

Jihad instead of Democracy?

Tunisia's Marginalised Youth
and Islamist Terrorism

Edmund Ratka / Marie-Christine Roux



Five years ago, Tunisians brought down their authoritarian regime under the banner of “work, freedom and dignity”, triggering a series of protests and transformation processes in the Arab World, which in turn had a great impact on Europe. Tunisia remains to be the only country in the region that has successfully transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy. Notwithstanding, radicalization among young people is posing a threat to the country’s democratic transition, as many feel barred from the country’s economic, social and political life. Thus, for many of those lacking prospects, “jihad” – whether abroad or at home – is rendered an ostensibly luring alternative.

Islamist terrorism hit Tunisia in 2015 with full force. The attacks on the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March were followed three months later by another on a hotel beach in Sousse, where 59 foreign tourists were murdered. The tourism industry collapsed, together with any hope of swift economic recovery for the country. In November, a suicide bomber completed his grisly mission on a Presidential Guard bus in the heart of the capital city, taking twelve policemen with him to the grave. The attack wracked the security forces to the core, dealing further blows to the citizens’ trust in their state. The organisation “Islamic State” (IS) laid claim to all three attacks. The assailants: young Tunisians.

For a number of years now several thousand Tunisians have been fighting within the ranks of the “Islamic State” and other terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Although jihadist radicalisation is a global phenomenon, it presents a particular challenge for Tunisia, a still infant democracy. In addition, it marks a stark contrast to the prevailing view of Tunisia, at home and in the world at large, as a haven of tolerance and modernity. In fact, the country is the only one to have made a successful transition towards democracy as part of the “Arab Spring” – a democracy that still endures in spite of all the threats the country faces both internally and externally. Owing to its strong civil society and the ability of its political elite to arrive at a consensus and share power amongst one another,

the country managed to avoid a coup scenario or drifting into a civil war, as has been the case in other countries in the region. Accordingly, it has received international praise for its efforts in recent years, not least among which is the Nobel Peace Prize 2015 won by the National Dialogue Quartet, a group composed of four Tunisian civil society organisations.

The burning question that therefore arises is, despite this, why are sections of Tunisian society, especially the younger generations, susceptible to calls for violence in the name of “Holy War”? This article aims at a better understanding of the phenomenon of jihadism in Tunisia and will investigate the causes and factors of radicalisation. The basic conditions for this have proved to be the continued and multidimensional marginalisation of parts of Tunisia’s youth. The interplay between psychological, material, domestic-political and international factors gave rise to dynamics of radicalisation.

Definitions and Analytical Framework

The terms and analytical categories used in this article are defined below. They will be used to better understand the phenomenon of jihadism and the process of radicalisation in Tunisia and elsewhere. The conceptual starting point here is Islamism as a collective term to mean “efforts to alter society, culture, government or politics using the values and norms considered Islamic”.¹



← Young people and the revolution: Young Tunisians formed the backbone of the 2010/11 revolutionary protests. Yet, many have shown themselves to be susceptible to jihadist thinking. Source: © Zoubeir Souissi, Reuters.

If we define Salafism as a “holistic concept that joins together faith, law, rites, moral and ethical codes of conduct and ideals of political order”,² we are referring to a particularly radical form of Islamism. Scholarly literature generally distinguishes between three currents, which share a strict interpretation of religion exclusively based on the Quran, prophetic tradition and the early period of Islam. Whilst purist Salafism is considered apolitical and focuses on non-violent methods of promulgation and education, political Salafism seeks to apply Salafist beliefs to the political sphere and through political means. Jihadist Salafism, however, may require violence and subversion.³

Whether in the form of Salafist or Muslim Brotherhood type of Islamism, varying levels of radicalism are brought to bear. As such, radicalisation can be defined as a process through which an individual or group adopts violence-based methods of political action founded on an extremist ideology and challenges an established political, social or cultural order.⁴ Jihadism, understood as the execution of Islamist objectives through violent terrorism, therefore gravitates towards the upper end of the radicalism scale.⁵

In order to understand the causes and the process of jihadist radicalisation, a two-step model for analysis is put forth in this article. This first consists of an initial or basic set of conditions that enable radicalisation in principle: the multi-dimensional marginalisation of certain societal strata/population segments. Marginalisation is therefore considered a state or process by which individuals or groups on the margins of society are less able to participate in decisions affecting the economic, political, social and cultural activities of their country. The second step involves intervening factors that lead to the

radicalisation of those marginalised. Jihadist radicalisation is particularly dangerous, as it can conduce the participation in terrorist activities in Tunisia or abroad.

This broad working hypothesis will be developed and clarified throughout the course of this analysis of the case of Tunisia. In doing so, we will also refer to the existing literature on Islamist and jihadist radicalisation. Although the majority of IS' foreign combatants come from Arab countries, the current literature – with its general empirical research gap – continues to focus on Europe and the radicalisation of European youth. In addition, other qualitative and quantitative data from Tunisia will be analysed. These sources are combined with the authors' own personal observations and structured interviews with Tunisian experts and practitioners dealing with jihadism and its foundations in Tunisia. Furthermore, recently conducted representative surveys and sociological studies addressing the attitudes of the country's young people and how they relate to politics and religion will be used.

Heterogeneous Islamist Violence in Tunisia

Although the “Islamic State” organisation has claimed responsibility for the three major attacks of 2015 mentioned above and the focus is now on the terrorist threat in the country, the phenomenon of violence with Islamist connotations in Tunisia has proven to be of a much more complex nature. With respect to forms of organisation and action, a distinction can be made between four different categories that have manifested themselves successively and in a somewhat overlapping manner since the revolution.

