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Macro-Level Drivers of Violent Extremism in Tunisia Through New Institutionalism

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Abstract: Using a neo-institutionalist approach, this article analyzes state-institutional dynamics and practices influencing radicalization and violent extremism (VE) in Tunisia in the context of political transformation after 2011. Focusing on macro-level analysis, it highlights institutional limitations such as slow innovation, poor coordination, and resistance to change. A key finding is the persistent triangular dynamic of regional disparities, socio-economic grievances, and unequal development at the heart of a failing long-standing governance-development model, fueling frustration especially among youths. Violent extremist narratives exploit these vulnerabilities, while moderate counter-narratives remain weak. The predominance of security-focused responses fails to address root causes, emphasizing the need for inclusive, preventive policies co-designed with communities and civil society. Effective VE prevention requires improved institutional coordination and engagement in in-depth consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

Keywords: violent extremism, macro-level, new institutionalism, youth, Tunisia

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Introduction

Tunisia has experienced a series of violent extremist incidents at various periods over the past 17 years. These incidents continued even after the country embarked on a comprehensive transition to democracy starting in 2011, as a series of successive violent operations targeted security forces, soldiers and civilians. The military and security institutions succeeded in dealing with most of these operations, but this approach did not break with the phenomenon by treating it at its roots.

Countering violent extremism is important to protect the lives of individuals and the security of nations. However, to achieve sustainable results in this direction, countering violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) efforts must be based on evidence through research that both addresses its root causes as well as its dynamic and complex enabling contexts.

This article is produced as part of the research carried out within the CONNEKT project (Contexts of Violent Extremism in MENA and Balkan Societies).¹ It seeks to understand the relationship between policies, state institutions involved in countering radicalization and violent extremism, including their strategic role and their daily routine practices, and the drivers of the phenomena of radicalization and violent extremism (cf. Kapidžić, Hirkić, and Turčalo 2025). It is based on an analysis of the results of field research consisting 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 analyzed via a qualitative data matrix.

The article uses the neo-institutional approach in order to analyze the role of institutions and policies with regards to violent extremism. This approach considers institutions as the locus of influence and change; therefore, it explores the effect of the institutional system on the dynamics of change. This approach defines the institution as a set of rules and practices that are structured 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 hand, they are relatively flexible with individuals' expectations and changing external circumstances.

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

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- 1 CONNEKT addresses several research gaps in dealing with the radicalization of young people in the MENA and the Balkans by focusing on the drivers of radicalization and VE there through a dynamic understanding trying to grasp the complexity of radicalization and VE as social phenomena, in order to produce a differentiated understanding of the Social Contexts of Radicalization and VE that will help improve prevention policies and programs. The project is working on producing a multi-level analysis of radicalization through the interplay of institutions, communities (social groups), social contexts and individuals on three analytical levels: The macro-level, the meso-level and the micro-level.

1. What is the role of Tunisian state institutions in preventing and combating the phenomena of radicalization and violent extremism and their relationship with the factors driving the phenomena?
2. What are the most significant macro-drivers of violent extremism in the Tunisian context?

This article will first give an overview of the paradigm of neo-institutionalism. Then it will explain the research methodology. In the third section, the article will provide a description of the political context of Tunisia to situate the institutions and their actors. The fourth section will examine how state approaches and policies have influenced institutions and how these interact with state dynamics, especially during the transitional phase Tunisia experienced after the 2011 revolution. Considering this institutional analysis, the fifth section will offer a mapping of the drivers of violent extremism in Tunisia from a macro-level perspective.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

New Institutionalism as Research Paradigm for Macro-Level Analysis of the Drivers of Radicalization and VE

This article aims to develop an understanding of the macro drivers (essentially related to the state, its policies and its institutions) affecting the phenomenon of violent extremism, by studying not only the state's legal texts and legislative frameworks, but also the state institutions and the evolution of their policies in Tunisia post 2011. We think that this understanding will be effective by using a solid and broad theory that better helps grasp the institutional dynamics and the complexities of the social-political contexts of the country. Understanding policies and institutions necessitates, in fact, that we consider not only institutions as formal (legal) entities but also that we consider the behavior of individual actors within institutions as well as the relationship between institutions and their complex contexts.

