ben Ali will live on the legacy of his predecessor both in political matters and in terms of relations with the religious sphere, in putting at these two levels more resources in security forces. In order to legitimize his new rule, Ben Ali offered a limited political opening through a process of national reconciliation with the political opposition including the Islamists. He granted the leader of the Islamic movement, Rashid al-Ghannushi, amnesty in 1988; and promised to guarantee the Islamic movement the license for a political party.

Ben Ali held slightly competitive elections in 1989 and the Islamists were allowed to participate with an independent list. However, the relative success of the Islamist movement achieving around 15 percent of the nationwide vote led Ben Ali to change his approach and to ban the Ennahda in 1992. With Ennahda going underground in the 1990s, Salafism started to rise, both in its scripturalist (alsalafiyya al-'ilmiyya) and jihadi (al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya) forms. Scripturalist Salafism grew through private meetings, books and audio-visual materials and the religious satellite channels that attracted many Tunisians striving for religious knowledge due to the "religious desertification" under Ben Ali. Tunisia also witnessed the emergence of a Salafi jihadist trend during the 1990s. This movement began to grow in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war on terrorism led by the USA.

By the end of the 2000s, the high unemployment and inflation rates, the lack of political freedoms, and the elite corruption, led to a huge popular uprising that resulted in ousting Ben Ali in January 2011.

After the 2011, there was considerable debate between both Islamic and secular political groups over the role of Sharia in the legislation process. The debate over this issue has raised the level of tension in society between secularists and Islamists. As polarization reached worrying levels, Rachid Ghannouchi, the president of Ennahda, interfered and persuaded members of his party that there is no need to explicitly refer to Islamic Sharia in the Constitution and that it would be enough to keep the pre-existing first clause of the old Constitution which states that ‘Tunisia is a free, sovereign and independent state, whose religion is Islam’ (article 1).

Drivers of religiously inspired radicalization and assessment

Socio-Economic drivers

Structural analysis of the Tunisian population shows that 1 of 4 Tunisians is under the age of 15, while nearly 6 in 10 Tunisians (56.78%) are between 15 and 55 years of age. The latter percentage represents a large workforce which necessarily needs to be employed. At that level, it seems that persistent high unemployment among Tunisia’s growing workforce - particularly its increasing number of university graduates - was a key factor in the 2011 uprising that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali’s regime, as it had been a driving force in the strengthening of Ennahda, the main religious party in opposition to the former president as to his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba.

This configuration is illustrated by the data below, published by the Tunisian Institute of Statistics.

Table 1: Evolution of the unemployment rate (UR) in Tunisia between 2000 and 2018:

<u>Year</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2015</u>	<u>2018</u>
<u>UR</u>	<u>15.7</u>	<u>13.05</u>	<u>18.33</u>	<u>15.15</u>	<u>15.5</u>

Source: National Institute of Statistics, Tunis.

In detail, this overall unemployment rate breaks down structurally as follows, in 2018, which indicates its socially explosive nature.

Thus, a third (33.4%) of the active population aged 15 to 24 is unemployed, as almost 3 out of 10 graduates (28.8%) are unemployed.

In fact, the maintenance of the unemployment rate at high levels since the uprising that Tunisia experienced between December 2010 and January 2011 is linked to the very precarious economic situation that the country has experienced since the year 2011.

In economic and social matters, Tunisia presents a mixed picture. On the one hand, it occupies an advanced position compared to a number of Arab countries, with regard to its Human Development Index (HDI), on the other hand, it fails to ensure a level of growth in its production which could reduce the unemployment rate among its population and increases its purchasing power.

So, when it comes to Human development, as it’s approached and published by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), Tunisia’s HDI value for 2018 is 0.739 - which put the country in the high human development category - positioning it at 91 out of 189 countries and territories. In long period, between 1990 and 2018, Tunisia is

making progress on all the indicators selected by the UNDP. Between 1990 and 2018, Tunisian population's life expectancy at birth increased by 7.7 years, its mean years of schooling increased by 3.7 years and its expected years of schooling increased by 4.6 years. Also, Tunisia's Gross national income (GNI) per capita increased by about 95.5 % between during the last 30 years.

Now, and since 2011, the growth in GDP which has been recorded by the Tunisian economy has been both weak and very variable from one year to another. This did not contribute to reduce the unemployment rate among the working population in Tunisia. Since it did not authorize the improvement of the standard of living of the population as a whole.

