In the past years jihadist terrorism and radicalization have become some of the most critical threats to the Mediterranean region, including the European side. Emerging trends, lessons learned and overviews of the security status of the countries in the area, however, point out that radicalization and extremism are a complex global phenomena that may differ from country to country. Against this background, while approaching the phenomenon according to a multidisciplinary perspective, the file rouge of this volume is the intention to describe challenges and strategies of security with a view to the preventive dimension thus going beyond the simple adoption of ad hoc measures of response. Moving from radicalization and extremism in Italy, new trends and policies of contrast, prevention and de-radicalization in North Africa, with a specific focus on Morocco and Tunisia, are illustrated according to a comprehensive approach. Each contribution makes evident the need to involve both the national/local authorities and the society at large in efforts against violent radicalization and extremism, and broadly speaking terrorism, as well as to cooperate with regional and international organisations, like the European Union, the African Union and competent branches of the United Nations.

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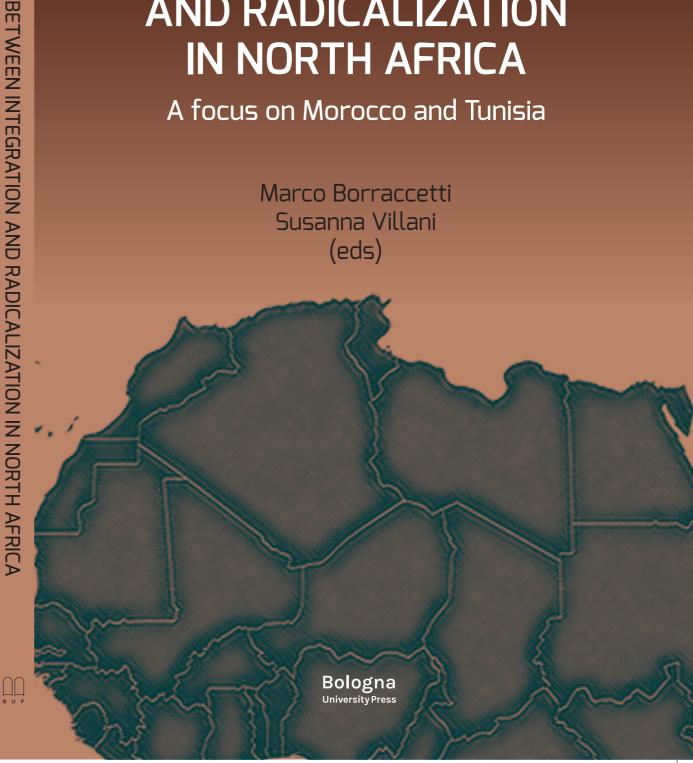
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Villani

BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND RADICALIZATION IN NORTH AFRICA

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A focus on Morocco and Tunisia

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CHAPTER IV

FROM COUNTER-TERRORISM TO PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: SECURITY PRACTICES AND APPROACHES IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA

Giulia Cimini[1], Guendalina Simoncini

ABSTRACT: International security policy and research agendas have increasingly emphasized terrorism as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Thus, the need to expand the toolkit to relate to it beyond the exclusively force-based approaches typical of counter-terrorism. Prevention of violent extremism and radicalization are examples of this. A newly democratized polity grappling with unprecedented terrorist challenges, Tunisia has since 2015-2016 featured a paradigmatic shift from a state-centric perspective, contingency-based approach mainly focused on counter-terrorism to a more inclusive, long-term strategy involving society at large in counter-radicalization efforts. This chapter thus accounts for the gradual diversification of the country's security strategies, focusing mainly on the prevention dimension. Reviewing pivotal terrorist attacks in the first post-revolution decade, it argues that this change of pace in security approaches and practices results from the interplay of international and national orientations. By illustrating the main initiatives that both local and foreign actors have carried out, the chapter also claims that preventing violent extremism has failed to replace counter-terrorism, but meritoriously complements the latter's predominant military focus with new, more comprehensive measures.

KEYWORDS: Counter-Terrorism – Preventing Violent Extremism – Terrorism – Radicalization – Tunisia

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1. Introduction

In the first decade after the 2011 Arab uprisings, Tunisia stood out as an outlier in terms of its democratic political process, then stalled if not in setback as President Kais Saïed moved forward with his constitutional reform plan. Along the way, serious and prolonged security threats also marked the post-authoritarian trajectory with the country becoming a target of terrorist attacks, carried out by local and regional actors. Whilst terrorism is by no means a new phenomenon in Tunisia as it pre-dates the 2010-2011 uprisings, hyper-localized surveillance under the Ben Ali regime made terrorism not a persistent threat. In the new democratic setting, however, the country experienced unparalleled violence against foreigners and security forces. Indeed, security conditions have increasingly deteriorated in the county, escalating from targeted threats to the assassinations of two left-wing politicians by Salafists in 2013 to large-scale attacks on foreign tourists in 2015 to the siege of the town of Ben Guerdane on the south-eastern border with Libya in 2016. Meanwhile, attacks on security forces remained constant, mainly clustered in the area of the Chaambi Mountains on the western border with Algeria. Furthermore, Tunisia has exported thousands of jihadists to Syria and Iraq. Regardless of conflicting estimates, it is widely acknowledged that it remains one of the main exporters of foreign fighters worldwide. According to government's data, around 3,000 Tunisians have left the country to join the ranks of the Islamic Caliphate for training or fighting in Syria, Iraq, Libya or Mali, while international statistics assume that up to 7,000 Tunisian jihadist foreign fighters exist.[2] Other numbers suggest that about 800 Tunisian foreign fighters have returned to Tunisia.[3] As the Islamic Caliphate continued to lose territory and fighters were forced to return home, dealing with individuals coming back from conflict zones had become a pressing issue, sparking debate on whether to deny their entry or, more realistically, on where and how to detain them.[4] With regard to this, an ad-hoc parliamentary committee was created at the beginning of 2017 to investigate the phenomenon of foreign fighters and the networks behind them with poor results. This committee in fact rarely gathered and had no real follow-up, pointing to the limited role that parliament had played in security and defense matters.[5]

In a decade, the overarching strategic security paradigm has repeatedly shifted, embedding new priorities and approaches. Undoubtedly, a major conceptual change was the transition from regime security to state security, namely from serving the physical and political survival of the ruling elites as it was under Zine el-Abidine

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[2] Barrett (2017); Renard (2019).
[3] Barrett (2017).
[4] Institut Tunisien des Études Stratégiques (2018).
[5] Marsad Majles (2019).