Neo-institutionalism helps to better grasp the political and social dynamics within and outside institutions by combining the values, norms and rules of the institutions with the stakeholders and political actors' perceptions, actions and interactions, all while enabling consideration of the evolution and transformation of the economic and socio-political contexts that state experiences. This theoretical framework will help better map the macro factors that promote violent extremism and collate them in a dynamic and objective way, by providing the opportunity to identify the various actors involved in combatting VE, focusing on the empirical impact of institutions' norms on behaviors, their representations of the norms and rules as well as their interaction with institutions and a changing political context.

Methodology

The article will be based on the analysis of the results of qualitative fieldwork conducted in Tunisia over a period of three months (from December 2020 to March 2021). Data Collection activities included two focus groups, 20 semi-structured interviews with institutional representatives, academics and civil society actors and one stakeholder workshop aimed at discussing the findings and further explore their validity and relevance. The workshop also discussed with diverse stakeholders the role of the seven factors in driving radicalization and VE. The data collected was analyzed through a thematic matrix that contributed to better capture trends and intersections within the data in relation to the drivers of VE at the macro-level. This analysis also enabled us to grasp the role of institutions in mapping the potential drivers of VE.

Macro Context in Tunisia

Political Regime

During the period between Tunisia's independence in 1956 and the 2011 Revolution, the Tunisian political system was a republican presidential system based on a single ruling party (the Neo-Destour Party, during Bourguiba's period, and the Democratic and Constitutional Rally (RCD) party under Ben Ali's era). The 1959 Constitution granted the President extensive executive and legislative powers, while imposing restrictions on prerogatives of elected legislative and judicial bodies. After the revolution of 17 December 2010–14 January 2011, the Constituent Assembly (Parliament) drafted a new Constitution that was ratified and formally adopted on 27 January 2014.² After the ratification of the new Constitution, the political regime took a new shape: from an authoritarian presidential system to a republican representative democratic system with a strong focus on participatory democracy (UNDP and International IDEA 2014 – Tunisian Constitution: Preamble).

The Impact of the Post-Independence State Model on Territorial Disparities and Economic Grievances

Since independence, the Tunisian state has adopted a highly centralized governance model, which for more than half a century regulated the state's relationship with all sectors. This has typically resulted in an unbalanced developmental model (Salihi 2019) that

2 The research was undertaken between March 2020 and March 2021 and does not cover later political and institutional developments, with the application of article 81 of the Constitution to shut down Parliament and the subsequent cancelling of the Constitution by the President and writing of a new one and its imposition in 2023.

favors the centre (the capital and coastal areas) at the expense of the peripheries (the interior regions). One of the corollaries of this highly centralized governance model is the adoption of development/urban policies that focused on building major cities, neglecting the development of rural areas, which continued to suffer from deep marginalisation as well as the lack of public services (World Bank Group 2014). This centralised model led to clear and deep economic and social disparities between the regions of the country, exacerbated by cultural and political marginalisation.

Despite the image of openness,³ the Tunisian regime, especially starting from the 1990s adopted laws and procedures that limited competition and restricted private initiative and investment (World Bank Group 2014). The state 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 (Interview 8, March 2021). This has led to severe restrictions on economic initiatives and produced a continuously 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 neighbourhoods of the capital, and major urban centres (Chirchi, Ghribi, and Aloui 2025), as well as the suburbs and the interior regions (Interview 4, January 2021; Interview 9, March 2021).

It is worth noting that the state policies, administrative procedures and institutional rules described above operate in Tunisia not just as a way to organize economic activities, but also as a form of control over society (March and Olsen 2008). This has resulted in the building of 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 recognized 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 *de facto* into a dictatorship.