As well, and as shown in the table below, the GDP (Gross domestic product) growth rate in Tunisia, after having been negative in 2011, was generally less than 2% annually, between 2012 and 2018.

Table 2: Evolution of the Tunisian GDP growth rate between 2010 and 2018:

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
GDP growth rate %	-1.92	3.9	2.4	2.3	1.1	1.0	1.9	2.51

Source: Tunisia, Ministry of Development, Investment and International Cooperation. <http://www.itceq.tn/wp-content/uploads/files/tab-bord/competitivite/tbord-competitivite-nov-2018.pdf>

This, because of the political instability that Tunisia experienced since 2011 and because of the terrorist attacks committed in the country between 2012 and 2015, especially in tourist sites. At this level the terrorist attacks against the Bardo Museum in Tunis, in March 2015, and against a hotel in the seaside town of Sousse, in June of the same year (with 60 dead, almost all foreigners) had as one of their objectives to asphyxiate the Tunisian tourism sector, one of the main engines of the economy².

Beside that, it is also necessary to note some of the principal economic and financial motives bellow:

1. The total investment ratio declined from 24.4% of GDP in 2010 to 18.5% in 2015.
2. The proportion of private investment decreased from 15.7% of GDP in 2010 to 12% and from 61% of total investment to 50% at the end of 2015.
3. The ratio of foreign direct investment on GDP decreased from 3.4% to 2.9% during the same period.

Along the same lines as the weak annual growth in GDP, and according to data provided by the National council of statistics³, the purchasing power of Tunisians decreased by around 4% between 2011 to 2018 whereas it recorded an increase of 20% between 2002 and 2011. Compared to the year 2017, the decline in purchasing power in 2018 is estimated at 3%.

These elements, combined with the high level of unemployment, especially among young people and graduates of higher education, is capable of creating a climate of distrust of the authorities as well as a desire for revenge vis-à-vis the society as a whole, and also vis-à-vis abroad, and in particular Europe, considered responsible for the economic and social problems plaguing the country.

² See Jeune Afrique, July 8, 2019. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/800570/politique/infographie-la-tunisie-regulierement-frappee-par-le-terrorisme-depuis-2013/>

³ <https://www.tanitjobs.com/blog/179/Le-pouvoir-d-achat-en-Tunisie.html/>

The monopolization of the religious sphere

One important role in fueling the Salafi Jihadi movement in Tunisia is the monopolization of the religious sphere under the old regime.

The Ben Ali monopolization of the religious sphere has led to an almost religious vacuum after the regime fell in 2011, and has hence allowed the Salafi-jihadi movement to take advantage of this situation to preach for its ideas after 2011 with little resistance or competition from other religious actors. From their side, state religious institutions were ill-equipped to compete with the newcomers to the religious sphere, either because they had been weakened by the policies of the old regime, as in the case of the religious university of Al-Zaytouna, or because they were delegitimized in the post-Ben Ali era as a result of their political support for the old regime, as is the case with the official imams affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. For example, during the Friday prayers that followed Ben Ali's flight to Saudi Arabia, Islamists, whether proponents of political Islam or Salafists, took over mosques and expelled imams appointed by the state. Estimates point to approximately half of the mosques in the country having had their Imams expelled during this period (Donker, 2019: 507). Some mosques even witnessed violent clashes between political Islamists and Salafists who competed for control of the same mosque.

External factors/events at the origin of radicalization in Tunisia

As in Morocco, external events have had also a significant influence on the radicalization of a great number of persons in Tunisia, as is the case with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

The war in Afghanistan against the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was initially seen as a war between Islam and Communism. From 2001, and the American intervention in this same country, the Afghan wars will be seen very often as a confrontation between the West, represented by the USA, and Islam. All this with the involvement of neighbouring Muslim demographic and economic powers such as Pakistan, Iran or Saudi Arabia.

In this regard, it should be noted that in parallel to the changes inside the Tunisian Islamist sphere, the beginning of the radicalization of some of its radical components and the repression which affected many militants of the "Islamic cause", many Tunisians went to fight in Afghanistan, against Soviet troops during the 1980s. However, the number of those has remained relatively limited. But, despite this, it's interesting to point here that one of the most resounding actions in this country, carried out by radical militants from the Maghreb, was led out by 2 Tunisians, including a student, formerly member of a left-wing group in Tunisia. This action consisted in the assassination of the former Afghan (and supposed pro-western) commander Ahmad Chah Massoud, on September 9, 2001 – two days before the terrorist attacks on the American soil - by two Tunisians coming from Europe, who presented themselves as Moroccan journalists⁴.