Ben Ali's presidency (1987-2011) to protecting government institutions, territory and the population as a whole. Also, understandings closer to notions of societal security have gradually emerged to enhance community resilience and make it an integral part of the fight against extremism. Revised local and international security practices associated with Security Force Assistance have come along with these conceptual changes.[6]

As the security situation worsened from 2011 to 2015, early demands for reforming security forces – and police above all – focusing on democratic accountability and human rights gave way to a more technical and pragmatic agenda aimed at improving the effectiveness of the security sector in fighting terrorist threats. This emergency counter-terrorism approach was then expanded to embrace counter-radicalization, placing greater emphasis on preventing terrorism and, more generally, violent extremism.

Hence, in this chapter we aim to illustrate how the approach to security in post-revolutionary Tunisia has gradually diversified beyond the purely hard security dimension to involve more of the social dimension. Crucially, preventing violent extremism (PVE) fails to replace the counter-terrorism (CT) approach, but complements the latter's predominant military focus with new, more comprehensive measures. As elsewhere, a multiplicity of actors in Tunisia have thus recognized that eliminating terrorists or preventing their attacks with intelligence is not enough, fitting into a much broader debate on terrorism as a complex phenomenon.

This chapter will proceed as follows. It first provides an overview of the concepts that are often mistakenly used as synonyms but on which it is difficult to find unanimous agreement. By tracing the major terrorist events that hit the country pioneering the so-called "Arab Spring", it then goes on to better contextualize the example of Tunisia and describes the evolution of securitarian approaches and practices that moved away from counter-terrorism alone. Finally, it zooms in on the most significant initiatives in terms of prevention by international and local actors as well as on state counter-narratives and awareness campaigns.

2. An unfinished theoretical debate: the broad spectrum of terrorism and violent extremism

In this chapter we thus argue that the counter-terrorism approach in Tunisia, after an initial emergency phase, has expanded to increasingly include the notion of prevention with a focus on its social dimension and violent extremism more broadly. In doing so, Tunisia is in line with a general trend worldwide. As observed in other

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[6] Cimini, Hanau Santini (2021).

contexts, the paradigmatic shift from counter-terrorism (CT) to counter violent extremism (CVE) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) resulted in a reconfiguration of institutions, strategies, policies and partnering agencies.[7] What is meant, however, when these terms are used?

For the sake of clarity, it is worth beginning with a quick overview of the different definitions of counter-terrorism and violent extremism and its prevention. Also, of the related notions of radicalization, counter-radicalization and de-radicalization.

Broadly speaking, counter-terrorism (CT) is often defined as the set of measures, methods and strategies – especially of a military nature – designed to limit and halt the activity of terrorist groups or individuals. It therefore varies greatly in terms of approaches ranging, for example, from a coercive posture, to a proactive approach, persuasive or defensive one.[8] Whatever the approach, CT has long been based primarily on the use of force, at different levels and with various intensities. War, targeted assassinations, the use of drones, border control, and intelligence activities are all examples of force-based measures. There are also measures of different nature such as the freezing of assets, extraordinary renditions, extraditions, special legislation and extraordinary temporary powers. Whereas CT has long been a national concern, especially after the attacks of 9/11, it became "global". Remarkably, CT measures have progressively hardened to the detriment of respect for fundamental rights, creating tension between the guarantee of security and the right of individual freedoms.[9] While the voices of human rights defenders have been raised all over the world denouncing the abuses committed in the name of security, numerous studies have also confirmed the problematic nature of heavy-handed CT measures in different contexts, their lack of success and even the risk that they are counterproductive.[10] Some explore the extent to which harsh responses undermine the legitimacy of state counter-terrorism,[11] more likely stimulating rather than suppressing terrorist violence, insofar as they contribute to a greater sense of grievance toward central authorities and increase support for terrorist groups.[12] Similarly, public authorities' abuse of physical integrity through torture would lead to nurture terrorism instead of countering it.[13] Not least, coercion often leads to unsatisfactory or even misleading information.[14] Because of all

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[7] Kundnani, Hayes (2018).
[8] Crelinsten (2009).
[9] Jackson (2005); Donohue (2008).
[10] Cole (2005), (2007); English (2009); Jackson et al. (2011).
[11] English (2009).
[12] Jackson et al. (2011).
[13] Walsh, Piazza (2010).
[14] Rejali (2007); Jackson et al. (2011).

these above-mentioned factors, the largely dominant force-based CT approach has been gradually questioned[15] and began to lose legitimacy in the mid-2000s.[16]

In parallel, new concepts emerged in the international context to explain and respond to political violence. "Violent extremism" and "radicalization" gradually imposed themselves in the international arena by acknowledging that terrorism is a problem that can be investigated through its origins, analysed in its manifestations and addressed through policy solutions beyond the use of physical force.[17] To be sure, the term "violent extremism" is as deeply contested as the notion of "terrorism"[18] and the two are sometimes employed interchangeably.[19] But even if it lacks a universally recognised definition, the former is considered a broader phenomenon than that of terrorism.[20] The concept of violent extremism has established itself in the scholarly literature and among practitioners to indicate the process of ideological transformation that anticipates the terrorist drift or, more generally, to explain the relationship between ideology and terrorism.[21] In that regard, preventing violent extremism (PVE) has been defined as the use of non-coercive methods to dissuade individuals or groups from mobilizing toward violence and to mitigate recruitment in ideologically motivated terrorism.[22] In this new vision, security measures alone would not be sufficient to provide an effective response to terrorism.[23] The PVE turn comes across as a holistic approach based on the assumption that social cohesion, stability and resilience are crucial drivers for preventing radicalization. In this same vein, marginalization, social exclusion, and socio-economic grievances are all factors potentially leading to the adoption of violent ideologies, behaviours and thus conducive to terrorism.[24]

Violent extremism is also related to the notion of radicalization, another contested term that refers to the adoption of extremist ideas and/or behaviors that would or could lead to embracing political violence. This is a gradual process and predates the decision of an individual to commit a terrorist attack. Peter Neumann describes the idea of "radicalisation" as "what goes on before the bomb goes off".[25] After the 9/11 attacks and those taking place in Madrid and London between 2004

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[15] Kundnani, Hayes (2018).