1. The first category is *Hisba* violence, understood as a kind of Salafist street violence.⁶ This form of violence took an increasingly aggressive course in the first few years after the revolution and is supplied by two currents, sometimes overlapping: First, the initially non-Islamist social or political violence against the old regime or the status quo that was born out of the revolution,

popularly demonstrated in particular by the so-called “Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution”. These leagues emerged from or were inspired by the citizens’ initiatives and neighbourhood committees during the days of revolution in January 2011. Their stated purpose was to defend the “achievements of the revolution” and bolster Tunisia’s “Arab Muslim identity”. To that end, the leagues specifically turned to street violence as what they now considered a legitimate “method of revolution”. This meant they were targeting those they identified as representatives of the *ancien régime* or of a secular and liberal model of society. Second, *hisba* violence grew out of the initially non-violent Salafist preachers’ activities organised primarily by *Ansar Al-Sharia Tunisia* (AST), a group formed shortly after the revolution. Over time, the first current became more Islamist, and the second became more violent.

In this context, acts of violence motivated by Islamic extremism increased – actions that were supposedly aimed at maintaining or restoring Islamic morality in Tunisia and which can be interpreted as an early form of jihadism. The nationwide targets of these groups, which also used beatings and incendiary devices to achieve their ends, included brothels, cinemas, art exhibitions, schools and universities that banned the wearing of the *niqab*, as well as Sufi shrines. The violence reached a fever pitch when the American embassy was attacked on 14 September 2012, concurrently setting the American school nearby on fire.

Paired with two politically motivated murders in 2013, this escalation increased both domestic and international pressure on the Tunisian government to address Salafist groups with renewed vigour. In May 2013, *Ansar al-Sharia* was barred from holding its conference in Kairouan, which led to violent clashes between the police and Salafists in the town of Ettadhamen, a suburb of Tunis. The organisation itself was banned in August of that same year. This, coupled with its clas-

sification as a terrorist organisation by the Tunisian authorities, has led to fragmentation within the group. Whilst some members simply returned to their previous “civilian” lives, some followed their leaders to Libya. Others went into hiding, founding jihadist cells or joining existing ones in Tunisia, and some even made their way to Syria and Iraq. Although this has led to a significant decline in *hisba* violence in Tunisia, other more extreme forms of Islamist violence have been able to profit from this decline.

2. This includes a hybrid mix of Islamist and criminal violence, which can be described as “Islamogangsterism”.⁷ Since the revolutions in Tunisia and Libya in 2011, smuggler networks have benefited from the relative weakness of both states and have been able to expand their influence in the border areas. In Tunisia, this affects the regions on the Libyan and Algerian borders. At the same time, jihadist groups have found sanctuary in the remote regions far from the state’s reach, especially in the Chaambi Mountains near the Algerian border. Although smugglers and jihadists do not necessarily share the same objectives, they may share common interests. Jihadist groups benefit from the material and financial resources of the smuggler networks, which in turn benefit from protection by jihadist groups and the weakening of state security organs. Also beyond the border regions, radical Islam and organised crime seem to be coalescing with one another quite strongly, even in the suburbs of the capital city. This has created fertile ground for jihadism, in the sense of political terrorism, to flourish.
3. Jihadist terrorism is not a new phenomenon in Tunisia. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) carried out an attack on the El Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba in 2002. What is new, however, is the sheer scale it has taken on in recent years. From 2011 to 2015, the targeted use of force has been brought to bear against at least 320 representatives of the Tunisian State, espe-





Bolstering jihadist morale: Ansar Al-Sharia followers convening in Kairouan in May 2012. The organisation has been banned by now. Source: © Anis Mili, Reuters.

cially soldiers and police, with nearly one hundred people killed. In 2015 alone, jihadists in Tunisia furthermore killed 62 civilians, most of whom were foreign tourists.⁸ Key moments were the assassinations of leftist opposition leaders Chokri Belaid (6 February 2013) and Mohamed Brahmi (25 July 2013), both of whom were shot in the open on the streets of Tunis. Another great shock was triggered by the attacks and ambushes on security forces at the beginning of Ramadan in 2013 and 2014, presumably carried out by supporters of *Ansar al-Sharia*. And 2015 was marked by the attacks on the Bardo Museum (18 March), the hotel beach in Sousse (26 June) and a suicide attack on a Presidential Guard bus in the capital (24 November), all culminating to form the tragic climax of jihadist terror in Tunisia to date.

As regards the organisational structure of jihadism, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb was the dominant force until 2014, as was their associated brigade (*katiba* in Tunisian), *Oqba ibn Nafaa*. This group's origins date back to the 2000s, and it has been active since 2012, primarily in the region bordering Algeria and includes experienced fighters from there. Coinciding with the final split between al-Qaeda and "Islamic State" and the proclamation of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the first signs of a split in the brigade in Tunisia began to show in June 2014. This led to the emergence of a new jihadist organisation, *Jund al-Khalifa*, which is associated with IS. The presence of two organisations competing for monopoly over jihadist legitimacy contributed to an escalation of the violence in Tunisia. The jihadist violence shifted

