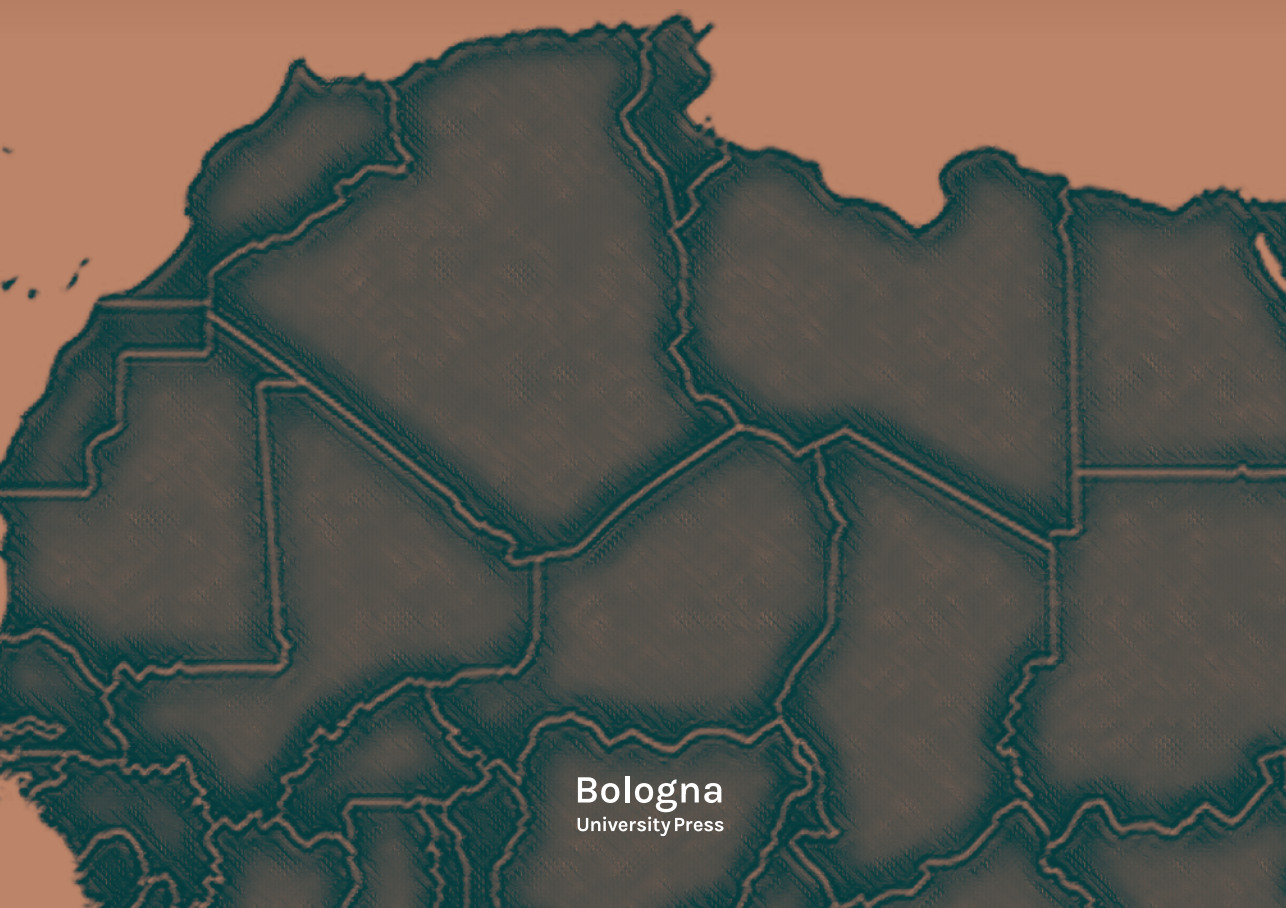


BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND RADICALIZATION IN NORTH AFRICA

A focus on Morocco and Tunisia

Marco Borraccetti
Susanna Villani
(eds)