[16] Martini (2020).

[17] Kundnani (2012).

[18] Nì Aoulain (2018).

[19] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018).

[20] United Nations (2015).

[21] Heath-Kelly (2013).

[22] Khan in United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018).

[23] United Nations General Assembly (2015).

[24] Nasser Eddine et al. (2011); Nash, Nesterova (2017).

[25] Neumann in Kundnani (2012).

and 2005, its use has spread exponentially in the last twenty years.[26] Nevertheless, a considerable number of scholars have denounced the ambiguity of this concept and the difficulties in translating it into effective public policies being often over concentrated on the psychological-religious-individual dimension to the detriment of the socio-political realm. The concept of radicalization has in fact often been oversimplified in public opinion and policies but it has been theorised in the field of social movements as a highly complex process with intricate roots, "driven by the interactions of various political actors within long-lasting processes".[27] McCauley and Moskalenko define radicalization as a "change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the group".[28] Nevertheless, as della Porta and LaFree point out, radical attitudes do not always precede or lead to violent acts, so there remains the need to consider actions (behaviour) and attitudes (aims and perceptions) separately as they are not necessarily dependent or correspond to each other. In light of the above, "de-radicalization" should be thought of as "the reversal of radicalization processes".[29] More often, however, when it comes to public policies, it is understood as the prevention or the disruption of radicalization rather than its reversal. As a result, the measures taken with the aim of de-radicalize individuals and groups suffer from a general superficiality.

In sum, as with the very concept of "terrorism" and "violent extremism", there is no international consensus regarding what exactly constitutes "preventing" or "countering" these phenomena.[30] Common denominator, PVE policies – as well as counter-radicalization ones – have been designed to broaden the spectrum of counter-terrorism towards new sectors such as education, socio-economic development and communication with the aim of avoiding the spread of violence and extremism that can lead to terrorism. Basic goal remains to avoid the spread and escalation of violence in a holistic way, or at least from different angles.

3. A fledgling democracy hostage to terrorist attacks

Before zooming in on concrete examples of how counter-terrorism and preventing violent extremism unfolded in post-2011 Tunisia, it is worth remembering that counter-terrorism was instrumental to repress and tame Islamist groups and oppo-

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[26] Sedgwick (2010); Richards (2011), (2015); Kundnani (2012).
[27] della Porta, Haupt (2012), p. 317.
[28] McCauley and Moskalenko (2008), p. 416.
[29] della Porta, LaFree (2012), p. 7.
[30] Nasser-Eddine et al. (2011); McCants, Watts (2012).

nents during Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. In April 2002, the bomb attack on a synagogue on the island of Djerba, one of Tunisia's foremost touristic destinations, put the country on the track of the post-9/11 "global war on terror". Initially dismissed as an accident by state authorities, the attack that killed 19 people including 14 Germans, three Tunisians, and two Frenchmen and left 30 others injured,[31] was later traced back to the Al Qaeda network. It brought to the adoption of the controversial 2003 Anti-Terrorism Act which provided ample leeway to control dissent at home. Indeed, approved in a favorable international conjuncture that had diverted attention to Islamic terrorism as the primary source of terrorist threats, this bill has been strongly criticized by human rights organizations for its instrumental use against political dissidents. Under the spotlight it was mainly its broad definition of terrorists and terrorism, as well as other ambiguous clauses. Remarkably, the 2003 bill significantly expanded the scope of the definition of terrorism from the 1993 Penal Code to include acts of "disturbing public order" and "influencing state policy". A joint report by Tunisia's Association against torture and the Committee for the respect of freedoms and human rights, denounces that the bill was in fact used to sentence regime opponents, allow draconian measures in prisons and gloss over torture as a systematic practice.[32] After all, Ben Ali's Tunisia was renowned for being a *mukhabarat* state, that is a regime largely dependent on intelligence and one of "the most heavily policed states in the world".[33] Under Ben Ali, the security sector had indeed developed increasingly authoritarian practices in its modus operandi. Specifically, not only was the police a tool of the president's authoritarian rule,[34] but it also became a symbol of corruption, repression and nepotism: in other words, a symbol of the regime itself. Notably, the iconic self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi after police confiscated his merchandise was the perfect example of something familiar to many Tunisians and Arab citizens that resonated region wide triggering the 2010-2011 uprisings: arbitrary and humiliating treatment by the state, personified by police officers.[35] It comes as no surprise that police stations were a major target of the demonstrators' anger during the riots.

After 2011, apart from a few hundred purges of the most compromised officers and the dismantling of the Directorate for State Security which had been accused of the majority of torture allegations, reforms were rather unsystematic and little change was made in the immediate post-revolutionary period.[36] What was most

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[31] Zelin (2017).

[32] Association de lutte contre la torture en Tunisie, Comité pour le respect des libertés et des droits de l'homme en Tunisie (2008).

[33] Lutterbeck (2015), p. 1.

[34] Camau and Geisser (2003); Hibou (2011).

[35] Cimini (2022).

[36] Hanau Santini, Cimini (2019).

striking was the inadequacy of the security forces to prevent and respond to acts of terrorism of various kinds.

Over the years, attacks labelled as terrorist evolved in their nature, targets and also lethality. In 2012, during the Islamist-led Troika government (2011-2013), Salafi groups attacked on the headquarter of Nessma TV, a private channel belonging to media tycoon Nabil Karoui, for broadcasting the animated film Persepolis, considered offensive to Islam. Also, they masterminded the attack on the US embassy in Tunis in September that year.