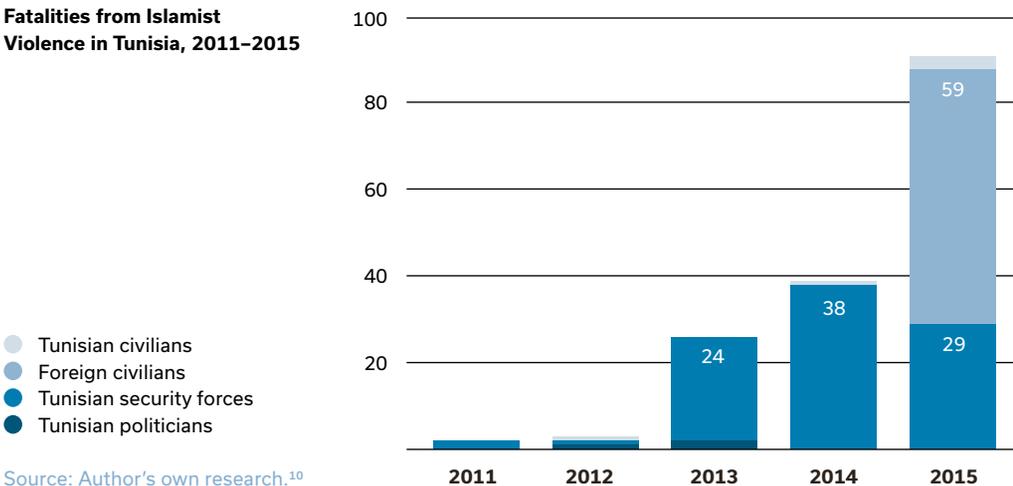
from combating what Islamists consider to be illegitimate state structures (*taghut*) to attacks on civilians. The circulated video of the beheading of a young Tunisian who was accused of cooperating with security forces was likely intended to intimidate the local population and was reminiscent of the methods in use by IS in Syria and Iraq. Although all of these forms of violence serve the common goal of weakening Tunisia’s new democratic government, including its institutions and economy, ultimately bringing about its downfall, they indicate an increasing “IS-isation” of jihadist terrorism in Tunisia.

4. The fourth category of jihadism entails foreign combatants, or Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF). With more than 5,500 Tunisians in combat areas – mainly Syria, Iraq and Libya – the nation is one of the main countries of origin for international jihadism. According to Tunisia’s Ministry of the Interior, more than 12,000 Tunisians looking to participate in the “jihad” have been prevented from leaving the country in recent years.⁹ Back in the 1960s Tunisians fought alongside the Palestinians against Israel, in Afghanistan in the 1980s and against the U.S. troops stationed in Iraq in the wake of the Iraq War in 2003. The outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 saw a resurgence of this phenomenon, which can be distinguished

in three separate waves. The first was characterised primarily by the fight against the Assad regime in 2012 and 2013, with many choosing to fight for revolutionary or humanitarian reasons. The second wave, which began mid-2014, was triggered by the emergence of “Islamic State”, thus rendering – in addition to Iraq – Syria as the fighters’ destination as well. The third wave is currently making its way through the neighbouring country of Libya. In the wake of the disintegration of Libyan statehood, with IS coming under increasing pressure in its Syrian-Iraqi stronghold, the organisation’s focus now also is on Libya, thereby changing the destination of Foreign Terrorist Fighters. For Tunisia, this means an increased risk – one that extends beyond the potential “returnees” whose numbers are now estimated at more than 700 in Tunisia; the first IS training camp in Libya is located just 70 kilometers from the Tunisian border. Those who carried out the attacks on the Bardo Museum and the hotel in Sousse were likely trained in one of the Libyan camps as well.

Islamist violence in Tunisia is therefore expressed in a variety of different ways, some of which converge and reinforce one another. Overall, the situation since 2011 can be characterised as one of escalation, both with respect to the number of attacks and the targets chosen.

Fatalities from Islamist Violence in Tunisia, 2011–2015



Source: Author’s own research.¹⁰

As yet, there are no official statistical data on the profile of Tunisian jihadists, or if there is, the Tunisian officials are keeping this information to themselves. Nevertheless, we can determine some recurrent features based on the cases known. Notwithstanding the few veterans of Afghanistan or Iraq who often hold leadership positions, such as AST founder Abu Iyadh, Tunisian jihadists are largely in their early to mid-20s, virtually none over the age of 30. Although there are some cases that involve those from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds, these largely involve students of technical subjects. The majority of jihadists come from poor backgrounds, or at least socially disadvantaged ones. They are almost all men, although women continue to join the ranks of IS.¹¹

What is striking is the often rather short radicalisation phase, sometimes taking just a few months. Take, for example, 23-year-old Seifeddine Rezgui who committed the attack on the hotel beach in Sousse: he was enrolled as an engineering student in Kairouan, where he was known as a passionate break dancer. By contrast, Houssam Ben Hedi Ben Miled Abdelli, who blew himself up on the Presidential Guard bus, had been radicalised since the revolution through his contacts with *Ansar al-Sharia*. In the working-class district of Douar Hicher on the outskirts of Tunis, the 26-year-old had muddled along as a day labourer and worked in a shop stall. He can be considered the prototype of multidimensional marginalisation we are regarding as the fundamental condition for radicalisation.

Multidimensional Marginalisation as a Basic Condition for Radicalisation

“There will come a day when I shall turn against you, my old country. You were so hard on me that it caused me to lose my soul. Oh, my land, I shall forever be unemployed and those villains you harbour are the reason why people are split in two.”¹² These lyrics by Marwan Gabos are a testimony to the anger and disappointment of a younger generation who feel just as disparaged under the young Tunisian democracy as they did under the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali.

Six dimensions of marginalisation can therefore be distinguished: economic, social, political, civic, geographic and cultural.

1. The clearest case for this is the continuing economic marginalisation taking place. This is due to the condition of the Tunisian economy, which has deteriorated since the revolution. Although, the regime change put an end to the kleptocratic interventions in the economy committed by *la famille*, the group of relatives and those favoured by former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the political uncertainty of the transitional period, which saw a total of six different governments, as well as the instability of the region, particularly in Libya, and the collapse of tourism and foreign direct investment following the terrorist attacks have all converged to bring economic growth to a halt. The official unemployment rate has been at a steady 15 per cent for several years now, but is twice as high for university graduates. At the same time, the majority of young Tunisians are working in low-skilled jobs in less productive sectors, such as the service sector or tourism industry.¹³
2. The lack of economic prospects – especially in the more conservative classes affected in rural areas and outlying urban districts – is accompanied by social marginalisation: no work means no marriage and therefore no separate household, individual emancipation and/or place in society. A solicitor who represents the families of Foreign Terrorist Fighters who have left the country for Syria speaks of a fundamental “problem of existence” for these young people.¹⁴ In fact, it is striking that, according to surveys, more than two-thirds of all Tunisian youth do not pursue any particular leisure activity neither of a sporting nor cultural nature.¹⁵ In rural areas, only three per cent of adolescents and young adults are involved in associations or clubs.¹⁶