As this monopolistic governance model has grown over the past 30 years, the level of clientelism and patronage has deepened. The regime was able to extend its hegemony over state institutions, making their work limited to achieving the interests of the ruling

3 Starting from the 1980s, the country has claimed adopting economic policies that were supposed to open the door for economic liberalism and privatisation in attempts to make the Tunisian economy attractive to foreign investment. These trends were clearer especially in the 1990's, with a new president (Zine Abidine Ben Ali), who built the legitimacy of his rule on an equation where economic liberalism and elimination of barriers to foreign investment were supposed to take the country in the direction of economic and social prosperity.

circle and its allies through a system of corruption and privileges (Sadiqui 2011; Lewis 2011). With time, a sense of injustice increased among Tunisians, especially educated youth (those with university degrees), that the labour market was unable to absorb and provide access to employment opportunities (Yerkes and Yahmed 2018). The feeling of injustice also increased among the general population due to a severe lack of freedoms (Chakroun 2018) and of transparency as well as the state's failures in achieving social justice (Siebert 2021) prior to 2011. 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 citizens (Hibou, Meddeb, and Hamdi 2011). It is in the context of the structural and macro-level impacts of this governance system as well as the policies and functioning of state institutions that the drivers of radicalization and VE will be analysed in this article in light of the results of field research.

Institutions: Impact, Interactions and Influences of Policy Approaches

Our interviews with several state institution actors within the current study, revealed that there is a shared view of the challenges for the national state in Tunisia, following independence, in upholding its promise to promote development and social justice. This has gradually led to the erosion of its political legitimacy as the state has had limited success in assuring the economic and social integration of all segments of society.

This view of government has become increasingly shared within various sectors, not only in civil society, and academia but also state institutions because of the erosion of the foundational principles on which the administration had been built. As many of our interviewees highlighted, the slogans, objectives and principles of the post-independence state were “emptied of meaning” (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021), 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.

This had resulted, during the decade preceding the revolution in 2011, in a noticeable inefficiency in the working dynamics of state institutions during at least the first decade of the new millennium. Some of the representatives of the institutions that we interviewed attributed this inefficiency of state institutions in managing public affairs to problems within the administration, that had occurred in the relationship between political decision makers and the administration, resulting in flaws in executing policies and transforming them into a tangible reality. Ouannes (2010) stressed that a collapse of confidence led to the formation of new administrative behaviours represented in resistance and reluctance to implement orders from the highest levels of the state to the administration

and translate them into routine practices.⁴ The recurrence of this behaviour produced a pattern that continued in the 10 years after 2011, 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.

Moreover, faced with numerous demands for institutional reform following the revolution, the old Tunisian administration had shown great resistance to reforms in order to protect itself from the dynamics of change. This resistance remained, even though several institutional representatives we interviewed acknowledged the need for reform. It is as if the institutional bureaucracy had become an entity that was independent of its individual members, working to preserve its existence rather than interacting with changes and pressures. Several of our interviewees reported that as the old bureaucratic structures remained for a long time shielded from proper evaluation of its practices, norms and values, as well as without renewing its methods and modes of operation and interaction, they became deeply resistant to reform and change. A long-term lack of reform created a situation where state institutions became unable to adjust the pace of their work with the social and political changes in their environment. The interviewees described the processes and tools of governance as rusty working at a very slow pace and only oiled with clientelist and corruption practices that have become deeply ingrained in the institutional culture inherited from the pre-revolution regime.

Part of the policies and processes that were changing at a slow pace are those related to the field of security where the state institutions remained dependent on the experiences inherited from the authoritarian system. Some interviewees talked about a “security culture” that is still ingrained in the state’s institutions where the norm is to restrict information and consider “hard security” as solution to all problems. Most agreed that “hard security” solutions were key in confronting the terrorist phenomenon in Tunisia, but they fail to address the root causes of the problem and thus cannot sufficiently deter the threat of extremism and violent extremism.

