

Preventing Violent Extremism in Tunisia

Much remains to be done to address the root causes of radicalization in Tunisia. Switzerland could make a meaningful contribution by creating spaces for dialogue, focusing on the grassroots level and supporting research.

By Lisa Watanabe

As the only Arab Spring country to have truly taken a democratic path, Tunisia holds much promise. It has held several free and fair elections, adopted a new constitution and will soon hold municipal elections that could further strengthen the democratic transition. Yet, the country still faces a number of challenges, not least jihadist radicalization. Tunisia suffered major terrorist incidents in 2015, followed by insurgent attacks near the border with Libya in 2016, all of which dealt a heavy blow to the economy. Tunisians have made up a significant proportion of foreign fighters in Syria, Iraq and Libya, many joining the ranks of Islamic State (IS). A proportion of these individuals have already returned home, only some of whom are known to the authorities. While Tunisia has done a great deal to counter terrorism, much still needs to be done to address the causes of radicalization in the country. Switzerland has committed to deepening its cooperation with Tunisia in the area of preventing violent extremism (PVE). It should focus on measures that draw on its experience in creating space for dialogue, acting at the grassroots level, and supporting research.

Discerning the Causes

Although still sparse, studies on violent extremism in Tunisia do tell us a number of things. As in most other country con-

texts, there is no one profile of a violent extremist that fits all. The levels of education, as well as the professional backgrounds of individuals convicted for terrorist-related activities, appear to vary considerably.¹ Equally, there appears to be no one pathway to violent extremism. A complex mix

Key Points

- A number of national level factors appear to contribute to radicalization, some of which Tunisian authorities have begun to respond to, notably through efforts to regain control of the religious sphere and initiate security sector reform.
- However, much remains to be done, particularly to improve relations between youth and police, to reduce the socio-economic marginalization in underprivileged areas, and strengthen trust in political elite.
- A more balanced approach to returnees from Syria, Iraq and Libya also needs to be developed that combines criminalization with de-radicalization and re-integration.
- Switzerland could make a contribution by supporting the creation of spaces for dialogue between youth and police at the community level, efforts to integrate youth into the formal economy in neglected regions, civic engagement projects that facilitate youth input and local government responsiveness, as well as supporting additional research on context- and gender-specific drivers of radicalization in Tunisia.

of factors linked to an individual's psychosocial make-up, his or her milieu and the broader national context are likely to come together in different ways to lead to radicalisation.

That said, a number of factors, often linked to past and present policies, do seem to have contributed to radicalization in Tunisia. Some of these factors are conjunctural and no longer play the same role they once did, notably the loss of control of several hundred mosques to radical preachers and greater opportunities for open proselytism that marked the immediate years following the removal of former Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Others are linked to Tunisia's not-so-distant past, but remain pertinent today. The weakening and politicization of the official religious sphere under Ben Ali robbed its representatives of the capacity to provide credible and relevant religious guidance to a population equipped with only a minimal level of formal religious education.² Those in search of spiritual inspiration looked elsewhere for guidance, but did so in the absence of the right tools with which to counter misinformation about Islam, notably sound knowledge of the principles of Islam and critical thinking.

People convicted of terrorist-related activities, also identify profound animosity towards the police and security forces as a factor leading to their radicalization. Young people vulnerable to radicalization similarly express negative sentiments towards the police, often formed as a result of police corruption, violent interactions with police officers, and being stopped and searched for no obvious reason.³ Perceived excesses undertaken in the context of reinforced counter-terrorism measures post-2015 are likely to further feed such perceptions of persecution and injustice, adding fuel to the fire.