⁴ Le Monde (French News paper), April 19, 2005.

Close to Western Europe, the Bosnian war, which was also one of the side effects of the explosion of the former USSR and which began in 1992 and lasted until 1995 (M. Lahlou, 2019), also had an immense impact on public opinion in Tunisia, as that was the case in Morocco, Egypt and all the Arab-Muslim world.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent war on terror, Tunisian youth joined Salafi-jihadi groups abroad—in Iraq, but also in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

To the consequences of these wars, one must add the effects on the Arab (and Muslim) public opinion of the “Intifidas” of 1987 and 2000 in the occupied Palestinian territories, of the wars in Iraq (from 2003) and in Syria (from 2011).

Like in Morocco, these external events will be amplified inside Tunisia (as in several Arab-Muslim countries) by the conjunction of socio-economic elements presented above, making a large part of the population, and especially young people, more sensitive to the arguments of the supporters of “Political Islam”, for whom all that the Muslims suffer lies in their distance from the “true values of Islam” and in the hatred of Westerners towards them.

After that, young Tunisians will be involved in or will commit various terrorist actions in Tunisia as in Europe, and in France and in Germany in particular, and many hundreds will join, mainly after the beginning in December 2010 the so called Arab spring, the war fields in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya or in some African sub-Saharan countries. In this sense, the United Nations Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries estimated in 2015 the number of Tunisian foreign fighters at nearly 6,000, including 4,000 in Syria, 1,000 to 1,500 in Libya and 200 in Yemen⁵.

The state’s approach; and non-state, societal led approaches

After the fall of President Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, the power vacuum, together with the security chaos that followed it allowed a violent religious voices, such as Ansar Al-Sharia, to work freely and to initiate/ reinforce its terrorist actions both in Tunisia and abroad, notably in the Middle East (see above).

To react to the terrorist attacks committed on Tunisian soil during the year 2013, and after the Islamists of Ennahda had withdrawn on January 9, 2014 from the government which they led since the first free elections organized in the country in October 2011, three types of approach have been followed by the Tunisian authorities. The first is focused the political/ constitutional, the second relies on the security measures to combat violent extremism, and the third aimed at reorganizing the religious sphere.

The political/constitutional approach

Violent extremism has taken advantage of the political polarization between the secularists and Islamists in the post 2011 era in order to consolidate its presence. These radical groups have explicitly attacked these democratic institutions and called instead for the rule of God. One main answer to this challenge of violent extremism has been to

5 United Nations Human Rights – Office of the High Commissioner. Geneva, 2015. <https://www.ohchr.org/FR/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16223&LangID=F>

protect the process of democratic transition and to complete the establishment of the political institutions.

The process of constitutional writing was not an easy one. This period witnessed high level of polarization between the Islamists and secularists. These tensions were aggravated by the socio-economic situation and the increasing power of the Salafi-Jihadi group Ansar Al-Sharia. The whole process broke down in July 2013 after the assassinations of two secular politicians, Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi in February and July 2013, respectively.

the opposition demanded the resignation of the government and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, while Ennahda refused to hand over power. The supporters of each group took to the streets in massive demonstrations in July and August 2013.

The UGTT led the formation of a Dialogue Quartet, together with the UTICA (the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts), the LTHD (the Tunisian Human Rights League) and the Bar Association to play a mediatory role between the different political groups. The Quartet managed to break the political deadlock through the negotiation of a roadmap which re-established a political framework for finalising the draft constitution.

Ennahda party agreed to relinquish control of government to a non-partisan caretaker government. Ennahda was also willing to compromise on some of the most contested provisions of the draft constitution, especially those concerning the role of religion and women's rights. More concretely while the new Tunisian constitution, like its Egyptian or Moroccan counterparts, proclaims Islam to be the religion of the state (Article 1), it does not include a reference to Sharia as "a" or even "the" source of legislation. Also, like in Morocco, the Tunisian constitution proclaims that "The state is the guardian of religion. It guarantees freedom of conscience and belief, the free exercise of religious practice". But, as a great difference compared to the Moroccan constitution, the Tunisian adds in the first part of its article 6 that the State guarantees "The neutrality of mosques and places of worship from all partisan instrumentalization. The state undertakes to disseminate the values of moderation and tolerance and the protection of the sacred, and the prohibition of all violations thereof. It undertakes equally to prohibit and fight against calls for Takfir and the incitement of violence and hatred". The second part of the same article is more specific in what it asserts. It prohibits "Takfir - the accusation of apostasy - and the incitement to hatred and violence" (R. Grote, 2020), which was an important concession to secularists when creating the constitution and also represents a major advance compared to what exists on this same subject in Morocco, in Egypt as in the rest of the Arab and Moslem countries.