Our institutional stakeholders emphasized the increase in projects and programs combating violent extremism during 2015, more specifically as the country was grappling with several VE incidents. The increase continued but at a lower rate until 2017, and to a lesser extent in 2021. However, the state programs are not well known to the public as they are

4 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: “The administration no longer went along with authoritarian political decisions.” (Interview 10, December 2020).

seldom covered in the media and because of weak communication with civil society organizations (CSOs).⁵

The Impact and Effectiveness of Institutional Prevention Policies

Discussing the effectiveness of the state's prevention policies, most of our institutional stakeholders agreed on some common observations. It is noticeable for instance that new policy approaches were said to be 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 was presented as not being 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 behaviors occurs between the technical

5 The National Counter-Terrorism Committee is a national structure tasked with developing guidelines for state institutions in countering/preventing violent extremism and developing state policies and programs implemented a significant number of programs within the framework of international cooperation.

These various programs are limited by weak coordination among the various actors involved in and between the different programs in order to support effective implementation. They are also challenged by changes in ministry officials or when passing from one government to another, due to the unstable political situation in a newborn democratic system. Bureaucracy and red tape also disrupt the implementation of these programs.

As part of the state's policies in preventing violent extremism, the Ministry of Religious Affairs launched a campaign against violent narratives in 2015 entitled "We are Islam" targeting young people on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Another example of institutional preventive efforts is the collaboration between the General Administration of Prisons and Rehabilitation with the US Department of State on establishing community reintegration centres of extremism and violent extremism prisoners who were released (Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme 2020).

Since 2016, the Government, under the supervision of the Ministry for Relations with Constitutional Commissions, Civil Society and Human Rights, launched the "Alternative Narratives" platform (Amouri 2019). The platform aims to develop, produce and promote alternative narratives to combat extremism and terrorism in partnership with civil society and the private sector through technology and modern means of communication in order to consolidate among Tunisian youth a culture of dialogue, tolerance, diversity and acceptance.

In mid-2017, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research allocated 2.5 million Tunisian dinars over five years to support academic efforts to better understand the roots of extremism among young people and to develop plans and methods to face it. This initiative is implemented in partnership between Tunisian research centers across the country, university professors and researchers from the Ministries of the Interior, Defence and Health (Sliti 2017).

side (of the administration) and the new approach” (Interview 11, March 2021). However, the interviewee still maintained that slow change was taking place: “I believe there is a relative change happening as cumulative action generates fundamental change” (Interview 11, March 2021).

Moreover, it appears that the policies and approaches adopted by institutions were based on a weak understanding of VE and radicalization processes and contexts as well as the absence of clear rules, in addition to leaving any assessment of the phenomenon to bureaucratic officials (Interview 10, December 2020). On the other hand, efforts to design a comprehensive and participatory, preventive approach between the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and other ministries (like the Ministry of Culture) did 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 was 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 join efforts to find a comprehensive preventive approach but, as usually happens, we do not find the structures that will work on that” (Interview 7, February 2021).

In addition, the interviewees indicated that the necessary data to implement policies was not always readily available to members of the administration, and not just to the public who have a right to access information. A bureaucratic, internal system continued to monopolise information and limit sharing it even internally (Focus Group 2, March 2021), which was 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).

As for implementing programs, the mandatory rules of the administration take a vertical hierarchical form, whereby programs 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]” (Interview 7, February 2021). This indicates that political decision-making after 2011 continued to operate within the old system of working practices developed in a very different context and based on an old approach to combating VE focused on the sole use of “hard power” which appear to contribute to creating the very environment that feeds VE.