Bologna
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Chapter III

ISLAMIC ACTIVISM AND DYNAMICS OF RADICALIZATION BEYOND RELIGION IN TUNISIA

Ester Sigillo

ABSTRACT: Tunisia was the only country in the Arab world to undertake a serious attempt at democratic transition in the aftermath of the 2010-2011 uprisings, in contrast to the geopolitical upheavals experienced throughout the region. However, since 2014 it was also the birthplace of a vast jihadist movement, which led thousands of young people to enlist as foreign fighters for the Islamic State. While several academic works have linked the phenomenon of radicalization to the political resurgence of Islamism, this contribution goes beyond the Islamism-radicalization nexus, exploring alternative explanations for the rise of radical registers and repertoires of action in the country. The revolutionary protests that first erupted in December 2010, but have reignited cyclically over the years, have advanced socio-economic demands on employment and social justice among the most disadvantaged segments of the population. The grievances have been expressed mainly by young people from the most marginalized areas of the interior and the south and, in general, by those social groups excluded from the clientelist networks of the old regime. In contrast to the rhetoric of ‘Tunisian exception’, instead of resolving the country’s socio-economic divide, the transition process has led to the exacerbation of non-inclusive growth and growing frustration of disenfranchised groups. While initially the discontent and sense of alienation were channeled by the Salafist-jihadist movements, more recently the ‘forgotten of the revolution’ have been represented by non-religious entrepreneurs.

KEYWORDS: Islamism – Salafism – Jihadism – Radicalization – Marginalization

1. Introduction

The fall of Ben Ali’s regime in January 2011 led to the revival of Islamic activism, in the form of party politics and social movements, after decades of repression. At leg-

islative elections in October 2011, Ennahda obtained 37% of the votes, emerging as the first mass religious party in the country. By 2012-2013, the ideological spectrum of the Islamic landscape had crystallized into four main trends: traditional Islamists (represented by Ennahda), Salafi political parties (the most important of which was *Jabhat al-Islah*), religious associations of various ideological affiliations, and Salafi-jihadis (represented by the socio-political movement *Ansar al-Sharia*). This scenario lasted until a critical moment in 2013 when a jihadist commando assassinated two leftist political leaders triggering a severe political crisis that culminated in criticism of Ennahda's alleged indulgence of the Salafists and eventually led the Islamist party to cede power in favor of a technocratic government. As a result, the Salafist socio-political landscape was reshuffled: the Salafist-jihadi group Ansar al-Sharia was banned and declared a terrorist organization, and Salafist associations suspected of having links to terrorist groups were shut down.¹

The Jomaa government, which took office in January 2014, launched a securitization campaign against religious associations suspected of having links with Salafist-jihadi movements inside and outside the country. In October 2014, after the legislative elections, Ennahda reached a compromise with the secular neo-Bourghibist party *Nidaa Tounès* (Call for Tunisia), which counts among its members some remnants of Ben Ali's regime. This new alliance marked the rupture of the Islamist party's relationship with the Salafist constellation and, in general terms, with the most radical, though not necessarily violent, actors. After the criminalization of Ansar al-Sharia, the Salafists who survived the securitization campaign found themselves without a symbolic and material reference. Indeed, following 2014's securitization campaign, violent extremism has paradoxically increased in the country.

Drawing on the Tunisian case, this contribution explores the drivers of Tunisian radicalization having as a background the literature on *post-Islamism*,² the *Islamization of radicalism*,³ and on the socio-economic dimensions of radicalization.⁴ Therefore, by analysing the evolution of Tunisian Islamic activism and the

¹ Merone, Blanc, Sigillò (2021).

² Proposed initially by Asef Bayat about the changing face of Islamism in Iran in the 1990s, the notion of post-Islamism refers to the "exhaustion of Islamism as a symbol and source of legitimacy, the trend towards secularization of religion and the appeal to limit the political role of religion" (Bayat, 1996: 46). The thesis of post-Islamism is later taken up by Olivier Roy, according to whom the Islamists' move to formal politics entails the failure of the original political project – of transformation of state and society according to Islamic principles – and its evolution towards a conservative democratic agenda (Roy, 1992; 1999). In other words, according to the Islamic perspective, Islamism has intellectually and politically failed as a societal and political change process.

³ According to the theory of Islamization of radicalism, religion is just a conjunctural variable of an already present phenomenon: radicalism. Roy (2021).