Just how weighty the feeling of socio-economic marginalisation strikes a chord with those segments of the population not even



Tourist guide on a Star Wars site in the desert near Nefta; the 2015 terrorist attacks in Tunisia dealt a fresh blow to the country's tourism industry. [Source: © Zoubeir Souissi, Reuters.](#)

directly affected by it is demonstrated by the nationwide success of the 2013 song “Houmani”. It describes the monotonous life of young people devoid of prospects in disadvantaged suburbs (*houma* in Tunisian): “We live like rubbish in a bin. Poor, no money, not a penny. We get up late, we don’t feel the time passing, I don’t have a watch. Nobody studies here. You feel suffocated here.”¹⁷ Corruption and nepotism have survived the revolution in many places and are doing their utmost to undermine the faith of young people in the prospect of breaking away from this lethargy and advancing a career.

3. Broad swathes of Tunisian youths remain excluded from the nation’s political life, even though this issue was at the heart of the civil protests in 2010 and 2011, which paved the way for free political participation in the first place. Neither the student and urban activist scene nor the rebellious unemployed youth and day labourers from the interior regions succeeded in organising themselves into sus-

tainable political structures after the regime change nor in decisively integrating the country’s nascent democratic institutions. The political transition was largely organised by the establishment. Traditional non-governmental organisations led by trade unions initiated and moderated the National Dialogue Quartet, composed of all major parties to lead the country out of the 2013 political crisis.¹⁸ Consensus has been considered the recipe for success of Tunisian politics ever since. This approach is being continued by the broad coalition between *Nidaa Tounes* – a more secular coalition movement that decided the presidential and parliamentary elections in late 2014 – *Ennahda* and two smaller liberal parties.

However, this “middle class compromise”¹⁹ between the national-modernist camp and pragmatic Islamists has yet to guarantee real societal political inclusion and (at least subjectively speaking) political representation for all segments of the population and

the nation. The low voter turnout, especially among young people, is an indication of this. In 2014, less than 20 per cent of those under the age of 29 participated in the parliamentary and presidential elections. Many citizens do not even know who their MPs are, especially in the interior regions, nor do they accept them as dialogue partners or representatives of their electoral district's interests once they have been elected and sent to Tunis. Generally speaking, political institutions enjoy low levels of confidence among rural youth, measuring below nine per cent (however, the military, family and local religious organisations are trusted by more than 80 per cent of the same demographic).²⁰

4. Especially in the neglected regions of the back-country and the problem areas of major metropolitan regions, relations with state authorities are partly so shattered that

the situation goes beyond political apathy and instead has to be characterised as civic marginalisation. Just a few days after a 16-year-old shepherd had been beheaded by jihadists on 13 November 2015, his cousin gave an emotional television interview that shocked the nation. In it, he not only lamented the miserable living conditions his family endured, but also the absence of the state in his mountain village in the central Tunisian region of Sidi Bouzid. He said that there were neither any public institutions available within reach, nor were the security forces able to protect the region's residents from the terrorists: "I'm 20, I've never seen a state official visiting the region. I've never met even one. I only know the 'State' from my ID."²¹ For the marginalised youth in urban regions, however, they do share a relationship with the state, albeit a conflictual one. "For young people here, the state is



Silent protest: A large portion of Tunisia's youth is socio-economically marginalised. Out of protest against the high unemployment rates, this young man sew his mouth shut in January 2016. Source: © Zohra Bensemra, Reuters.

the police officer who knocks them down,” explains a teacher from Kasserine.²² Significantly, this impoverished town in western Tunisia that lies at the foot of the Chaambi Mountains claimed the largest number of victims of violence from the regime in the entire nation during the 2010–2011 protests. A sociological study has shown that in Douar Hicher on the outskirts of the Tunis metropolitan region, young people feel the police systematically discriminate against them. For example, young people say they are prevented from reaching the city center by the arbitrary checkpoints in place.²³ This hatred of the police is reflected not least in the popular culture of Tunisian youth, in their rap and hip-hop music. “You want my ID? I won’t give it to you. For the sacrifice feast I’m slaughtering a policeman” are the lyrics to the song, *Boulucia Kleb*, (“Police are Dogs”), a 2013 song by rapper “Weld El 15” that glorifies violence. And it is not unheard of for these words to turn to deeds: Police stations in towns like Kasserine or Sidi Bouzid regularly go up in flames. Some observers speak of a veritable “war” between young people devoid of prospects and the police – a war that was already being waged during the Ben Ali regime and continues even now.²⁴

5. In many places, this socio-economic and political marginalisation coincides with a geographic marginalisation that dates back even further in the history of Tunisia. Even when the country was a French protectorate, the authorities preferred to recruit their administrative elite from the capital city of Tunis and the eastern coastal region (known as the “Tunisian Sahel” with Sousse at its center). The country’s founder, Habib Bourguiba, who prevailed against the “Youssefistes” (i.e. the supporters of Salah Ben Youssef, who originated from Djerba) anchored mainly in the south during the independence movement, also came from this region, as did his successor in the presidency, Ben Ali. Aside from the economic center of Sfax – a southern coastal city – the

regions beyond the capital and the Sahel are largely less developed both with respect to the economy and political infrastructure. People there feel traditionally disadvantaged by the central government, and feel they have been cheated out of the gains won from local natural resources, such as phosphate. Not least due to this economic imbalance, internal migration has been seen for decades, especially in the peri-urban belt of coastal towns. And in terms of culture, a gaping chasm exists between the south, with its traditional ties to neighbouring Libya, and the northern and eastern coastal region, which is oriented more towards Europe.