This situation results in what many of the interviewees (Interview 6, January 2021; Interview 10, December 2020; Interview 3, January 2021; Interview 7, February 2021, Interview 11, March 2021) identified as a dissonance between policies and daily practices in countering VE. Although most considered that the state apparatus and bureaucratic processes were undergoing transformation, this was a “difficult process” or a “very slow transformation”, to the point that “external observers think that little was changing”. This

situation results in a lack of effectiveness in policy implementation, in addition to the lack of inter-agency communication (that is, between the various institutions), and contributes to producing structural vacuums and inadequate procedural arrangements weakening executive bodies and limiting intervention to purely formulaic approaches that fail to properly address the prevention objectives declared in the policies.

In addition to this, many of the interviewees (Interview 6, January 2021; Interview 10, December 2020; Interview 3, January 2021; Interview 7, February 2021) pointed to the contradictory roles of institutions in countering VE. One expert described a lack of communication and coordination between ministries. “Ministries are like an archipelago in which every island is isolated from the other,” as public institutions do not share information with each other nor do they cooperate with researchers⁶. Some of the interviewees considered that forms of cooperation, even where they exist, are so weak that they do not yield any impact, citing the duplication of similar programs in many ministries, which constitutes a waste of resources, effort and time (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021). Ministries have very strong sectorial divisions and identities, which contributes to the emergence of values that prevent synergies in implementing common visions and policies (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021).

Cooperation with civil society has been also described as weak. Our fieldwork findings show that the state institutions’ support to the role of civil society initiatives of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) is not consistent with the desired goals of prevention. Grants were said to be awarded based on the population of the target region, which is a criterion that considers quantity rather than quality, meaning that it does not give priority to the most vulnerable groups and those in need of support. Programs and activities presented according to this criterion, in addition to their number, do not meet the needs of these regions. On the other hand, with regards to funding CSOs’ cultural initiatives on prevention, which is supervised and overseen by various ministries, some interviewees from CSOs indicated that only a few organisations had access to such funds. According to them, the donors’ policy of requiring partial self-funding or withholding funding until proof of expenditure intimidated and excluded many associations. Support to CSOs PVE initiatives remained unequally distributed across the regions, thus contributing to deepening perceptions of regional and social disparities in terms of access to culture.

Overall, interviews, focus groups and stakeholder workshop discussions point to a general lack of coordination of PVE effort whether between the state and civil society or between state institutions themselves with separate strategies and actions plans. For instance, most of the interviewees stated that mechanisms of cooperation and coordination between institutions and individuals concerned with VE do not exist. However, a small number of the interviewees mentioned some attempts or initiatives of cooperation such

6 The researcher cites the refusal of ministries to give him access to information (Focus Group 2, March 2021).

as the “Alternative Narratives Platform.” However, this platform, which was supposed to bring together civil society initiatives working on producing alternative narratives to VE (Espace Manager 2019) was not open to all the actors who were implementing projects or actions in this. Several actors, including the representatives of religious institutions, were not aware of the platform. In addition to this, 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 fulfill this role because of insufficient resources and a lack of oversight prerogative.

While cooperation on prevention policies and programs is weak, state polices remain mostly focused on the “hard security” approach to CVE. Most interviewees saw that the state had directed most of its capacity and resources towards this traditional approach⁷. This was explained as a quick-go-to approach for addressing VE that is well known to state institutions, in addition to be seeming “less costly” compared to the more time-consuming comprehensive approaches involving several stakeholders. In addition, the use of the hard security approach was attributed to a limited understanding of the phenomenon. Despite the state’s cooperation with researchers, this involvement does not result in the translation of research into policies (Interview 5, January 2021; Interview 6, January 2021). The dominance of the hard security approach over the comprehensive approach was attributed to institutional culture in Tunisia, which is built on a repertoire of practices that rely on hard security solutions in various fields to impose state authority and manage social, economic and political demands (Interview 1, December 2020).