⁴ Richards (2003); Fahmi, Meddeb (2015); Angus (2016); Groppi (2017); Tanoli, Jaffry, Ali (2018).

dynamics of radicalization as two not necessarily parallel trajectories, this chapter overcomes the Islamism-radicalization nexus. In doing so, it explores in depth the driving factors of radicalization in the country from 2011 until the last legislative elections in 2019.⁵

2. Unpacking the debate on Islamism, radicalization, and socio-economic inequalities

French scholars have largely debated the drivers of radicalization in its relation to Islamic actors. On the one hand, in his analysis of radicalization in Europe, Olivier Roy describes the origins of radicalization as the effect of a generational, cultural, and political schism of young people fascinated by violence and in search of a cause for their personal revolt.⁶ On the other hand Gilles Kepel contrasted Roy's argument by emphasizing the importance of understanding jihadism through an analysis taking Islam as the starting point. In this regard, according to Kepel, the logic of jihadist terrorism should be reframed in terms of a Salafi dynamic that has its roots in the "schism of values".⁷

Besides the French debate on radicalization, several scholars focused on the socioeconomic dimension as a relevant driver of radicalization, including works focusing on the MENA region.⁸ Some authors differentiated between causal factors at the macro-level, such as poverty, and at the micro or meso-level, like relative deprivation or groups' identity dynamics. In this regard, it is stated that "problems of marginalization and social exclusion can act as a catalyst for radicalization and, potentially, violent extremism".⁹

Recently, organizations working in development assistance, such as the World Bank, the EU, USAID and UNDP, have also started to take up this link and have worked out development responses for addressing radicalization and violent extrem-

⁵ President Kais Saied (2019-) decided to freeze parliamentary activities on 25 July 2021 and to definitively dissolve the parliament led by Ghannouchi on 22 March 2022. On July 25, 2022, Tunisians voted for a referendum on a new constitution that significantly expands the powers of a president who has sidelined the other branches of government to rule alone. The referendum passed 92% of the "yes" vote. The turnout was around 27%, but it matters little as there was no quorum. With the official start of the third republic, the measures taken by President Kais Saied precisely one year earlier to centralize power in his own hands, weakening parliament and other controls over the president and giving the head of state the ultimate authority to form a government, appoint judges and propose laws, were definitively institutionalized.

⁶ Roy (2015).

⁷ Kepel (2002).

⁸ Richards (2003); Fahmi, Meddeb (2015); Angus (2016); Groppi (2017); Tanoli, Jaffry, Ali (2018).

⁹ Angus (2016).

ism.¹⁰ Thus, poverty, social exclusion, and unemployment constitute the most frequently mentioned links between socioeconomic grievances and radicalization that have been widely debated in the context of research on terrorism and counterterrorism.

The notion that poverty is “a root cause of terrorist violence is widely asserted, particularly in the Western world”.¹¹ This assertion fits at first glance with basic liberal economic theory, which presupposes that individuals are motivated primarily by material well-being: “Those who have opportunities to sustain and better themselves will likely accept the system in which they live and behave peacefully. By contrast, those confronting socioeconomic distress and deprivation are more likely to be drawn to radical and possibly violent movements, including terrorist movements”.¹²

After 9/11, the poverty-terrorism nexus was further bolstered and was also famously linked to violent extremism by former US president George W. Bush in March 2002.¹³ Several academic works legitimated this argument by comparing macro data, such as GDP per capita and the number of terrorist attacks in a country.

If, on the one hand, socioeconomic aspects of terrorism should not be underestimated, approaches aimed at analyzing and identifying direct links between poverty, radicalization, and terrorism fall short, possibly because they remain in the field of rational choice theory and primarily rely on quantitative methods and, as a result, often exclude both constructivist perspectives and qualitative methods. Recent studies on terrorism emphasize indirect links between economic insecurity and terrorism. Academic research often presents conceptual thoughts and general mechanisms instead of analyzing explicit cases or briefly examining different cases without a thorough analysis. Lieven adds, “the link between poverty and radicalization in the Muslim world is clear, but not straightforward. [...] Rather than absolute poverty, such groups, and especially young men among them, tend to be radicalized by considerations of jobs and status”.¹⁴

Against this theoretical background, Colombo (2016) argued that radicalization in Tunisia is the consequence of multiple layers of *marginalization*, including political, social, and religious marginalization.¹⁵ In the following pages I will systematically analyse the evolution of Islamic activism and the dynamics of radicalization in the country. The results show that the two dimensions are not intertwined, neither they do not follow a parallel direction, but intersect with the other dimensions, thus contributing to a multi-layered explanatory pattern of violent extremism in the country.

¹⁰ Süß, Noor Baheige Aakhunzzada (2019).

¹¹ Gottlieb (2010), p. 34.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Maskaliūnaitė (2015), p. 14.

¹⁴ Lieven (2008), p. 20.

¹⁵ Colombo (2016).