As a result, the constitution was approved by an overwhelming majority, with 200 against 12 votes (and four abstentions), exceeding the required two-thirds majority for adoption without popular referendum by a wide margin. Being the country in which the "Arab spring" was born, Tunisia was also the first country to emerge from the ensuing difficult transition process with a new constitutional settlement reflecting a broad consensus, which bodes well for the future stability of the country.

The Quartet received the 2015 Nobel Peace prize for "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011."

Measures on the security level

In August 2015, Tunisia's assembly of representatives adopted the Counter-Terrorism Law to provide a framework for counter-terrorism efforts in the country. The law tries to strike a better balance between the protection of human rights and fighting terrorism than the 2003 anti-terrorism law issued under Ben Ali. Nonetheless, human rights organizations objected to the law for its vague definition of terrorism and the broad leeway it gives to judges to admit testimony by anonymous witnesses.

In November 2016, Tunisia's national Security Council adopted a strategy to fight terrorism and extremism. The strategy, which was intended to take a comprehensive approach to the fight against terrorism, was drafted by the Ministry of Interior. Thus, the military and civilian security forces continue to make counterterrorism their priority, leading to the dismantling of several terrorist cells and the disruption of a number of attack plots⁶. This strategy is built around four points: prevention, protection, judicial proceedings, and retaliation. The Counterterrorism (CT) Law of 2015 led to the creation of the National Counter-Terrorism Committee (Commission nationale de lutte antiterroriste). This inter-ministerial structure involves a dozen of ministries which are relevant to PVE activities. Its main mission is to oversee the implementation the national Counter-Terrorism strategy and coordinate all efforts across ministries in the field of counterterrorism and PVE. The National CT Committee works as a platform that aims at facilitating inter-agency coordination and intelligence sharing. The Committee involves a dozen of ministries which are relevant to PVE activities. This includes the following ministries: Human rights, Youth and Sports, Women family and childhood, Education, Culture and Religious Affairs. In 2017, Tunisia set up the National Intelligence Centre, an institution designed to overcome problems with coordination and information-sharing between intelligence agencies that had plagued the country's counter-terrorism efforts since the revolution.

However the Tunisian counterterrorism strategy still lacks important elements. In dealing with returning fighters, the Tunisian authorities seem to hope that the problem will fix itself (Aaron Y. Zelin and Jacob Walles, Tunisia's Foreign Fighters, Washington Institute, December 17, 2018). The government is now able to recognize returnees at official border crossings, but it has no plan for what to do once they are identified, and its security forces lack the means to monitor them. The government offers no rehabilitation or reintegration initiatives for individuals who fought in Syria—returnees are either detained in prison or free to join general society. Tunisia has also no programmes for support of victims of terrorism and violent extremism, Training for frontline practitioners, platforms for intra and interfaith dialogue between the state and religious leaders, or programs and measures to prevent radicalisation into violent extremism in prison and probation settings. However, Tunisia has been working with international partners on reforming and improving the capability of its security sector.

Religious measures

Between 2011 and 2013, the Tunisian state lost authority over many of Tunisia's 5,000 mosques, including historic ones such as Al-Zaytouna Mosque, the Great Mosques of Kairouan, M'sakken, and Sfax. About 400 of Tunisia's 5685 mosques (2017 statistics) are believed to have come under Salafi control, and about 50 under that of Salafi jihadists

6 UNHCR/Refworld, "Country Reports on Terrorism 2016 - Tunisia". <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5981e40d13.html>