Many interviewees, especially the academics, argue that the hard security approach contributes to legitimising violent extremist discourse. They describe a vicious cycle where the use of violence by the state provides the justification for violent behavior by young people in response to perceived police brutality. This cycle of violence is clearly illustrated in the form of sub-culture, such as street art, music and the songs of soccer fans, which frequently express grievances against treatment by the security forces. Thus, the hard security approach contributes to exacerbating the vulnerability to VE narratives. While hard security approaches are still widespread, human security programs are said to be deficient. For this reason, researchers and activists in local, national and international organisations advocate for the development of systematic approaches that help better address the social context that creates vulnerabilities to VE narratives and rhetoric.

7 The respondents in both the focus groups and the individual interviews.

Macro Drivers and Social Contexts of Radicalization and VE

Map of Drivers

Most of the interviewees agree that the seven factors (religion, economic deprivation, political grievances, culture and leisure opportunities, digital literacy, territorial inequalities, and transnational dynamics) are present in the context of Tunisia, but their assessment of the relative importance of these drivers varied.

Regional Disparities

The imbalance between state policies and territorial planning results in clear economic, cultural and social disparities between the regions of the country (Salihi 2019). 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 (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021). 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). We observed similar regional inequalities when it comes to educational opportunities and attainment, access to leisure facilities and cultural activities, which results in perceptions of relative deprivation and a sense of injustice, affecting the interior regions as well as marginalized 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 (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021) thought that social exclusion and social grievances are not necessary 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 from the middle class and even from affluent regions (example Sousse, a coastal governorate). One of the participants explained, based on a conclusion drawn from the "Alternative Narratives" platform project (Amouri 2019), the attraction to extremist rhetoric extends beyond economically or socially marginalized 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 fulfillment for youth by promoting a sense of belonging" (Interview 3, January 2021).

Despite this focus on individual paths to radicalization, our interviews pointed to four distinct regions when it comes to views on the relative importance of different drivers of VE, as follows: The Centre West, the South, marginalized areas of the Governorate of Bizerte and low-income neighbourhoods of the capital.

The Centre West and Northwest Regions

Several participants who had closely studied individual cases of radicalisation highlighted the role of perceptions of regional inequalities in the vulnerability to radical narratives. Cases in the Northwest and Centre West (e.g., Kasserine) of Tunisia were given as an example of this vulnerability. Regional inequalities are attached also to socio-economic grievances caused by the unequal distribution of opportunities and of public services and infrastructures resulting in a strong, collective feeling of exclusion (Meddeb 2016, 2020).

In this context, the vulnerability to radical narratives is not based on “Takfirism” or religious ideology but is instead rooted in narratives of collective and individual grievances and a 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 extends to the beginnings of the post-independence state. They stem from long-standing economic and developmental grievances (Salihi 2019), 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. 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. As a result of this, 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” (Interview 2, January 2021). 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 transnational factor as a clear contributor to the vulnerability to VE processes (International Crisis Group 2014, 2017).

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. Some of our interviewees pointed to the history of 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 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 the fostering factors of vulnerability to crime and violence in the city. Several respondents maintained that the most important social drivers of criminality are also the same causes of vulnerability to VE.

Driving Factors in Urban Social Contexts

It is noticeable that the research participants identified not only the interior regions as having significant vulnerabilities but also some major urban centers such as Tunis and Sousse. Feelings of exclusion and resentment (*hogra*) are indeed heightened in urban contexts in the most disenfranchised neighborhoods 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 delinquency and violence, but also symbolically through 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 prey to criminal and VE network recruitment⁸. Extremist narratives give them hope for the possibility of individual and collective salvation through an alternative form of justice compensating for the perceived absence of social justice. 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, VE narratives appear as making

8 National ID cards, which can be requested by police officers in public, state the holder's place of residence.

sense of the perceived injustices and providing alternatives or solutions to the failure of developmental policies in the urban contexts compensating for the absence of effective and successful economic and social policies.