3. The origins of Islamic activism in Tunisia

Tunisian Islamism developed in the 1970s as an Islamic grassroots community (*jama'a*) inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhoods (*jama'a al-Islamiyya*) and conceived the religion and politics as 'two parts of a whole' (*shumuliyya*). In other words, Islam was intended as a global practice that does not differentiate religious from social or political activity. With the partial liberalization of the 1980s, the religious group transformed itself into a political movement called 'the Movement of the Islamic Tendency' (*harakat Ittijah al-Islami*) (MIT). Over time the Movement has undertaken a transformation that evolved into a 'specialization' in a political party. In 1989, the president, Ben Ali, who initially seemed favorable to a policy of inclusion, allowed the party's creation. To comply with Tunisian laws banning religious parties, Rached Ghannouchi, the party leader, changed the organization's name from the Movement of Islamic Tendency (MIT) into Movement Ennahda (*Harakat Ennahdha*), meaning 'rebirth,' thus abandoning any Islamic reference. The Movement's religious reference was, however, kept alive thanks to some movement members engaging in grassroots activities (such as charity coupled with *da'wa*) in secretive conditions.¹⁶

The party's ideological transformation remained the fundamental concept of Ennahda's public discourse from early 2011 onwards.¹⁷ At the IX Congress held in June 2012, Ennahda's leadership prompted a debate on the division in the party's activities between 'preaching' (*da'wa*, which means 'call') and 'politics,' proposing that the group's more conservative members participate in civil society independently from party politics.¹⁸

As described in the following pages, the party has transformed over the years in a context characterized by high pressure given by the opposition, especially the remnants of the old regime gathered in the new party, Nidaa Tounès, whose initial objective was to thwart the rising power of Political Islam in the country.¹⁹

3.1 Origins of Tunisian Salafism

Salafism refers to a literal version of Islam that claims to follow the path of Islamic ancestors (*salaf al-salih*). In the literature, apolitical/quietist Salafism is the scripturalist form (*al-salafiyya al'ilmiiyya*), while the Salafi jihadi (*al-salafiyya aljihadiyya*)

¹⁶ Author's interviews with activists engaged with the charitable sector in Tunisia.

¹⁷ Cavatorta, Merone (2013); Cavatorta, Merone (2015).

¹⁸ McCarthy (2015).

¹⁹ Cavatorta, Merone (2015).

believes in an armed struggle to establish an Islamic state.²⁰ In the 1990s, the Ben Ali regime had initially permitted Salafism as an apolitical alternative to the Ennahda party's political project. However, following a keenly fought election in 1989, he proceeded to clamp down on many religious actors. These policies inadvertently contributed to a jihadist movement taking root in Tunisia. Salafism grew through the proliferation of private meetings, books and audio-visual materials, and religious satellite television channels that attracted many Tunisians striving for religious knowledge. Salafism and Salafi jihadism further gained influence within Tunisian society through preaching and charitable activities. In the post-revolution era, jihadists also exploited the weak security environment in poor locales by engaging in vigilantism, social mediation, and conflict resolution, purportedly on behalf of locals. Through these efforts, they were able to establish good relationships and influence not only local communities but also establish smuggling networks that were used to procure weapons and other resources. Although not all Salafi jihadists are violent, their call for the implementation of a strict Islamic system of governance, and willingness to wage an armed struggle to achieve their aims, is innately violent in nature, as some have argued.

Tunisian Salafism, in both its quietist and jihadist versions, has its roots in the dissatisfaction of some Islamists with the actions of the old MIT, which had made democratic compromises to govern. Therefore, several Islamists left the movement before it became a party, to clandestinely create the Tunisian Islamic Front (TIF) in 1986. Many Tif militants left Tunisia for Pakistan and Bosnia, where they took part in jihads; others went into exile, while still others remained in their homeland, marginalized, or imprisoned. After the fall of Ben Ali, many Salafists returned home or were released, while young people who had adopted Salafism clandestinely came out of the closet. The impetus for the revival of 'indigenous' Salafism, however limited, came from the contamination by Tunisians who had engaged in jihad abroad. The quietists set up several charitable organisations and schools, while the newly established Salafist political parties increased their pressure on the new government to try to carve out a more prominent role for themselves. But it was the jihadists who profited the most from the political transition. Post-2011 Tunisia created a unique situation in the Arab world, in which jihadist ideologies and democratic experience mixed for the first time. Several analysts and observers welcomed the legalization of Salafist parties in Tunisia, arguing that the Salafist actors who participated in democratic life served as a counterbalance to the presence of the jihadist current. The marginalization of the quietist Salafists and their oppression would instead favor a radicalization of the movement.