6. Finally, the feeling of a cultural and identity-related marginalisation can be observed – especially for young people who have already been affected by the dimensions mentioned above. This feeds on the suppression of Islamic practices under the Ben Ali regime and, in the words of a Tunisian sociologist, a “collective memory of humiliation and the decline of the Arab Muslim world”.²⁵ In fact, the Tunisian population casts the greatest suspicion on Western and American, French and British foreign policy in particular – conspiratory suspicions that are openly articulated, even in the mainstream press.²⁶ Under this worldview, the Arab Muslim world is being exposed to attacks by foreign powers and is primarily seen as the victim in this conflict.

Jihadism is making Tunisia’s marginalised youth an offer. It promises supposedly simple answers to their material and moral existential crises.

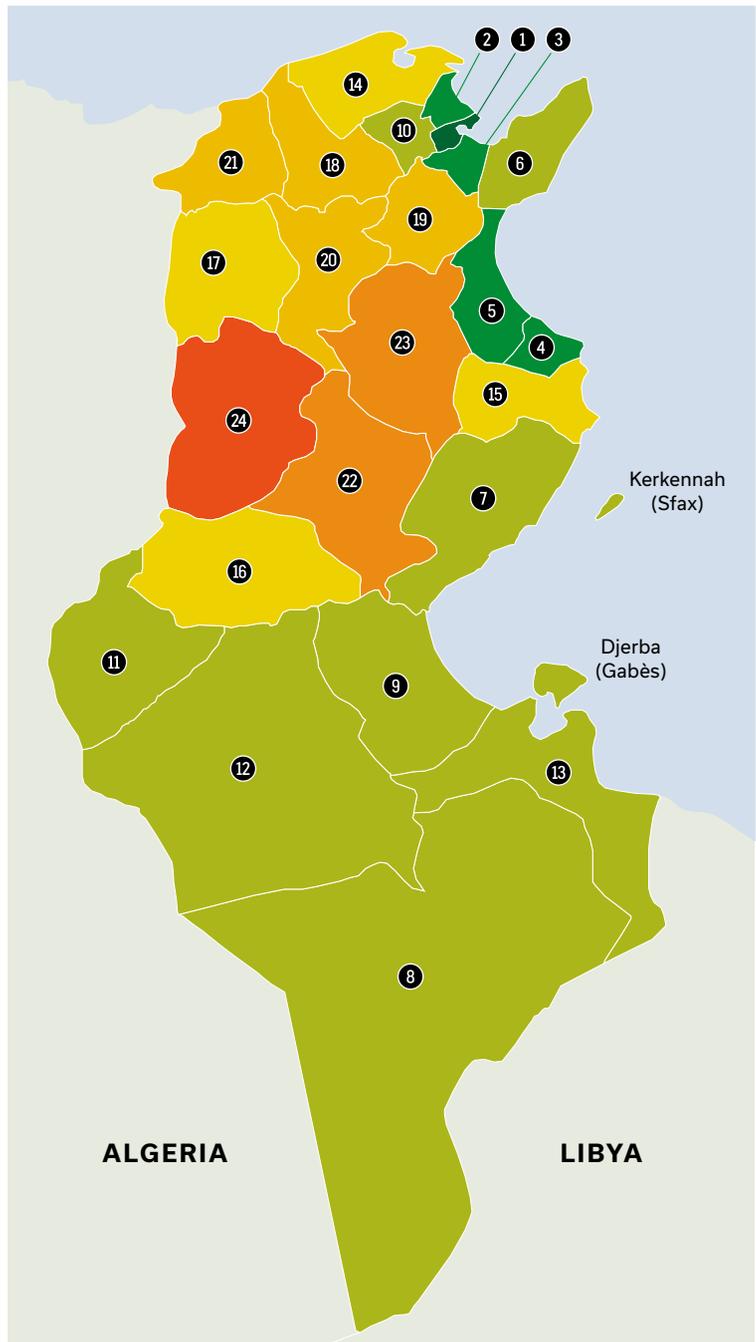
The marginalisation described here in six different dimensions certainly does not necessarily lead to Islamist radicalisation or terrorist activity. It does, however, create a fertile sounding

Disparities in Regional Development in Tunisia

1	Tunis	0.76
2	Ariana	0.69
3	Ben Arous	0.66
4	Monastir	0.64
5	Sousse	0.62
6	Nabeul	0.57
7	Sfax	0.56
8	Tataouine	0.55
9	Gabès	0.53
10	Manouba	0.53
11	Tozeur	0.51
12	Kebili	0.50
13	Medenine	0.50
14	Bizerte	0.49
15	Mahdia	0.42
16	Gafsa	0.41
17	Kef	0.40
18	Béja	0.39
19	Zaghouan	0.39
20	Siliana	0.36
21	Jendouba	0.31
22	Sidi Bouzid	0.28
23	Kairouan	0.25
24	Kasserine	0.16

●	<0.2
●	0.2-0.3
●	0.3-0.4
●	0.4-0.5
●	0.5-0.6
●	0.6-0.7
●	>0.7

Indicator



The regional development index – made up of 18 socio-economic development variables such as education, communication, employment, standard of living, population, health, justice and equality – is based on a scale from 0 to 1 (highest level of development). [Source: Author's own research.²⁷](#)

board for the factors of radicalisation and the dynamics Tunisia has been confronted with since the revolution.

Intervening Factors of Radicalisation

Jihadism is making Tunisia's marginalised youth an offer. It promises supposedly simple answers to their material and moral existential crises. The weakness of the State since the revolution and the political tolerance of radical groups in the initial period of transition have provided jihadism with the space necessary to advertise this offer. Since finally declaring war on jihadism, state authorities have continued using the still unreformed security apparatus with its well-known agents of repression, which only further stokes the anger of Tunisia's youth. Meanwhile, on the regional and international levels, a dynamic has developed that has served only to promote the jihadist phenomenon, in Tunisia and abroad. Four categories of radicalisation factors can therefore be determined for Tunisia.