Besides negative interactions with the police, socio-economic marginalization appears to be a common characteristic among those convicted on terrorism charges, as well as those vulnerable to radicalization. This kind of marginalization is most readily associated with a lack of job opportunities for young people, particularly those living in regions that have been traditionally neglected in development terms, notably the country's interior, west and south. Frustrations about the lack of economic perspective are further aggravated by a lack of cultural opportunities through which young people could develop social ties and gain social recognition in the absence of work-related status.⁴

Socio-economic marginalization often appears to be intertwined with disaffection with the political elite. Young people vulnerable to radicalization seem to associate lack of economic opportunities with corruption on the



A woman sits outside her house, which was damaged in fighting between Islamic State jihadists and government forces, in Ben Guerdane, near the Libyan border, Tunisia, 12 April 2016 Zohra Bensemra / Reuters

part of local officials in particular.⁵ In the eyes of many youth, jobs go to those who are well-connected, not those who are the most qualified. Disillusionment with officials is not just palpable at the local level, but also at the national level. Individuals vulnerable to radicalization appear to have lost faith in their politicians' sincerity, as well as the political process as a viable means of change.

Grievances associated with these structural factors have generated incentive structures that have been easily exploitable, due to conjunctural factors at the regional level, notably the establishment of IS-held territories in Syria, Iraq and neighbouring Libya. IS propaganda has been very successful in tapping into these incentive structures. It promised political purpose and social prestige gained from fighting for a greater cause, a sense of belonging once in the caliphate, and material benefits, including salaries and housing.

Addressing the Causes

The Tunisian authorities have taken a number of steps to address some of these causal factors. Much has been done to try to reduce the opportunities for recruitment, including re-instating officially appointed imams in mosques that escaped the control of the authorities, closing down Islamic charities with alleged links to terrorism and designating the Salafi movement, Ansar Al-Sharia, as a terrorist organization. To be sure, some of these measures have reduced recruitment possibilities. Yet, too firm a grip on the religious sphere could be counter-productive.

Official religious actors need to be perceived as credible and relevant if they are to compete with extremist voices. In particular, they need the space to be able to tailor their discourse to local concerns, just as extremists do, and to make it appealing to youth. They may also need addi-

tional training to do so, as well as support for outreach to the community, especially to youth.

Of course, some people may not be inclined to seek religious advice from mainstream religious actors, looking instead to non-official religious actors within their own religious community. Bridges into Salafi communities need to be built, perhaps by working with young, influential figures in those communities who are willing to oppose violent extremism.⁶

Improving relations between law enforcement authorities and citizens should be seen as a critical part of preventing radicalization. Citizens need to feel that the security services and police are there to protect them. This means that counter-terrorism measures need to be in line with the rule of law and human rights, and underpinned by robust oversight mechanisms, to avoid excesses. Progress has been made in this regard. However, momentum for security sector reform (SSR) must be maintained. Improving relations between police and citizens will also require active outreach to citizens and greater responsiveness to their security concerns.

Addressing socio-economic marginalization requires a regional development strategy that focuses on development of the Interior and border regions in the West and South. People living in these areas need to see that there is a rupture with past policies and to benefit from the same level of services as coastal areas. Governance vacuums in neglected neighbourhoods of big urban centres also need to be rectified and combined with the creation of spaces for social and recreational activities for young people.

There is also a need for political elites at the national and local levels to more effectively engage with young people, and to convince them of their willingness to respond to their concerns. In part, this involves improving communication strategies and increasing citizens' access to information. However, it will require active outreach to youth, who may be deeply skeptical about formal governance structures, both at the local and national levels.

In addition, the liberation of IS-held territories in Syria, Iraq and Libya heightens the need to develop effective ways to deal with individuals returning from these conflict zones. Incarcerating returnees may seem like an effective and politically low-risk way of dealing with them. However, relying too heavily on prosecution could prove problematic, not least because prosecution may prove difficult in the absence of evidence of foreign-fighter-related crimes and the lack of de-radicalisation and re-integration programmes within the penal system. An approach that combines criminalization with such "softer" measures could provide

a better chance of avoiding radicalization in prisons and recidivism on release.

The return of women and children from formerly IS-held territories poses additional challenges. In general, research suggests that political motivations are common to both men and women. This could be the case in the Tunisian context too. Female returnees may also require de-radicalization, particularly since women have a disproportionate influence on the education of their children.