²⁰ Wiktorowicz (2005).

4. Socio-economic marginalization and jihad in Tunisia

Although Tunisia turned from a highly rigid dictatorship to a representative democracy in 2011, the demands for secure employment and local development of the most marginal regions remained unchanged. In fact, while the Revolution conquered a level of civil and political rights never seen before in the country, it was clearly unable to set it on a more socially inclusive developmental pathway. Political instability aggravated the economic downturn, leading to a worse living for most Tunisians, especially young people. A report, published in 2014 by the World Bank, about young people in Tunisia analyzed the main dimensions of their exclusion: economic, political, social, and cultural exclusion. Moreover, it highlights that “young people who are not in education, employment or training may be simultaneously disengaged from community life, originate from a poor household, and lack social networks, which in turn precludes their access to opportunities in the labor market. These may be the most marginalized and disempowered youth”.²¹

Scarce attention, however, has been paid to the analysis of the structural conditions that not only restrict the possibilities for young people’s social realization but also contribute to defining the notion of youth. It is determined not only by local conceptions about the passage to adulthood but also by the structural conditions that restrict or favor it. Especially for males, adult status is attained only when an individual can buy a house, marry a woman, and have children. In a situation of economic and social crisis like that experienced in the post-revolutionary context, young people’s life paths have become more subject to the condition of *waithood*.²²

As underlined by scholars, *Ansar al-Sharia* (AS) (‘The Defenders of the Sharia’) quickly gained ground among a part of the population sidelined by the state in areas suffering from high poverty and low levels of education. AS was mainly dedicated to religious proselytism, political activism, and social welfare activities. Indeed, the group proposed to advance a social alternative to the population “excluded” from the transition process.²³ In the outskirts of large urban centres and depressed areas in the centre and south of the country, the parallel welfare network built by the organisation ensured the survival and availability of basic needs to hundreds of thousands of people. If on the one hand young, disenfranchised Tunisians who joined in 2011 were quite unfamiliar with Salafist doctrine at the time of their recruitment,²⁴ on

²¹ World Bank Group (2014), p. 5.

²² A survey conducted in the regions of SidiBouزيد and Kasserine on the social and demographic factors that triggered the uprising showed that 62% of young graduates believed their socioeconomic situation to be worse than that of their parents. See also: Pontiggia (2021); Bonci, Cavatorta (2021).

²³ Merone (2015).

²⁴ Marks (2013); Merone (2015).

the other hand, in the three years 2011-2013, the movement controlled over 400 places of worship and cultural associations throughout the country, from the outskirts of Tunis, such as the neighborhoods of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, to the desert villages in the hinterland and the South.²⁵ As posited by an expert working at the Institute of Strategic Studies: “The success of the movement can be explained by the marginalization experienced by the social bloc of those who participated in the Revolution but then felt betrayed by the new political forces unable to represent them. This anger and the inability to integrate into the economic fabric led them to seek their own identity and expression in anti-system movements.”²⁶

4.1 Marginalization and jihad at the borders

Resource-poor and sandwiched between two giant states-rentier, Tunisia has always been permeable to informal trade activated on its borders with Algeria and Libya. The cross-border economy developed in the 1990s in parallel with trade liberalization that followed the implementation of the structural adjustment plan in 1986. However, the austerity policy that emerged from international commitments contributed to increasing socio-economic inequality between inland and coastal areas. In the face of the distortions of the neo-liberal development model, public authorities tolerated and controlled the development of heterodox border economy practices by actors co-opted by the RCD (Democratic Constitutional Regrouping), the quasi-one-party in power during the Ben Ali regime. The marginalization of border regions and the lack of development policies thus transformed smuggling activities into a true “economy of necessity,” embodying an alternative form of local development to the state.²⁷ Whereas before the revolution, exchange activities at the borders were controlled by the hegemonic party RCD, after the collapse of the Ben Ali regime, there was a lack of central regulation. Therefore, the porosity of the borders has brought to light a scenario of reconfiguration of new networks located beyond the old smuggling activities, uncoordinated with each other and disengaged from government control. Indeed, since 2011, the political context in which this economy is embedded, the hierarchy of its actors, and its political significance have changed. Despite the emergence of a class of large-scale entrepreneurs in the informal economy, most smuggling activities increasingly express the marginalization and subordination suffered by borderland populations. In a context where the state is almost totally absent, the actors who invest in the informal economy are young graduates without jobs, local government officials looking for a supplementary sala-

²⁵ Torelli, Merone, Cavatorta (2012); Merone (2015).