In 2013, the murders of two prominent leftist politicians – Choukri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi – at the hands of Salafi groups shocked public opinion. Moreover, by increasing domestic political polarization and mistrust towards the Islamist party Ennahda, held politically responsible for what happened to the leftist leaders, these events threatened to derail the country's democratization. Indeed, for several months, Ennahda's leadership hesitated to ban Ansar al-Sharia (AST), a Salafi movement which remained out of the political fray while challenging "official" political Islam from the margins of society, mostly through proselytizing activities. It was only in May 2013, after violent clashes erupted between AST supporters and security forces in various areas of the country, that Ennahda Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh labelled Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist network.

The terrorist threat, however, became existential only in 2015 when targeted political violence morphed into mass shooting against foreign tourists. First came the attack on the Bardo national museum in Tunis on March 18, and then the one on a beach resort in Sousse on June 26. At the Bardo, 22 people, the great majority of them European citizens, lost their lives at the hands of two militants. Likewise, an ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) gunman killed 38 people – out of whom thirty were British citizens. These attacks revealed the elephant in the room, by exposing the existing security vacuum and the disarray of the Tunisian security forces. The failure to respond effectively demonstrated gaps in institutional capacity, from situational awareness, command and control to coordination between security forces and senior government officials. Furthermore, with the state of emergency already in place, a third bloody attack on a bus of the Presidential Guard hit downtown Tunis again on November 24, killing 12 officers and wounding 20 others, including four civilians.

Equally striking, the insurgent attacks on the border town of Ben Guerdane in March 2016 when a commando of jihadists entering from Libya attempted to seize the town and made it a stronghold of the Islamic Caliphate in Tunisia. In the early morning of March 7, an armed group of about 70 people, mostly Tunisians affiliated to the so-called Islamic State, penetrated across the Libyan border and attacked different strategic locations in the town. They also rounded up and executed targeted chiefs of security forces and collaborationists house by house, thus showing

considerable local knowledge. These deaths add to the number of those who died accidentally in the course of the shootings. Interestingly, the assailants called local inhabitants to rise up against the central Tunisian state with the hopes of capitalizing on a widespread feeling of abandonment and neglect locally. Contrary to expectations, with a death toll of 14 security officers, seven civilians and 46 insurgents, the attack failed thanks to both the unexpectedly prompt reaction of security forces and ordinary people's resistance. The battle turned in public opinion and in political discourse into an "epic" and the town of Ben Guerdane became the city symbol of resistance to terrorism in Tunisia.[37] At a time of great political, economic and social crisis, this episode became a fetish of national union in the face of terrorism and an example of harmony between law enforcement and citizens.

All these events deeply impacted upon security practices. As anticipated, the main consequence was that bigger and more coordinated international efforts prioritized a greater efficiency of the security forces over issues of transparency and democratic accountability which should have broken with the past authoritarian legacy. The high number of Western casualties in the 2015 attacks led in fact European countries – and shortly after also the US and additional countries – to pledge technical rather than normatively driven forms of security assistance to the country. In retrospect, the performance of Tunisia's security forces improved. Unlike other contexts, post-interventionist security assistance strengthened central security forces and the coercive manifestation of state power.[38] The flipside was the dilution of democratic reforms. While 2015 has put the security machine back on track, it is also true that counter-terrorism has been the overall concern for some time. By contrast, the insurgent attack on Ben Guerdane prompted the need to more vocally address the issue of violent extremism and radicalization, not only at the individual level but in terms of societal resilience.

4. Shifting trends: from counter-terrorism to preventing violent extremism

In Tunisia's post-revolutionary era, border integrity and the monopoly of force have been overarching concerns of the prevailing state-centered approach to security. Against this backdrop, the focus on counter-terrorism went hand in hand with foreign programmes of technical assistance aimed to improve the operational capacity of national security forces. Yet, Tunisia lacked a proper counter-terrorism strategy until 2015-2016 insofar as mostly chaotic and, in some ways shortsighted, measures

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[37] Simoncini (2021).
[38] Hanau Santini, Tholens (2018).

have been taken prioritizing repression and leading to severe consequences. Furthermore, the delay with which certain initiatives have been taken to stem the problem of political violence inside and outside the country has unfortunately marked the increasingly intricate evolution of violent movements. Thereafter, Tunisian counter-terrorism has been characterized by a systematic recourse to the regime of exception.[39]

On 4 July 2015, following the aforementioned bloody attack on Port el-Kantaoui beach at 10 kilometers away from Sousse, the President of the Republic Béji Caid Essebsi announced the beginning of a "war on terror" and declared the state of emergency. To be fair, Tunisian citizens were not new to this "exceptional" measure. From 2011 onward, such status had in fact always been in effect except for only 18 months. Importantly, the state of emergency has proven to be a fertile ground for the perpetration of human rights violations.[40] To add to that, the new antiterrorist legislation of 2015, quickly adopted after the events in Bardo and Sousse, has failed to provide a legal framework fully respectful of fundamental rights at the level of investigation, procedure and punishment.[41] Despite the amendments made in 2019, the CT law continues to be inherently problematic. Indeed, it has been considered by a part of civil society to be "a copy of the 2003 law and therefore subject to the same criticisms, particularly in terms of guarantees for a fair trial".[42]

Many observers agree in saying that counter-terrorism in Tunisia has been essentially based on control and repression.[43] Among the most discussed procedures applied in the post-revolutionary period there are administrative extrajudicial measures such as house search and arrest, travel restrictions and bans on leaving the country.[44] In the context of the national plan to combat terrorism and the state of emergency, these measures have been often applied without a judicial order and without any right of appeal. The most glaring example is undoubtedly the Directive No. 17 of 2013, better known as the "S17" from the French word "signalisation" (signaling), originally put into effect by the Tunisian Ministry of Interior to prevent young people under 30 to travel to hotbeds of conflict. S17 was motivated by the crisis caused by the high numbers of Tunisian foreign fighters traveling to the Islamic State and other jihadist organizations causing national and international concern. Nevertheless, this measure got "out of hand" of public institutions,[45] restricting and

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[39] Mullin, Rouabah (2016); Alzubairi (2019).

[40] Amnesty International (2017).

[41] Bras (2016).