For a large portion of Tunisian jihadists the financial incentives now play a crucial role in their recruitment.

1. Psychological and ideological factors are generally considered to play a key role in the radicalisation process, especially when this involves adolescents and young adults.²⁸ Radical ideology, in this case jihadist ideology, provides individuals with answers to their existential problems – answers that resonate with individuals' own experiences. In this sense, jihadist organisations act as “entrepreneurs of identity”, promising individuals radical life changes both immediately and in the long term. This is particularly true of IS, whose ideology is accessible even to those without a distinct knowledge of Islam and which uses its sophisticated propaganda system based on social media to enable anyone to join. It offers a utopia – a
2. In addition, IS also takes advantage of the economic weakness of the marginalised youth. According to some analysts, the financial incentives now play a crucial role for the majority of Tunisian jihadists recruited.²⁹ Depending on their qualifications, IS will offer a potential candidate anything between 400 and 4,000 U.S. dollars a month, including appropriate safeguards for survivors in case of death. This makes IS' “minimum wage” higher than the average salary in Tunisia. Against the backdrop of high inflation since 2011, this incentive has been even more effective, promising recruits support

new revolutionary, religious and supposedly more just social order adherents can take an active role in bringing about and in which they can actively participate. These persons will belong to a group of their peers, a community that provides a place for them in this new social order and therefore promises them a sense of belonging and a new sense of self-confidence. In the over-simplified worldview of IS, this person is always part of the good and the great, and is always victorious. Furthermore, IS' apocalyptic Internet propaganda promises participation in the liberation of Islam in the final battle against the crusader nations – thus providing the ultimate sense of existence.

This mixture of religious (good and evil, apocalypse) and political, revolutionary ideology (utopia, new social order) gives their hatred of government institutions and their use of violence a double legitimacy, in their eyes. In all its various forms (whether in Tunisia or abroad), “jihad” can therefore be considered to be the final outlet young Tunisians have at their disposal to vent their continued frustration in the form of resistance against their own helplessness and the (at least perceived) continued humiliation they suffer at the hands of the state and society. For some, like the revolution was before it or like illegal immigration to Europe, “jihad” is an opportunity for people to try their luck again elsewhere.



"Listen and Obey": Young warriors in an IS propaganda magazine. Jihadist ideology makes the promise to provide every individual with a sense of belonging and new self-confidence. [Source: Dabiq.](#)

not only for themselves, but for their families as well. The cafés in which young, unemployed men while away their time have now become prime territory for “recruiters”, who receive high bonuses themselves.

- By contrast, the first few years after the revolution often saw mosques as the prime sites of radicalisation and recruitment. They were able to gain power on account of the post-revolutionary weakness of the state and its penchant for political tolerance until mid-2013. By early 2011, in the wake of the continuing revolutionary protest movements and the general amnesty being shown for political prisoners, radical Islamists were released as well who then played a key role in establishing Salafist-jihadist movements, such as *Ansar al-Sharia*. With the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the associated delegitimisation of state authority, the public sphere in general and mosques in particular slipped the bonds of state control. During

this period, groups ranging from radical Islamist to Salafist-jihadist tendencies took control of an estimated 500 mosques, or almost ten per cent of all mosques in the country.³⁰

The so-called troika government (a coalition made up of *Ennahda* and two smaller social democratic parties) elected in autumn 2011 in the first free elections initially did little to combat this loss of control. Reasons therefore might be found in the revolutionary, and thus state-sceptical, attitude of president Moncef Marzouki or with regard to the “engagement strategy” and ideological association with preachers of Salafism, as displayed by at least some sections of *Ennahda*. Members of its radical wing were not only part of this group of Salafist preachers surrounding the mosques, but even appeared as speakers at the *Ansar al-Sharia* conferences in 2011 and 2012.³¹ Although the troika began changing its policies in this regard as of mid-2013 and the technocratic interim

government appointed six months later took an even harsher stand against Salafist groups, the genie had by that point already been let out of the bottle. At the same time the focus of Ennahda on politics and its increasing participation in governing the country, based on consensus and compromise with secular groups, contributed to creating a “religious vacuum”, which benefited radical movements.³²

In general the state has yet to succeed in striking a balance between security and freedom. The political indecision and weakness of the security apparatus, which was initially de-legitimised by the broader public in the first few years following the revolution in the wake of Ben Ali’s fall from power, has been transformed into an all-out crackdown by the security forces – something that has affected young people in particular. This ranges from frequent arrests for drug use (nearly 8,000 Tunisians are currently imprisoned for this) to humiliation in police custody. Human rights organisations have reported the continued practice of torture and at least six unresolved deaths in prisons since 2011.³³

Especially with those segments of Tunisian youth particularly affected by socio-economic marginalisation there is a kind of confrontation taking place which, from their point of view at least, resembles that of the police state against which they revolted more than five years ago. State violence, which is perceived to be unjust and arbitrary, spurs on this vicious cycle of repression, humiliation and radicalisation. This can be seen in the trajectory of some of the members of the ultra-groups of Tunisia’s main football clubs, who had already come to blows with the police under the Ben Ali regime and then played an important role in the revolutionary protests in 2010 and 2011; some of them are now turning to jihadism.³⁴ The form in which violence is expressed is the only thing to have been shifted by repression, whilst the phenomenon as such persists or is even intensified through a spiral of radicalisation.

On the run: Prior to the fall of the Gaddafi regime, tens of thousands of Tunisian migrant workers were earning a living in Libya. The turmoil in February 2011 drove them back home. Source: © Yannis Behrakis, Reuters.