²⁶ Dacrema (2014).

²⁷ Meddeb (2016).

ry, and artisans converted back to fuel sellers, who secure their livelihoods through illegal cross-border activities.²⁸

The porousness of the border between Tunisia and Algeria is due both to the peculiar geography—a steppe-like terrain that facilitates the smuggling of goods—and to an artificial border division that occurred in colonial times, which divided a vital social and economic space of many tribal groups, such as the Ouled Sidi Abid, the Ouled Sidi Tlil, and the Frechich.²⁹ Therefore, the entrenched nature of smuggling in the Kasserine region is also a product of kinship and solidarity relations on both sides. Thus, smuggling has become a way to “use” the border and make it productive in this peripheral and long-marginalized region, which in the aftermath of the Revolution was constituted as a “victim region” at the Truth and Dignity Instance, the commission in charge of advancing the transitional justice process after the collapse of the authoritarian regime.

Under Ben Ali’s regime, tolerance of smuggling activities was part of a low-cost administrative approach in the border areas: if customs and police authorities had prevented smuggling, these areas would have been completely abandoned by their inhabitants due to the lack of government development policies in the region. Therefore, the security services saw smuggling as a safety valve that could keep rural exodus, unemployment, poverty, and crime.³⁰ However, tolerance was accompanied by patronage policy, without which it would have been impossible to maintain control. Small-scale assistance in the form of food, livestock, and water tanks increased the power of local officials who selected beneficiaries based on their loyalty to the RCD. In addition to their political and patronage character, the aid packages had a role from a security standpoint as they were a vital reference point in recruiting and involving the local community in border supervision. The work of the security services was mainly based on intelligence activities involving the recruitment of informants from among forest guards and smugglers. This mechanism was mostly based on intimidation, fear of reprisals, and bribery.³¹ Although it increased the porosity of the border, this approach helped regulate the border space, reinforcing the state’s dominance over smugglers under an unwritten agreement characterized by the guarantee of economic protection in exchange for loyalty to the regime.

In the post-Ben Ali period, the delegitimization of the security forces by the local population led to the disintegration of those networks of informants that were essential to the surveillance of the border region. After 2011, intensified acts of terrorism in the Chaambi Mountains area, led to greater stigmatization of smugglers. However, the post-2011 political vacuum provided opportunities for insertion for

²⁸ Meddeb (2015).

²⁹ Meddeb (2016).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

new actors, such as criminal networks linked to drug and arms trafficking, and jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), who penetrated Tunisia from Algeria via the Sahel.

Populations in the southeast of the country, and particularly in the Médenine region, are more closely associated with Libya than with Tunisia, for reasons of shared geography, economy, and cross-border family networks. As in the case of Kasserine, Médenine governorate has always lived off the informal economy linked to smuggling, as a socially accepted practice tolerated by the government in the absence of state development plans. Ben Guerdane, a border town located about thirty kilometers from the Libyan border supplies the entire region with products from Asia via Libya. This has always benefited the entire country. As Tunisia's second largest economic partner, Libya has been the main source of informal cross-border trade, accounting for about 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product.³² Precisely because of this interdependence, since 2011, Tunisian civil society activists, cross-border traders, and merchants have protested the closure of the border crossing between the two countries, Ras Jadir, accusing the government of jeopardizing the very survival of the people in the southeast of the country.

During Ben Ali's regime, the practices of mediation and protection of smuggling by the RCD-linked security services were the preferred avenues of building a local notability dominated by the Twazine, Ben Guerdane's main tribe very close to Gaddafi, which controlled the trade route linking the Tunisian city to Zuwara and Tripoli, Libya.³³ The vacuum left by the collapse of the Ben Ali and Qaddafi regimes disrupted the Libyan-Tunisian borders, and new political actors found themselves renegotiating the terms of the informal economy with Ben Guerdane's notables.

With the outbreak of the Libyan civil war, Tunisia welcomed the capital flight of Libyan businessmen. Despite the occasional closure of the Ras Jadir border crossing, hundreds of thousands of refugees have also crossed the border to escape the ongoing conflict. However, while Tunisia has been a refuge for many Libyans, Libya has also taken in thousands of young Tunisians linked to jihadist networks, particularly since 2013.