[42] Réseau d'Observation de la Justice Tunisienne (2016), p. 7.

[43] Aliaga, O'Farrell (2017); Ben Mustapha Ben Arab (2018); Chirchi et al. (2020).

[44] Organisation mondiale contre la torture (2019); United Nations Development Program et al. (2021a).

[45] Cotteret (2020).

violating the freedom of movement. According to official figures, 29,450 Tunisians have been prevented from traveling out of the country on the basis of S17 measures from 2013 to 2018.[46] Their use has thus appeared as disproportionate and discriminatory. Such restriction on the right to freedom of movement, moreover without prior notification except at the time of travel and without the possibility of knowing the reasons and appealing, and other extrajudicial measures has had serious social consequences. Right defenders have in fact pointed out implications such as the loss of employment, social isolation, divorce, and different kinds of traumas for those people affected and their families.[47]

A part of Tunisian civil society has repeatedly denounced the abuses committed in the name of security and in the framework of counter-terrorism, and have done so also leveraging on the spread of prevention discourse, as detailed below in this chapter. Here, it suffices to recall that the full respect for fundamental rights and freedoms is a key asset of the new "preventing violent extremism" approach that will complement more canonical counterterrorism measures.[48] Notoriously, 46 major Tunisian civil society organizations (CSOs), signed and addressed an open letter to the state authorities against the adoption of the new anti-terrorist legislation, namely Organic Law No. 26 of 2015. These also included the quartet awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 made up of the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Employers' Union, the Human Rights League and the Order of Lawyers. The letter clearly gives voice to human rights defenders worried about "a dangerous path in the name of striking back against terrorists".[49] Along with the letter, an awareness campaign was also carried out under the coordination of Human Rights Watch and involving some Tunisian celebrities to affirm that human rights abuses should not be allowed in CT operations.[50] Whereas ad hoc emergency measures such as the 2015 counter-terrorism law were pivotal in facing the emergency linked to terrorism, a more diversified approach has been gradually emerging around prevention and deradicalization. This approach, based on a long-term perspective and greater inclusiveness, involved society more closely into state security activities. To be sure, society became both a security actor and a security target to be protected.

The joint civilian-military effort that derailed the terrorist plan of creating a jihadi stronghold in Ben Guerdane in 2016 played a major role in this further twist. Not only the improved coordination between the security forces, but the active role of the local community was decisive in thwarting the terrorist assault. In the com-

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[46] Jelassi (2021).

[47] Organisation mondiale contre la torture (2019).

[48] Observatory to Prevent Extremist Violence (2020).

[49] Human Rights Watch (2016a).

[50] Human Rights Watch (2016b).

mon vulgate, a marginalized and often stigmatized community, chose to react to terrorism by somehow cleaning its reputation and proving its allegiance to the central state. Linking security to the wellbeing of the community, that is to societal security – intended here as the capability of a society to preserve its essential character under changed circumstances and despite possible or real threats[51] – represent what we might compare to the "local turn" of peace studies and peacebuilding. These latter have in fact emphasized complexity, local capacities, and human agency.[52] Unlike in previous approaches to security, local actors acquire a proactive and transformative role. In other words, bottom-up input and local ownership become an unavoidable condition for the long-term success of security strategies. That said, three remarks are necessary.

Firstly, the myth of the "epopee" Ben Guerdane has to be more critically analyzed. Although the main narrative on the battle insisted on the courageous help of the citizens to the security forces while proving the resilience of the Tunisian people to terrorism coming from abroad, a non-negligible group of locals was colluded with the assailants. On March 6, 2022, the criminal chamber specialized in terrorism cases at the Court of First Instance of Tunis rendered severe judgments about the events of Ben Guerdane.[53] Of the 96 defendants involved, 16 were sentenced to capital punishment,[54] 15 to life imprisonment and two were sentenced to 30 years. Imprisonment sentences between 20 and 27 years were pronounced against 9 people, and others ranging from 4 to 15 years against the 51 remaining defendants. An unspecified number of indictees were also dismissed. When one also considers that of the 46 dead assailants, most were Tunisian nationals, the rhetoric of terrorism as an imported phenomenon from outside loses ground. The participation of a nourished group of local citizens at several levels in planning the Ben Guerdane attack has been systematically silenced by a political and mediatic discourse that insisted on the positive involvement of civilians in the clashes alongside the army and other security forces, though, it contributes to showing the potential for mobilization by violent extremist groups at both national and local levels.[55]

Secondly, although the events in Ben Guerdane paved the way for a more inclusive understanding of security involving society at large, more traditional security measures have certainly not disappeared. New approaches have thus come alongside traditional approaches, especially border security. The battle, in fact, also contributed

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[51] Wæver et al. (1993).

[52] Juncos, Joseph (2020).

[53] Anadolu Agency (2022).

[54] Despite Tunisia has continued to issue death penalty sentences and has never suppressed capital punishment from the penal code, a *de facto* moratorium has been observed in the country for almost 30 years.

[55] Boukhars (2017).

to the ongoing further militarization of the Tunisian-Libyan border. Stricter controls were enforced, aggravating the economic difficulties of the border community, traditionally reliant on cross-border trade and smuggling activities in the absence of other viable alternatives, and already on its knees as the result of the Libyan crisis first and the Tunisian economic recession that had disrupted conventional flows.[56]