Besides these domestic political elements, international factors have as well benefited jihadist radicalisation in Tunisia in recent years. Particularly serious for Tunisia is the failure of the transition in Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. There, the collapse of the state has made the country a breeding ground for jihadist groups. Beyond the security implications this involves, Tunisia, which shares a 459-kilometer border with Libya, is suffering economically from the situation in its neighbouring country. During the Gaddafi regime, thousands of Tunisians, especially those from poorer social



strata and less prosperous regions, worked as migrant workers in Libya, sending their pay back home. The emergence and success of IS with its presence in Syria and Iraq, and more so now in Libya, and its attacks in the West have bolstered global jihadism and may seem to represent a kind of utopia (now even becoming somehow real) in the eyes of marginalised young people in search of dignity. These factors for radicalisation at the international level also include the influence of foreign preachers, mainly coming from the Gulf states – an influence that has continued to spread since 2011. Building on the teach-

ings that have already been widely available through satellite television since the 2000s, these preachers travelled to Tunisia following the revolution and have contributed to the Salafist and Wahhabist orientation of the mosques ever since.

Conclusions and Outlook

Of course, not every “marginalised” young person in Tunisia will become a terrorist. After all, the jihadist groups recruit their leading cadres from privileged backgrounds as well. However, we can assume that the likelihood of jihadist

radicalisation increases the more dimensions of marginalisation identified in this article are faced by individuals. Although the character of this marginalisation is specific to Tunisia, parallels can be drawn to the dynamics of radicalisation elsewhere – be it in regards to Boko Haram’s recruitment potential in Nigeria given the “break with authorities and identities”³⁵ or the “Islamisation of radicalness”³⁶ as the jihadist phenomenon in France has been described.

For Tunisia and its still fragile democracy international jihadism presents an existential threat if it continues along the spiral of radicalisation set forth in this article and if the escalation of terrorist violence that is associated with this cannot be stopped. Meanwhile, it has become clear that Tunisia and its international partners must develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to tackle several of the foundations for this simultaneously. In addition to the various forms of marginalisation, whether economic, social, political, civic, geographical and cultural-identitarian as a basic condition for radicalisation, the psychological, ideological, material, domestic and international factors identified in this article can also be used as starting points for developing counter-measures. But time is of the essence. Originating in Kasserine, nationwide protests broke out in January 2016 to demand work and regional development. The hunger strikes and self-immolations are acts of desperation which make clear that, for many Tunisians, the desire for dignity remains unfulfilled.

All told, this is a Herculean task for the Tunisian government and the country’s political class to take on (even more as it has not yet completed the process of consolidation and maturation after the revolution). Yet there are signs of hope on both the state and, in particular, the non-governmental level. The Constitution of 27 January 2014, which was adopted almost unanimously by the country’s first freely elected parliament, requires the state to increase the participation of young people in politics, society and the economy as well as to establish a regional balance. It promises decentralisation and local self-governance – a revolutionary claim in a centralist

state such as Tunisia, yet one the government has only just begun to address. The media coverage on the fifth anniversary of the revolution also began detailing the continuing unsatisfactory situation in the inland regions and with the country’s younger generation. The political and media elite in Tunis is very aware of the need for deliberate action. In his speech on 14 January 2016, President Essebsi announced a national youth congress. The aim would be to define strategies “together with young people for young people” in order to better “integrate them into their own country”.³⁷ At the same time, the president established a commission of jurists to revise the criminal code in order to adapt it to the constitutional liberties guaranteed—a demand that has been repeatedly raised by young activists.

Nevertheless, many younger generation Tunisians across all socio-political classes and all regions are not waiting for change to be translated from the constitutional provisions or political rhetoric into the reality of their everyday lives. Despite their fate, they often seem to be taking these administrative hurdles into their own hands. One example of this is the *Centre des Jeunes Dirigeants d’Entreprises* (CJD), a young entrepreneur’s association in which reform-minded entrepreneurs and executives have joined forces, with several regional branches being founded last year across the country. Given the deficient state educational structures, a night school was launched with international aid providing members with the opportunity to advance their management skills.³⁸ In Kasserine, residents are working to “take back” Mount Chaambi, which is considered a stronghold of jihadist cells, through the establishment of a cultural center and a hiking trail for alternative tourism. Residents of El-Guettar, a town in the district of Gafsa in central Tunisia where the pro-regime mayor was expelled in the wake of the revolution, did not have time to wait for the repeatedly postponed local elections. Through neighbourhood committees and councils, citizens there quickly appointed a manager of local business as their mayor.³⁹ These kinds of bottom-up initiatives cannot replace the

political, economic and security conditions that are needed. However, they are evidence of the potential of a country that has, as yet, survived the lack of material dividends promised by democracy in much the same man as it has survived the recurrence of terrorist attacks. Supporting this civic potential is not only a contribution to the development of Tunisia, but also to the fight against international jihadism.