(Petré, 2015). Secular parties called for tight state control of the religious sphere to ban any Islamist or Salafi groups from preaching in mosques. Before 2011, Ennahda used to criticize the state-controlled Islam. However, the religious chaos that accompanied the Tunisian uprising – together with political pressure from secular groups – led the Ennahda leadership to change its position. The ministry of religious affairs has started to regain their strength and legitimacy since 2013, when successive ministers of religious endowments have been determined to extend the ministry's control over all mosques and imams and close all illegal mosques. The Ministry also relieved several unlicensed Salafi preachers from their duties and appointed other imams affiliated to its administration in their place. These measures even went beyond the Salafi preachers to include religious figures close to Ennahda, including a former minister of religious affairs (Noureddine Khadmi). The ministry suggests also themes for Friday sermons and has employed 600 people tasked with ensuring that the imams' rhetoric is in accordance with the law

So too, public discussions over the neutrality of mosques started as part of the dialogue that took place in the transitional stage about the identity of the state and society and the relationship between religion and politics. The neutrality of mosques was one of the most intensely debated issues during the national dialogue and was included in the road map agreed upon by different political factions for resolving the 2013 political crisis. The members of the National Constituent Assembly ended by stressing the importance of the neutrality of mosques by incorporating it into the constitution which will be adopted in January 2014.

Civil society led initiatives

Tunisian Civil society can play an important role to prevent violent radicalization. Unlike the case with state institutions, civil society organizations enjoy a better knowledge of the local context, as well as higher level of social trust among local communities than state institutions. The activities of Tunisian civil society have increased considerably since 2015. It included a wide range of projects in different fields, such as cultural activities, community work, capacity-building, art therapy, awareness-raising and dialogue sessions between youth and police forces (Letsch, 2018: 176). In addition, some civil society initiatives have been designed specifically for women. One example is project FORTE (For a better women engagement in Preventing Violent Extremism) that started in 2018. The project aims to improve engagement of 90 targeted women in Countering Violent Extremism & Preventing Violent Extremism in their localities through advocacy in 3 of the most threatened zones in Tunisia which are Sejnane, Menzel Bourguiba & Ben Guerdane. Another initiative is that of Tunisia CVE Prison Project, by Search for Common Ground-Tunisia. The project aims to prevent engagement with violent ideologies amongst adult and young Tunisian detainees during and after their period of detention through improved rehabilitation and reintegration programming.

However, the lack of state support for these civil society organizations, has led these organizations to look for external funds to support their activities. As International donors have put Preventing Violent Radicalization as one of their main objectives, they supported a number of these civil society initiatives. These international funding opportunities have led many of the Tunisian civil society organizations however to add

a PVE dimension to their work even it was not originally there, as is the case with those engaged in gender equality and culture governance. This trend has led Tunisian CSOs to adopt their project proposals to the international agenda, through the rebranding of their activities under the PVE label to keep receiving funding from external donors and survive economically (Lestch, 2018: 181).

Crisis case studies

The confrontation with Ansar Al-Sharia (summer 2013)

Tunisia has been home to a growing Salafi-jihadi movement since the fall of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. The most organized group within the Tunisian Salafi jihadism scene is Ansar Al-Sharia. The movement was established in April 2011 as a group following the Salafi-jihadi ideology, but with a specific focus on the strict implementation of the Islamic Sharia Law. However, unlike other cases, most Ansar al-Sharia leaders rejected the use of violence inside Tunisia, calling Tunisia a land for preaching, not combat. Thus, while some of the Salafi jihadists who formed Ansar al-Sharia group previously believed in the need for armed struggle to establish an Islamic state, the Arab Spring led them to change their tactics and to focus instead on preaching religious ideology, with the goal to prepare the ground for the establishment of the Islamic state. The movement took advantage of the security vacuum the country witnessed after the fall of Ben Ali's regime to take control over a number of mosques in order to preach for its ideas and recruit new members. About 400 of Tunisia's 5685 mosques (2017 statistics) are believed to have come under Salafi control, and about 50 under Salafi jihadists. Their preaching and charitable activities allowed them to expand their influence in the public sphere and to recruit militants in the suburbs of Tunis and the inland regions, known to have remained on the fringes of the economic development experienced by the Capital and the northeast region of Tunisia, especially Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Kasserine to reach according to a movement spokesperson (Bilel Chaouachi) more than 50.000 supporters.

However, some members of Ansar al-Sharia have indeed engaged in violence, either outside Tunisia by joining the jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq or inside Tunisia by targeting security forces and secular political figures. Outside Tunisia, as it was written above, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights declared in July 2015 that there are more than 5,500 Tunisians fighting in jihadi groups. Inside Tunisia, the decision of some members to take up arms resulted in a series of attacks against the Tunisian police and the assassination of two political figures from the opposition, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, in February and July 2013, respectively. The assassinations put the post-revolutionary political transition process at risk because secular political forces accused Ansar al-Sharia of being behind the assassinations and the ruling Islamist party Ennahda of protecting it.