Thirdly, this shift from a state-centric perspective, contingency-based approach mainly focused on counter-terrorism and border management that prioritized result-oriented technical and training assistance, to a more inclusive, long-term strategy involving society at large in counter-radicalization efforts, did not come from out of the blue with Ben Guerdane. Indeed, it traces back to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's agenda on preventing violent extremism. If locally the battle of Ben Guerdane has induced public institutions to rethink their approach beyond strictly securitarian measures by showing how important societal resistance and resilience can be in defeating terrorism, it is also true that this domestic shift also coincided with a paradigm turn at the international level. As a matter of fact, the United Nations spearheaded the adoption of the so-called prevention of violent extremism (PVE). More specifically, the UN Security Council played a central role in the internationalization of the discourse on violent extremism, especially through Resolution 2178 of 2014 along with the 2015 Action Plan of the UN Secretary for the Prevention of Violent Extremism.[57] In sum, we might say that Tunisia's move from a narrower counter-terrorism approach to a broader preventing dimension, albeit mainly linked domestically to what happened in Ben Guerdane, is part of a broader international paradigm shift. This latter was not merely transposed in the Maghreb country, but was rather the result of the interplay of international and national orientations. On closer inspection, a domestic debate had been going on for some time, and undoubtedly Ben Guerdane showed how a renewed approach to terrorism was the right way forward. Especially since 2015, increasing attention has been paid to the root causes of terrorism, as shown by the parliamentary discussion for the adoption of the abovementioned Organic Law No. 26 of 2015. Political discourse from multiple sides, once heavily concentrated on the military dimension of counterterrorism, began recognizing the need of implementing public policies capable of addressing socio-economic development[58], disrupting extremist religious views[59] and involving local civil society and international organisations.[60] In parliamentary debates, different deputies stressed the need of adopting a comprehensive

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[56] Mullin, Rouabah (2018); Boukhars (2017); Meddeb (2017).

[57] Martini (2020).

[58] Yakoubi (Member of Parliament from the Union Patriotique Libre - UPL party) in Marsad Majles (2015a).

[59] Madhioub (Member of Parliament from Ennahda party) in Marsad Majles (2015a).

[60] Belhaj Hmida (Member of Parliament, Nidaa Tounes party) in Marsad Majles (2015b).

view on terrorism by tackling poverty,[61] regional unequal development and youth unemployment,[62] all considered as risk factors for developing extremist and violent behaviours, or push factors for the adhesion to violent extremism.

5. Uncovering Tunisia's violent extremism prevention projects

In Tunisia, PVE has featured a new integrated approach bringing along a number of important novelties and challenges. Not only it broadened the domains of intervention compared with CT, but also involved a plethora of both state and non-actors at multiple levels, from the local to the national to the international one.

On the domestic front, by way of illustration, the holistic nature of PVE led to a more active participation of different Ministries breaking somehow the monopoly over counter-terrorism and security of the Ministry of Interior and, to a lesser extent, of the Ministry of National Defense. Moreover, the "Whole-of-Society Approach"[63] of PVE also opened a space for civil society and international organizations. As greater coordination became necessary, a new institution was specifically set up to carry out this task, namely the National Committee for Countering Terrorism and Extremism, commonly referred to with the French acronym CNLCT (*Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme*). Established by the Organic Law No. 26 of 2015, this Committee is composed by the representatives of 15 ministries, a judge specialized in counter-terrorism and several experts in charge of holding strategic, coordinative, regulatory, advisory and awareness-raising missions.[64] Prevention thus increasingly turned out to be an essential aspect of CNLCT activities. Among others, these latter include the issuance of guiding principles to prevent and fight against terrorism and support the international efforts made in this sense. In tune with the new international PVE approach, it was the CNLCT to draw up the 2016 National Strategy to Fight Terrorism and Extremism. This latter, indeed, saw the light in a context of international mobilization for the harmonization of domestic anti-terrorist practices to international standards and was largely affected by the UN Global Strategy Against Terrorism and by the EU Anti-Terrorist Strategy. Adopted in November 2016 but released in full only years later, Tunisia's National Strategy paved the way for several ministerial action plans in 2018 that, unlike the first one, have not yet been made public. The strategy, currently under revision, bears on four key pillars as its western equivalents: prevention, protection,

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[61] Hamdi (Member of Parliament from Nidaa Tounes party) in Marsad Majles (2015a).

[62] Madhioub (Member of Parliament from Ennahda party) in Marsad Majles (2015a).

[63] United Nations General Assembly (2015).

[64] Presidency of the Tunisian Government (2019).

pursuit and response. Also, it features 59 general objectives that enshrine a multidisciplinary perspective.[65] More specifically, the prevention pillar, counting 18 articles, includes a series of guidelines ranging from addressing "the social, economic, political and intellectual factors conducive to the spread of terrorism"[66] to strengthening international cooperation in CT and PVE. It aims to prevent online recruitment and address the phenomenon of foreign fighters "directing them to de-radicalization and reintegration programs".[67]

Besides the efforts made by state institutions in expanding the counter-terrorism activity towards a more comprehensive and multidimensional approach, several studies have highlighted the extent to which international actors are largely involved in this sector.[68] Starting from 2016, most of the funds for implementing these programs have been actually allocated by international donors as part of multilateral or bilateral development cooperation. By contrast, Tunisian governments have provided very scarce funds through the various ministries (Letsch, 2019).

Coming to international players, among the 17 UN agencies based in Tunisia, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is one of the most committed to the PVE. In 2016-2017, the *Tamkeen* (Arabic for "empowerment") project, more broadly devoted to the promotion of active citizenship, integrated for the first time a PVE perspective to strengthen social cohesion. *Tamkeen*'s main activities were related to capacity building of Tunisian CSOs but also financed third-party projects carried out by small associations scattered across different regions of Tunisia. In 2018, for example, the Southern region of Medenine hosted a number of developing projects through local associations specifically targeting rural women and aimed to build community resilience against violent extremism. Furthermore, the UNDP launched a new project with a strong PVE mission in 2020: "*Tarabot* - Inclusive development to prevent violence". Designed in partnership with the CNLCT, it aims to help strengthen the resilience of the Tunisian state and society concerning violent extremism by making PVE efforts more effective. The project covers a wide range of activities including research. As a matter of fact, in the framework of the *Tarabot* project (wich means "connections" in Arabic), several studies have been carried out to inform public policies on PVE, by providing data on the most pressing issues, offering a fresh outlook and specific recommendations for the revision of the 2016 National Strategy scheduled in 2021 and yet to be released. Among these studies, there is an analytical review of the factors that drive people to involve themselves in extremism in post-revolu-

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[65] Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme (2016).

[66] Ibid., p. 4.

[67] Ibid., p. 6.