Education is one of the major policy areas that were emphasized as being linked to vulnerability factors that remain insufficiently addressed. Participants emphasized the high rate of school dropouts whose number reached more than a million students without ever receiving any integration or coaching (Interview 5, January 2021). According to the participants, policy deficits in this regard have led to an alarming situation of youth delinquency and crime threatening social peace. Participants considered that, especially in urban centers of the country “streets have turned into an incubator of crime, delinquency and addiction” for teenagers and children due to “the lack of alternatives” and the “weaknesses of public programs efficiently addressing this issue” (Focus Group 2, March 2021).

In the same context, another interviewee (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021) confirmed that majority of young people who are detained in prisons and correctional facilities come from marginalised urban spaces where social and family ties are weakened in comparison with rural regions in the country. Children and adolescents who go through the correctional facilities tend to return there or to prison with no real reform of their issues.

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 to provide solutions of social integration and positive socialisation for youths 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.

Whether in the interior regions or in the disenfranchised neighborhoods of the urban centers, a wide gap seems to separate society from its governance system and institutions, thus creating a disconnect as well as opportunities for alternative forms of belonging for large swaths of youth in the country.

Radicalism Between Transnational Dynamics and the National Management of Religious Affairs

Analysing the meaning of the emergence of radicalization and VE as a global threat by linking it to macro-level transnational dynamics, some of our interviewees working on strategies of P/CVE considered that the phenomenon has to be linked to the confluence of several crises: Local, regional and global. It is in these contexts that we need to place it as a contemporary issue. They considered that the world witnesses the emergence of radicalisation with every crisis (Interview 2, January 2021). One of the stakeholders inter-

viewed maintained that “with the crisis in the 1960s, there were some armed leftist movements that represented VE groups” and mentioned a “division of the left into political movements and cross-border armed movements” (Interview 2, January 2021; Interview 8, March 2021; Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021). In the same vein, the Arab revolutions came as an extension of a poli-crisis of governance systems in the region, reflecting discrepancies between Arab societies’ transformations matched with inadequate transformations of these governance systems. Caught between these inadequacies, regional transformations and major transnational dynamics, this situation creates weaknesses and empty spaces of legitimacy, legality and sovereignty that are captured by terrorist groups. In this sense, terrorist groups appear as a manifestation of poli-crisis of the governance systems in the region. As an expression of this sort of crisis, radicalism is not attached to a specific discourse or ideology and can take up several forms and ideological discourses. This time, it is dressed up in Islamic garb, which has been described as “the Islamisation of radicalism” (Roy 2017). What is required in this context is “addressing the structural causes of the crisis rather than addressing only its symptoms or expressions” (Stakeholder Workshop, March 2021).

Despite this so-called “Islamisation”, what is remarkable is that those who are recruited by violent extremist groups do not possess significant religious knowledge and are not necessarily religious devotees (i.e., committed to obligatory acts of worship such as fasting and prayer). While some of our interviewees considered that ideology and religion play a central role in motivating action, some others emphasized that the individuals who are recruited by violent extremist groups do not possess significant religious knowledge and are not practising. This opinion is shared by some actors within the religious field.⁹

On the other hand, many of the stakeholders emphasized the role of religion in the prevention of radicalization and VE. One of the participants of the stakeholder workshop, from the Ministry of Religious Affairs (March 2021) 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), highlighting that throughout its history, Tunisia has generated a moderate understanding of religion, which was produced by Al-Zaytounah Mosque (Interview 12, February 2021). These teachings were opposed to the doctrines of Takfirism, which is considered to be the ideological basis of religious extremism (Petré, 2015).