5. Securitization of the religious field and the intensification of violent extremism

Summer 2013 represented a watershed for the country's political stability. The assassination of two secular activists, Chokri Belaid and Muhammad Brahmi by a Jihadi commando allegedly linked to Ansar al-Sharia, and the military coup in Egypt

³² Cherif (2015).

³³ Meddeb (2018).

that removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power in July 2013, triggered a severe political crisis characterized by strong protests of the country's secular forces against the Ennahda's led government.³⁴ On August 27, 2013, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh (Ennahdha) listed Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist organization before the Islamist party was forced to relinquish power to a technocratic government to preserve the stability of the country.³⁵

The new government led by Mehdi Jomaa, established in January 2014, started a campaign of securitization vis-à-vis religious associations and mosques suspected of having ties with Salafi-jihadist movements inside and outside the country.³⁶ In June 2014, the Ministry of Religious Affairs declared that 90 mosques out of 5,100 still escaped the control of the government and later proceeded to dismiss 'radical' imams. The government also clamped down on Salafi associations and schools under charges of illicit foreign funding and/or terrorism in the framework of a 'normalization' campaign.³⁷ This political phase culminated in October 2014. At the legislative elections Ennahda, defeated at the ballot, made a historical compromise with secular forces, making a coalition government with Nidaa Tounès. This new alliance signed the cut of the Islamist party relationships with the Salafi constellation.

After the criminalization of AS and the pragmatic turn of the Ennahada party, Salafis who survived the securitization campaign found themselves without a symbolic and material reference. This led to an increasing escalation of violent extremism in the country. Indeed, the crackdown led to an outflow of fighters to Syria, coinciding with the creation of the Islamic State.³⁸ While several militants of the movement have been arrested, many others have fled the country and joined Ansar al-Sharia in Libya,³⁹ and some have joined terrorist groups in the Sahel such as al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Uqba ibn Nafi Brigade Oqba Ibn Nafa Brigade, while others have adapted to the new context.⁴⁰

³⁴ Ansar al-Sharia did not claim responsibility for the attack and most analysts agree that it was unlikely ordered by its leadership. The two assassinations were later claimed by ISIS and attributed to Abu Bakr al-Hakim aka Abu Mouqatil, a French Tunisian who joined ISIS after the attack. See Merone et al. (2021).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Sigillò (2020).

³⁷ Merone et al. (2021).

³⁸ Merone (2015); Zelin (2020).

³⁹ In addition, a short-lived integration between militant networks in the two countries occurred through the creation of Shabab al-Tawhid (The Youth of Pure Monotheism), an organization composed of former Tunisian and Libyan militants from Ansar al-Sharia, which proclaimed its support for the Islamic State in Libya.

⁴⁰ One adaptive strategy of Salafi activists was the shift from a religious to a societal commitment in a context where claiming a Salafi identity implies being tagged as an individual linked to violent extremism. Social work in charitable or (social and human) development associations thus became the new legitimate form of engagement in a context where local authorities viewed any religious

In March 2015, gunmen stormed the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, killing 20 people. That summer, in Sousse, a lone gunman killed 38 people, mostly tourists, at a beach resort. In November 2015, a suicide bomber killed 12 members of the presidential guard, capping a year that was a tough test for Tunisia's transition to democracy.⁴¹ As of October 2015, almost 6,000 people, in a total population of 11 million inhabitants, have left the country to fight for the Islamic State.⁴² In March 2016 armed groups of militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Libya and Ansar al-Sharia attacked the city of Ben Guerdane, in the governorate of Medenine.

Overall, the suburbs of Tunis and the most marginalized regions of the country have been the main departure points to Libya, Syria, and Iraq for many young Tunisians looking for work and a cause to believe in.⁴³ Furthermore, Tunisia experienced, more than any other country in the region, the recruitment of young women, mainly in the jihad al-nikah business, and according to Tunisian Minister of Family Samira Meraï, 700 Tunisian women left the country to join the Islamic State or other jihadi organizations.⁴⁴

6. The post-Islamist agenda and new trajectories of radicalization beyond religion

After the terrorist attacks in Tunis and Sousse, the government officially announced a 'war against terrorism.'⁴⁵ Consequently, harsh security policies came hand in hand with the state promotion of a moderate religious discourse seeking to marginalize radical religious expressions.⁴⁶ In this scenario, Ennahda's discourse revolved around its full detachment from the Islamist project of transformation of politics and society, which to be sure was already initiated with the decision to not include any mention to the sharia in the Constitution issued in January 2014. At the the 10th party Congress held in May 2016, the party leader declared: "There is no longer any justification for political Islam in Tunisia."⁴⁷ This statement was followed by the decision of the par-

orientation with suspicion. Associations that before 2013 presenting themselves as Salafi-inspired organizations, since 2014 have started to relinquish their religious references and changed their names and logos. See Sigillò 2021 for an analysis of post-Salafist trajectories.