Two approaches competed within Ennahda in how to deal with this crisis. The first argued that by allowing Jihadi Salafists to work publicly, they would moderate their ideas through interaction with other Islamic groups, and thus could be an asset to the Islamic movement in their competition against the secular forces. The second perceived them as a threat not only to the Tunisian political process, but also to the Islamic experience of Ennahda. The rise of political violence in 2013 gave the second position the legitimacy to act.

Thus, in May 2013, the government refused to allow Ansar al-Sharia to hold its third annual meeting. In August 2013, the Prime Minister, also Ennahda's secretary general, declared Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization as he considered in a public declaration that this movement was involved in the killings of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi and other security officers. The declaration led to the arrest of more than 6,500 young people who were members of or sympathized with Ansar al-Sharia, and also prompted many other Jihadi Salafists to leave the country for Libya or Syria, most of them joining Islamic state (ISIS) in Libya.

The vacuum left by Ansar al-Sharia allowed other violent groups to expand. This is the case of Al Qaeda affiliated group Uqba Bin Nafa' brigade, operating at the Algeria-Tunisian border, as well as ISIS in Libya which established a camp near the Tunisian border, that focused on training Tunisian fighters. Among this group were the individuals responsible for attacks in 2015 against the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the beach resort of Sousse Tunisians who had joined ISIS in Libya also led the armed attack on the Tunisian border town of Ben Guardane in March 2016 with the aim to establish an Islamic emirate on the Tunisian- Libyan borders.

The crisis of the city of Ben Guardane (March 2016)

Ben Guerdane is part of the governorate of Medenine, located in south eastern Tunisia, close to the border with Libya. It has a population of 79,912, with an average age of 30 years old. The illiteracy rate is about 19 percent and the unemployment rate is 18.85 percent.

The Islamic State saw in the city of Ben Guerdane a suitable target that could be easily controlled to establish an Islamic emirate from it, similar to what happened in the city of Sirte in Libya. The Islamic State fighters have founded their vision on three main factors:

First: the state of socio-economic marginalization, under which suffers Ben Guardane. The city has suffered from decades of marginalization and discrimination where the Tunisian central state has been unable to provide basic services for the local population. The economic situation in Ben Guerdane is quite fragile, relying mainly on what the local population calls "border trade", including smuggling activities. Employment in other sectors than trade is in sharp decline, with 5.12 percent in manufacturing and 7.47 percent in the agriculture and fishing sector. Even the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2014 has demonstrated a certain degree of popular support for the phenomenon of violent extremism in economically disadvantaged regions— including the Ben Guardane region.

Second, the religiously conservative nature of the city as well as the involvement of a number of its youth already in jihadist organizations, which led some researchers to refer to Ben Guardane as one of the hotbeds of violent radicalization. This discourse gave the impression that the city can welcome the entry of the Islamic State. Some of the city's residents did indeed helped ISIS in storing weapons before the attack on the city and prepared houses and hiding places for the attackers.

Third, the geographical location of the city. It is a border area stretching over a vast desert space to the border with Libya. This border area where the control over the borders was weakened during the "revolution", would facilitate the infiltration of

terrorist groups, as well as in the smuggling of weapons and vehicles, which has already occurred during the attack on the city.

The Islamic State attack began at the dawn of March 7, 2016, when militants from Libya assisted by 50 members affiliated with the IS in Ben Gaurdane to invade the city with the aim of controlling it. Contrary to Tunisia's previous terrorist operations, this attack was not only a "terrorist" attack aimed at killing and wounding state officials, but rather it looked like an organized military operation aimed at capturing the city. The operation began with several simultaneous attacks on army barracks, the local headquarters of the National Guard and the city's police station. At the same time, these attacks were accompanied by three assassinations targeting a customs officer, a police officer and a member of the National Guard's anti-terrorist unit. The operation appeared to be an attempt to provoke a "local revolt" as the attackers sought to win the support of a large part of the local population by inciting the rebellion against state institutions while trying to take military control of the city. Members of the armed men began to roam the city center, declaring on loudspeakers that they belong to IS and asking the residents to support them. Others also took the initiative to distribute the weapons to the local residents.