Switzerland's Contribution

While addressing the causes of radicalization is a task for the Tunisian authorities, Tunisia's international partners should support them in their efforts. Within the context of its North Africa Programme, Switzerland has been engaged in numerous activities that contribute in an indirect way to PVE in Tunisia. Switzerland lends support to SSR, particularly with regard to improving oversight and building up civil society's capacity to push for reform within the security sector. Further initiatives aimed at transforming relations between youth and police at the local level would be worthy of support, particularly those that aim at facilitating dialogue. This would not only help to build trust between young people and police officers, but also to establish policing priorities and provide early warning mechanisms.

Switzerland has also been actively supporting projects that contribute to job creation in disadvantaged regions of Tunisia, particularly in the central-west and south-west. A focus on regenerating the economies of such regions remains relevant in the PVE context, particularly actions that aim to include youth in the formal economy. This could be particularly pertinent in border regions,

Further Reading

Le terrorisme en Tunisie à travers les dossiers judiciaires Mouldi Guesoumi et al., *Centre tunisien de la recherche et des études sur le terrorisme*, October 2016.

A useful quantitative study that compiles and analyses the cases of 1000 individuals convicted in Tunisia on terrorist charges from 2011 to 2015.

Tunisia's Jihadi Problem and How to Deal with It Lisa Watanabe and Fabien Merz, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4, Winter 2017.

An overview of the main drivers of jihadist radicalization in Tunisia.

Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia *Center for Insights in Survey Research*, Winter 2016.

This study provides a snapshot of the drivers of radicalization in Béja – an area Tunisia that has contributed a significant number of foreign fighters.

where the security crackdown since 2015 is inadvertently forcing people out of the informal smuggling economy upon which they have traditionally relied, further exacerbating their exclusion.

As mentioned, youth vulnerable to radicalization appear to associate lack of job prospects with lack of good governance at the local level. Support for initiatives aimed at increasing the transparency of local authorities with regards to job availability, as well as training and funding opportunities could help to improve the perception of local political elites. Civic engagement projects focused on involving youth in the planning processes of social, cultural and sports-related activities and facilities at the community level could also contribute to reducing socio-cultural marginalization in some of Tunisia's underprivileged areas, where vulnerability to radicalization appears particularly severe. Officials may require additional training in civic and youth engagement to do so optimally. Switzerland could facilitate this.

One additional line of action that is set out in Switzerland's Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism and is not usually emphasized enough in PVE discussions, is the need for more contextual knowledge about radicalization. Supporting the development of a Tunisian PVE research network could be a good place to

start. In particular, more on-the-ground studies that draw upon sufficiently large samples of interviewees are still needed to examine which drivers of radicalization are most important in different localities. Such studies should also have a gender dimension. Female radicalization remains comparatively underexplored, even though Tunisian women have departed for IS-held territories.

Selected sources

1. Mouldi Guessoumi et al., "Le terrorisme en Tunisie à travers les dossiers judiciaires," Centre tunisien de la recherche et des études sur le terrorisme, October 2016.
2. Andrew McDonnell et al., "Reimagining the Religious Sector: A New Vision for Countering Violent Extremism in Tunisia," International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, February 2018, pp. 4–5, 7.
3. Emma ben Arab, "No Single Pattern in Radicalisation of Foreign Fighters, Says Study," *The Arab Weekly*, 13 August 2017; Center for Insights in Survey Research, "Understanding Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia," Winter 2016, p. 15.
4. Center for Insights in Survey Research, *ibid.*, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
6. See McDonnell et al., *Op.cit.*

Dr. Lisa Watanabe is a senior researcher, focusing on North Africa, at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich

Policy Perspectives is edited by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich. The CSS is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

Editor: [Martin Zapfe](#) / Assistant Editor: Prem Mahadevan

Comments welcome at PolicyPerspectives@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

Recent editions of **Policy Perspectives**:

- ! **Cyberspace is a Consensual Hallucination** (6/2) by Robert Dewar
- ! **Rethinking Mediation: Resolving Religious Conflicts** (6/1) by Jonas Baumann, Daniel Finnbogason, and Isak Svensson
- ! **The China Challenge Calls for US Leadership** (5/6) by Brian G. Carlson

For more editions, and for a free online subscription, visit <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/css-policy-perspectives.html>

© 2018 Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich www.css.ethz.ch
ISSN: 2296-6471