Two of the participants of the stakeholder workshop as well as one of the interviewees explained the emergence of Takfirism by the historical context of state restriction of mainstream religious teaching and discourse due to secularization policies adopted by the

9 Representatives of the Ministry of religious affairs and some academics at the stakeholder workshop, March 2021. Also see Hassaini 2018. The author mentions that 82% of those targeted by terrorist recruiters are not religious individuals.

state.¹⁰ The official religious discourse was said to have been emptied of its practical dimensions that relate to lived reality, causing a spiritual void, the absence of clear religious references.¹¹ In addition, 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, as 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.¹²

Another academic interviewed (Interview 1, December 2020) 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. Discourse analysis of VE narratives uncovers that, at the basis of the religious views adopted by VE groups and used to justify 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” and this subordination as being due to “Muslims not practicing their religion”, thus creating a political narrative transforming victimization into promises of “heroism” and “salvation” (Fottorino 2015).

Summary of VE Macro-Factors Tested by CONNEKT in Tunisia

An analysis of the 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 centralized 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. The map of regional disparities in Tunisia overlaps with the regions most affected by the phenomenon of VE, indicating a strong correlation between regional disparities (the geographical distribution of social injustice and inequalities), on the one hand, and VE, on the other.

10 Participants to the stakeholder workshop from the Ministry of from the Religious Affairs (March 2021) and one interview with an academic (Interview 12, March 2021).

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

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 is illustrated by the highest levels of protest and social contestation.

Economic Exclusion

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 fails to strengthen youth resilience to violence or provide solutions for social integration and positive socialisation, particularly for youths 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, however, is not a collective driver but rather increases and facilitates the impact of transnational dynamics.

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 accentuating 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”. These transnational dynamics are activated through the effects of a highly centralized governance model that was, for decades, based on social, economic and political control and exclusion, and an economic model that exacerbated regional disparities. The latter 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.

Conclusion

Applying a neo-institutionalist perspective, this article analysed the state-institutional dynamics as well as the institutional practices and interactions that may contribute to understanding the macro-level context of radicalization and VE in Tunisia.

The findings at this level revealed significant limitations in the capacity of institutions to address the underlying drivers of radicalization and violent extremism. Progress in adopting innovative approaches was notably slow, hindered by several factors including program duplication, weak inter-agency coordination, and resistance to institutional change.

Moreover, these findings pointed to key structural factors that are essential to understanding the broader social contexts of radicalization and VE in Tunisia. From a macro-level perspective, this article has identified a triangular dynamic involving regional disparities, economic and social grievances and the implementation of an unequal development model. This triangle has emerged as a major driver of both criminal violence and VE and constitutes the source of persistent social and economic challenges, particularly among youths and marginalized communities in Tunisia. The longstanding neglect of these grievances has contributed to deepening frustration and alienation, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive and sustainable responses.

Violent extremism 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, social and political grievances of large swathes of society (youths in particular) and many regions of the country has contributed to providing a fertile environment in which the drivers of extremism and VE grow (Lamloum 2016). Violent extremist narratives have adapted to the grievances found within each region according to its conditions, building on existing vulnerabilities (regional disparities, social, economic and political grievances, as well as unequal access to culture, leisure, and lack of political participation).

These narratives resonate with existing transnational dynamics through the geographical proximity of Algeria and Libya and have become more easily accessible with digitalisation, which has accelerated the spread of the phenomenon by promoting extremist narratives through social media and the internet. These narratives face little competition from alternative narratives such as community values or moderate shared religious values such as those produced by Al-Zaytouna, which have not been empowered to play a role in countering violent 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 predominance of the hard security option fails to address the factors driving VE, which contributed to exacerbating the existing drivers. The implementation of CVE policies needs to be improved through strengthening coordination between the various actors involved in confronting and addressing VE. This requires giving greater priority to preventive approaches co-constructed with local communities, CSOs, and decision-makers, building clear and effective coordination mechanisms, and fostering effective communication within and between institutions. While international support and cooperation are necessary to build sustainable and successful preventive policies, the key to the success of such policies is

authentic institutional engagement in in-depth consultation with society and all stakeholders, centred on common interests to help co-define the priorities of PVE and CVE policies and programs.

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