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- 1 Seidensticker, Tilman 2014: Islamismus: Geschichte, Vordenker, Organisationen, Munich, p.9.
- 2 Said, Behnam T./Fouad, Hazim 2014: Einleitung, in: idem (eds.): Salafismus. Auf der Suche nach dem wahren Islam, Freiburg i. Br., pp.23-51, here: p.30.
- 3 Cf. Ridwan Bauknecht, Bernd 2015: Salafismus. Ideologie der Moderne, Info aktuell 29, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, p.4; Volk, Thomas 2015: Islam – Islamismus. Eine Klärung in aufgeregten Zeiten, in: Analysen & Argumente 164, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, pp.5-6.
- 4 Cf. Khosrokhavar, Farhad 2014: Radicalisation, Paris.
- 5 Jihadism must be distinguished from the term Jihad, which is an ambiguous term in Islamic theology and can in no way be equated with terrorism. As a result, the use of the term *Takfirism* (from *takfir* = accusing of apostasy) is preferred, especially amongst Arab Muslim scholars and commentators, when characterising IS or other violent Islamist groups.
- 6 In Islamic theology, *hisba* is the duty of every Muslim to demand what is right and forbid what is evil. For more on *hisba* violence, cf. Gartenstein-Ross, David 2013: Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba and Jihad, Research Paper, May 2013, p.2.
- 7 Ayari, Michael 2013: Tunisia's Border: Jihadism and Contraband, North Africa Report 148, International Crisis Group, p.27.
- 8 Cf. Mejri, Walid 2015: Terrorisme en Tunisie: Carte interactive des événements après le 14 janvier, Inkyfada, 26 Nov 2015, in: <http://inkyfada.com/maps/carte-du-terrorisme-en-tunisie-depuis-la-revolution> [3 Feb 2016].
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- 10 Figures largely based on Mejri, n.8. There are no official figures covering the period in question, while estimations vary depending on source and methods of counting. Cf. also Observatoire tunisien du secteur de la sécurité: Chronologie interactive, in: <http://www.observatoire-securite.tn/Fr/timeline/show/83> [19 Feb 2016].
- 11 The terms “jihad nikah” (*Nikâh*: marriage) or “sex jihad” made headlines in Tunisia, especially in 2013. Cf. Kapitalis 2013: 1,000 Tunisiennes vouées au jihad nikah dans les camps d'Edleb en Syrie, 27 Aug 2013, in: <http://kapitalis.com/societe/17848.html> [3 Feb 2016].
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- 13 Cf. The World Bank 2014: Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion, in: http://worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/tunisia/breaking_the_barriers_to_youth_inclusion_eng.pdf [3 Feb 2016].
- 14 Interview with Badis Koubakji, solicitor and chairperson of the Association de Secours aux Tunisiens à l'Étranger, 12 Jan 2016, Tunis.
- 15 Cf. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung / SIGMA Conseil 2015: Les jeunes Tunisiens et les Mouvements Salafistes, Dec 2015, Tunis.
- 16 Cf. The World Bank, n. 13, p. 14.
- 17 Quoted in Mulumbu, Greta 2013: Houmani, la chanson qui peut changer le visage de la Tunisie, Slate Afrique, 18.11.2013, in: <http://slateafrique.com/413309/societe-houmani-le-titre-de-rap-qui-secoue-la-tunisie> [3 Feb 2016].
- 18 Also beyond the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet one can observe how some established civil society organisation such as the *Tunisian Association of Democratic Women* (ATFD) become a part of the influential post-revolutionary structure while others “mobilizing from the margins” as in the case of the campaign for the “Martyrs of the Revolution” were facing major obstacles in attracting the political and media elite’s attention. Cf. Antonakis-Nashif, Anna 2016: Contested transformation: mobilised publics in Tunisia between compliance and protest, in: *Mediterranean Politics* 21/1, pp. 128-149.
- 19 Merone, Fabio 2015: Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam, in: *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42/1, pp. 74-87, here: p. 79.
- 20 Cf. The World Bank, n. 13, p. 11; Fakhreddine, Jihad/Pugliese, Anita 2013: Tunisians Lose Confidence in Government, Gallup, 13 Aug 2013, in: <http://gallup.com/poll/163943/tunisians-lose-confidence-government.aspx> [3 Feb 2016].
- 21 Nessma TV 2015: Le cousin de l'ado décapité témoin, 22 Nov 2015, minute 4, in: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=kxu1oIboIc> [3 Feb 2016].
- 22 Quoted in Gaveriaux, Laura-Maï 2016: Kasserine ou la Tunisie abandonnée, in: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Jan 2016, p. 6.
- 23 Cf. Lamloum, Olfâ 2015: La politique à la marge de l'État et des institutions, in: Ali Ben Zina / Lamloum (eds.), n. 12, pp. 115-145, here: p. 124.
- 24 Interview with Walid Mejri, journalist and editor-in-chief of Inkyfada, 14 Jan 2015, Tunis.
- 25 Interview with Mohamed Jouili, director of the Observatoire National de la Jeunesse Tunisienne (OJT), 12 Jan 2016, Tunis.
- 26 Cf. Ben Romdhane, Hmida 2015: Trio infernal, La Presse, 25 Aug 2015, in: <http://lapresse.tn/21012016/103275/trio-infernal.html> [3 Feb 2016].
- 27 Figures based on the Ministère du Développement Régional et de la Planification 2012: Indicateurs de Développement Régional, Nov 2012, in: http://www.mdc.gov.tn/fileadmin/Conference_presse/Strategie%20de%20developpement/Diagnostic%20strategique/Indicateurs%20de%20developpement%20regional.pdf [8 Feb 2016]. The statistics included in this calculation refer to the period between 2004 and 2010.
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- 29 Interviews with Michael Ayari, International Crisis Group, 11 Jan 2016, Tunis and Hassen Zargouni, chairperson of the polling company SIGMA Conseil, 15 Jan 2016, Tunis.
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- 31 Interview with Walid Mejri, journalist and editor-in-chief of Inkyfada, 14 Jan 2015, Tunis; cf. *Réalités* 2013: Qui sont-ils? Que veulent-ils?, 29 May 2013, in: <http://realites.com.tn/2013/05/qui-sont-ils-que-veulent-ils> [3 Feb 2016].
- 32 Cf. Fahmi, Georges / Meddeb, Hamza 2015: Market for Jihad: Radicalization in Tunisia, *CMEC* 55, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, pp. 11-12. Cf. *Amnesty International* 2016: Tunisie: la torture en détention perdure, 14 Jan 2016, in: <http://amnesty.fr/Nos-campagnes/Crises-et-conflits-armes/Actualites/Tunisie-la-torture-en-detention-perdure-17307> [3 Feb 2016].
- 33 Interviews with Badis Koubakji, solicitor and chairperson of the Association de Secours aux Tunisiens à l'Étranger, 12 Jan 2016, Tunis, and with Mohamed Jouili, director of the Observatoire National de la Jeunesse Tunisienne (OJT), 12 Jan 2016, Tunis.
- 34 See the article by Bakary Sambe in this issue.
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- 36 Speech by Béji Caïd Essebsi on 14 Jan 2016 at the Presidential Palace in Carthage (Tunis).
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