However, the majority of the city's residents refused to join the attack. With the arrival of the Tunisian security forces to the city from the police, the National Guard and the army, the people of the city joined the security forces immediately, and they refused to cover the armed militants and even began to help the security forces in guiding them to their the locations. The operation ended with repelling the attack with a death toll of: 36 Islamic State militants, eleven members of the security forces and seven civilians.

Best practices and conclusions

The evolution of the internal, political and security situation in Tunisia over the past 5 years shows important successful practices when it comes to preventing violent extremism.

- 1- **On the political level:** Addressing secular-Islamist polarization deprives violent groups from the fertile ground to consolidate their presence within the society. The experience of **the Quartet** led by the UGTT, together with the UTICA (the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts), the LTHD (the Tunisian Human Rights League) and the Bar Association, has contributed to address this polarized political environment by playing a mediatory role between both secularists and Islamists groups. The Quartet managed to break the political deadlock through the negotiation of a roadmap which re-established a political framework for finalising the draft constitution. By protecting Tunisia's democratic transition, this initiative has, even if unintendedly deprived violent groups from an enabling political environment to consolidate their presence.
- 2- **On the security level:** The main challenge that often face counterterrorism efforts is how to allow for the cooperation between the security and non-security ministries in order to combat terrorism. In order to address this challenge, Tunisia has established in 2016 the **National Counter-Terrorism Committee** (Commission Nationale de Lutte Antiterroriste). This inter-ministerial structure involves a dozen of ministries which are relevant to PVE activities. This includes the following ministries: Human rights, Youth and Sports, Women family and

childhood, Education, Culture and Religious Affairs. Its main mission is to oversee the implementation the national Counter-Terrorism strategy and coordinate all efforts across ministries in the field of counterterrorism and PVE. The National Counter-Terrorism Committee works as a platform that aims at facilitating inter-agency coordination and intelligence sharing. In 2017, Tunisia set up **the National Intelligence Centre**, an institution designed to overcome problems with coordination and information-sharing between intelligence agencies that had plagued the country's counter-terrorism efforts since the revolution. Its main tasks include: providing analyses, risk and threat assessments for the prime minister and the head of the National Security Council (NSC); drawing strategic guidelines and priorities for the NSC; and devising the national intelligence strategy and seeing it through implementation (Matei and Kawar, 2020).

- 3- **On the civil society level:** Tunisian Civil society play an active in role to prevent violent radicalization. One of this civil society initiative is the **Tunisia CVE Prison Project** led by Search for Common Ground-Tunisia. The main objective of the project is to prevent engagement with violent ideologies amongst adult and young Tunisian detainees during and after their period of detention through improved rehabilitation and reintegration programming. This objective is achieved through two specific outcomes. First, enhance the capacity of the staff of the Directorate General for Prisons and Re-education (DGPR), of prisons, and of Child Detention Centers (CDCs) to manage, rehabilitate, and reintegrate adult and young detainees, including violent extremist prisoners (VEPs) and imprisoned returning foreign terrorist fighters (RFTFs), in line with international human rights standards for treatment of detainees. And, second to increase cooperation and coordination between state and non-state stakeholders in efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate detainees, including violent extremist prisoners and returning foreign terrorist fighters.

To conclude, Tunisia has made important steps to face the post 2011 wave of violent extremism. The summer of 2013 has been particularly a tipping point, where the high level of political polarization allowed radical groups to consolidate its presence in the country. However, since then, Tunisia has succeeded in protecting its young democratic system, and has hence deprived these extremist groups from an enabling environment to expand. On the security level, the Tunisian security apparatus has shown over the past few years an increase in its ability to counter violent extremists' groups. While the number of terrorist attacks reached its peak in 2013 with 29 attacks. It decreased to 4 in 2017, before increasing again to 19 in 2018.

However, Tunisia still needs to address the challenges related to how to manage its religious sphere, and the urgent need to address its socio-economic problems. On the religious level, the Tunisian state has been trying to fully control the religious sphere in order to prevent radical voices from taking advantage of the mosques to preach for its ideas. However, in an environment monopolized by official institutions, parallel religious spheres can create breeding grounds for jihadist groups to preach their ideas and recruit new members. State religious institutions should manage the religious sphere, not to monopolize it. And finally, socio-economic grievances remain the main challenge that needs to be tackled to prevent more desperate youth from joining these violent groups.

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