[68] Aliaga, O'Farrell (2017); Letsch (2019); Simoncini (2020).

tionary Tunisia[69] and an analysis of the economic impact of violent extremism in the country.[70]

The UNDP is also a major sponsor of projects on "Community policing" (*Police de proximité*), born with the double aim of recovering the bottom-up reputation of the police and value local communities in preventing violent extremism. In other words, they aimed at boosting more socially ingrained security mechanisms premised on the cooperation between societal and security forces, that Ben Guerdane's example had shown to be a working model. Community policing projects have relied on local security committees (*Comités Locaux de Sécurité*, CLS) in charge of elaborating local security plans through bottom-up efforts, making police officers, civil society and local authorities work together.[71] Through this micro-level approach, these community activities have mainly addressed low-politics issues, such as drugs, women and crime prevention. Interestingly, the CLSs are currently dispersed across Tunisia, but mostly located in the south and interior regions, long considered to be more vulnerable to terrorism in the common vernacular. Unfortunately, the Minister of Interior that was supposed to set up new CLSs on its own following the good practice inaugurated by the UNDP, has lagged behind.

In addition to UN agencies, the European Union (EU) is certainly one of the main donors in the PVE field. From 2017 to 2020, through its Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace (IcSP), the European Commission allocated approximately three million euros to local civil society organizations to implement PVE projects.[72] These former covered a number of issues, including improving the conditions of the inhabitants of marginalized regions, understanding the factors that lead to violent extremism, accompanying the reintegration of young detainees, advocating for the respect of fundamental rights in the fight against terrorism, promoting the social and political participation of unemployed young people and building capacity for the protagonists of social and cultural life.[73]

This European line of funding may seem small when compared with the 36.25 million dollars from the U.S. Agency for International Development allocated from 2018 to 2022 in the framework of the initiative "TRACE: Tunisia Resilience and Community Empowerment".[74] Designed to promote social cohesion, reduce communities' risk of instability and increase resilience to violent extremism, it gave birth to the *Ma3an* (meaning "together" in Arabic) project, implemented in 30 Tunisian communities in partnership with international and

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[69] United Nations Development Program et al. (2021a).
[70] United Nations Development Program et al. (2021b).
[71] United Nations (2017b).
[72] European Commission (2020).
[73] Ibid.
[74] Government of the United States (2022).

Tunisian partners under the coordination of Fhi360, an international nonprofit international organization.

As far as international actors are concerned, the enhanced importance of prevention is evidenced by the creation of an ad-hoc working group within the G7plus platform and thus the need for greater coordination. After the 2015 attacks, a new security assistance format was devised for Tunisia through an enlarged G7 which included the European Union, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In Tunisia, the G7plus acted as a coordination mechanism to avoid duplication and promote sharing of information among Western countries about their respective security assistance to the North African country. It practically operated through working groups, each co-led by a third country and a Tunisian ministry. At a later stage, a fifth operational working group specifically devoted to counter-radicalization was set up, co-led by the Netherlands and the EU. On the Tunisian side, the leader was the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), at least before the working groups were consolidated from five to three with the US presidency to the G7: the group on Border Integrity and Transport and Security; that on Counter-Terrorism; and the one on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism. All underscore the growing importance of prevention, but also how its perception changes over time.

6. Campaigning against terrorism and violent extremism: propaganda, awareness raising, and counter-narratives

As mentioned above, the new paradigm enabled the possibility of new policies and strategies to combat extremism and prevent terrorist drifts. Remarkably, the discursive dimension gradually acquired a strong importance in recent years in the fight against violent extremist recruitment in Tunisia. This corresponds to a growing interest of the international community in disrupting the extremely accurate and professional propaganda developed by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In Resolution 2354, the United Nations[75] called on member states to develop measures to counter extremist propaganda, indicating guidelines for the implementation of counter-narrative initiatives. Tunisia has been the fifth most targeted country by ISIS communication campaigns[76] with a tailored messaging often embodied by Tunisian foreign fighters sharing their experience in the Caliphate and motivating Tunisians to join the organization.[77] The impact of such messaging has

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[75] United Nations (2017a).

[76] World Leadership Alliance - Club de Madrid (2017).

[77] Zelin (2020).

worried the authorities and civil society, giving the impetus for the development of audiovisual campaigns aiming at challenging the extremist discourse. In fact, Tunisian state authorities have gone beyond the mere counter-narrative, insisting on the necessity of building grassroot alternative narratives, not only being capable of countering the extremist message, but able to offer an alternative option, a Tunisian-specific positive narrative.

To this end, a governmental inter-ministerial PVE Strategic Communications Unit was created in 2015 under the supervision of the Ministry in charge of relations with constitutional bodies, civil society and human rights and assigned coordination tasks. This Unit particularly focuses on online extremist recruitment, and in doing so it addresses the priority of implementing "a national approach that will prevent the recruitment, via the Internet, of new elements by terrorist groups, by reducing the effect of extremist propaganda on young people while respecting freedom of access to the Internet" listed in the 2016 National Security Strategy.[78] More specifically, the PVE Strategic Communications Unit launched the Alternative Narrative Platform in 2016. Interestingly, the very initial aim was to build real alternative discourses, context-tailored and characterized by positivity and inclusiveness instead of producing a simple opposite narrative. The Platform supports the works done by third parties as private and civil society actors and coordinates the efforts of institutional and non-institutional actors. However, it must be said that, to date, no significant project came into being.

Some awareness campaigns have nonetheless been developed by various Tunisian ministries, such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Education. In 2015, the Ministry of the Interior produced and released several videos. The very first one was entitled "Do not make yourself vulnerable to terrorists in the virtual world, there are new victims every day".[79] It opens with the image of a female Facebook user scrolling through her bulletin board and receiving a friendship request from an unknown person with the ISIS flag on his profile picture. When she accepts the request and starts to discover the profile of her new "friend", pictures of weapons and the calligraphic image of a white *šahāda* (an Islamic oath declaring belief in the oneness of God and in the prophet Mohammad as his messenger) on a black background pop out of the page. Meanwhile, the girl receives a message inviting her to reach the Islamic State, promising her paradise in exchange for her sacrifices. At this point, counter-messages come in. For example "They will tell you: sacrifice yourself with us for a just cause […] But in reality, you will discover hell on this earth and you will die alone, far from your Nation, from your mother, your brothers and your father

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[78] Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme (2016), p. 6.
[79] Tunisian Ministry of Interior (2015a).

[…]".[80] Indeed, the video was aimed to sensitize a mainly young audience to the dangers of the jihadist propaganda online, but increasing attention has also been devoted to their parents. A famous awareness campaign devoted to them reads: "When we do not pay attention to our sons, terrorism can be among us".[81] The video shows blurred images of a woman sitting in a police car speaking by radio to her son who is involved in a terrorist attack. The desperate woman addresses her son messages of disapproval, crying and shouting, while trying to make him desist from the violence to no avail. In the end, the video states: "If you had told us what you saw, we would have protected him" inviting parents to speak out when detecting suspicious behaviors.[82]

At the end of this overview of key initiatives in the field of PVE, some reflection is necessary. Unsurprisingly, a large part of these projects, though heterogeneous, are mainly aimed at young people. After the 2010-2011 uprisings, Tunisian "youth", who have emerged powerfully on the scene claiming their own agency,[83] as complex as that category is, have been affected by so many development projects aimed at reinforcing their participation in the transitional process and molding their active citizenship. Starting from 2015, this wide variety of youth-tailored programmes have gradually begun to integrate a securitarian dimension through the inclusion of PVE. During the post-revolutionary period, some argue, major transformations took place at the level of youth policy in the country: from being a State monopoly it has in fact turned into "a field of competition with international stakeholders".[84] PVE injection on youth policies does not happen smoothly. Among other authors, Sukarieh and Tannock problematize the theoretical basis and the practical results of PVE policies addressing youth in the Arab contexts.[85] Analyzing several institutional initiatives taken by various actors on the wave of UN Resolution 2250 on Youth Peace and Security (YPS) of 2015, they argue that the YPS agenda overestimates the role of young people as security subjects and actors. According to Murphy, instead of continuing to see youth as "a source of insecurity" or major actors of security, the approach to be taken would rather be to investigate the forms of insecurity experienced by youth in South and East Mediterranean countries.[86]

Indeed, Tunisian civil society has developed some youth-centered programs that privileged the experience of marginalized youth, seeing them neither as risks nor as security actors, but as protagonists in their own lives and that of the community. A

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[80] Ibid.
[81] Tunisian Ministry of Interior (2015b).
[82] Ibid.
[83] Pepicelli (2018).
[84] Somi (2016), p. 3.
[85] Sukarieh, Tannock (2018).
[86] Murphy (2018).

virtuous example is the project "Strengthening youth participation in Ettadhamen" by International Alert Tunisia. Ettadhamen is one of the working-class neighborhoods of the Tunis suburban belt, most affected by the extremism phenomenon. The project resulted in the publication of the book "Les jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen. Une enquête sociologique".[87] Deconstructing the dominant media narrative that has reduced the Ettadhamen neighborhood to a site of Salafist violence, the book offers a different perspective on these young people, highlighting the complexity of their lives and the social, political and religious mechanisms that mark these sensitive territories, conducting in some cases to extremism.

However, despite the dynamism and the large number of projects that starting from 2015-2017 have been implemented in Tunisia through partnerships between local and international actors for PVE, the sector is not exempt from critical issues. Aliaga and O'Farrell point out the "lack of coherence and long-term vision" as well as the risk of "reinforcing the problems they most need to address".[88] The work of Lydia Letsch confirms that the high dependence of civil society actors on external financing translates into a strong influence exerted by international actors on the way in which preventive activities are designed and implemented as well as on the beneficiaries to be involved.[89] The international donors' discourse based on superficial understandings of cohesion and peace risks further alienating the beneficiaries of these (mostly) short-term programs.[90] Indeed, many observers agree on the need to propose effective structural changes to prevent violent extremism rather than limited initiatives. However, the situation of the serious economic and political crisis that Tunisia has been going through in the post-2011 decade does not allow for the possibility of implementing the reform plans necessary to end up with the unequal development of the regions and bring new perspectives to the socio-economic problems of the country. These problems risk jeopardizing the success of the PVE programs developed so far in Tunisia.

7. Conclusion

This chapter has traced the paradigmatic shift of Tunisia's security practices from a narrower counter-terrorism approach to a more comprehensive prevention of violent extremism. The latter entails not only the inclusion of more security recipients but also those who provide security, more vocally involving society. In addition, it

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[87] Lamloum, Ben Zina (2017).
[88] Aliaga, O'Farrell (2017), p.19.
[89] Letsch (2019).
[90] Simoncini (2020).

provides for a broadening to other areas beyond the purely military, so as to encompass socio-economic, socio-cultural and even psychological dimensions. In our analysis prevention played a key role as a distinguishing feature. However, it should be pointed out that this is not an aspect that is absent in counter-terrorism, but is more understood in the sense of anticipating a possible attack. After all, it was one of the four pillars of the 2016 Tunisian National Strategy along the lines of the European one. The fault lines between one approach and the other are obviously not always clearly demarcated. Not even from a time perspective. As illustrated, the shifting focus from preventing terrorist attacks as part of the country's counter-terrorism approach to preventing the process of individuals' radicalization typical of PVE strategies is hardly traceable to a single moment. Undoubtedly, Tunisia's domestic political environment became more receptive after Ben Guerdane. In a way, domestic terrorist attacks have set the stage well for this change, also in line with an international trend.

Tunisia has been hit hard by terrorism in its first post-uprising decade, with significant implications in terms of economic and even political stability. In this sense, it has been an interesting "laboratory" of counter-terrorism practices and prevention. In contrast to other contexts, it should be acknowledged that in Tunisia, the debate on how best to address the issue has been posed. The large number of projects in favor of preventing violent extremism and radicalization testify to this vitality and willingness. What is no small thing, actors traditionally regarded as a black box such as the Ministry of Interior have shown an openness, albeit still minimal, to cooperation with civil society and international actors. Yet, there remain mainly implementation problems, not least because of political will, and an underlying issue that is anything but minor, such as the question of de-radicalization in prisons. In this regard, the constant changes in power and the perennial political crisis have been detrimental.

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