⁴¹ Colombo (2016).

⁴² Soufan Group (2015).

⁴³ Lamloum, Ben Zina (2015).

⁴⁴ Jelassi (2015).

⁴⁵ Strasser (2017).

⁴⁶ Merone et al. (2021).

⁴⁷ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2016/05/19/rached-ghannouchi-il-n-y-a-plus-de-justification-a-l-islam-politique-en-tunisie_4921904_3210.html.

ty's leadership to engage in a process of specialization (*tabaṣṣus*), aiming to separate politics from religion.⁴⁸ This measure was perceived as unnatural by several currents within the Islamist community as it envisages a distinction between two dimensions – religion and politics – which are intertwined. Thus, from being representative of the overall Islamist constellation, the specialization created a split between those who refuse such a change in the name of the original Islamist ideal and those who think that the new historical juncture demands a separation of politics and preaching activities. For several local analysts, the discontent of popular groups has grown further due to the Ennahda's self-proclaimed transformation from an Islamist party to a "Muslim Democracy",⁴⁹ interpreted as an attempt to move towards the centre of the political spectrum. According to these analyses, the exit from political Islam would create a vacuum that would favour the emergence of more radical groups capable of providing a new political representation to conservative voters who felt abandoned by Ennahda or simply excluded from the democratisation process.

New radicalisms

At the 2019 legislative elections, Itilaf al-Karama (Dignity Coalition), positioned as the fourth political force in the country, emerged as an anti-establishment force wishing to fight against the "corrupt caste".⁵⁰ The Coalition has been depicted by media and secular forces in the country as embodying a new radical *Islamist challenger*. However, the political group is *not* a religious party but a heterogeneous coalition where Salafis, and Islamist activists feeling betrayed by the party, met also other actors, including independent preachers, remnants of the dissolved Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution (LPR), human right activists, independent journalists, and bloggers.⁵¹

The Coalition presented itself as "a revolutionary force" seeking to fulfill the unaccomplished goals of the revolution and to defend the socio-economic rights of those "excluded" by the democratic transition. As a matter of fact, according to its secretary-general Seifeddine Makhlouf, the coalition's purpose is "the unification of the revolutionary camp, of those marginalized, excluded by the democratization process".⁵² In a Facebook-spread communication, the coalition clearly states that its "relationship with the rest of the elements of the current [socio-political] scene is based on a very strict and clear separation between the national forces that have an interest in the continuation of the revolution and the success of its project, and the

⁴⁸ Sigillò (2022).

⁴⁹ Ghannouchi (2016).

⁵⁰ Author's interview with a member of Itilaf Karama, Tunis, July 2019.

⁵¹ Blanc, Sigillò (2019).

⁵² <https://www.facebook.com/323675788266292/photos/a.3248967248>. Translated from Arabic.

forces of reaction, backwardness, and lackeys of dictatorship and external domination” and that it intends to “form a complete national network of actors known for their loyalty to the revolution and their deep affiliation with the concerns of its people and the defense of its identity, its values, and its aspirations”.⁵³ Thus, the Coalition relies on sovereigntist rhetoric denouncing the interference of Western powers in Tunisian politics, the imposition of a Western model of governance, and the spoliation of the natural wealth of the country. According to the coalition’s voters at the last elections: “Itilaf al-Karma is the new political force bringing back dignity to Tunisian people, it will implement all the revolutionary changes that Ennahda was not able to do because it was too submissive vis-à-vis the old regime’s people and the diktat of the international community, France in particular”.⁵⁴ Indeed, Itilaf Karama’s revolutionary narratives, underpinned by radical registers, are mostly identitarian: the goal advertised by the coalition is to represent the “general willingness of the people by defending the Tunisian identity and its values freed from the material and cultural French hegemony over the politics and the economy”.⁵⁵ Overall, rather than the criticism against the Ennahda’s abandonment of the Islamist agenda, the main grievances of the movement revolved around the lack of transparency in elite politics (including Ennahda), the “rotten compromise” of the Islamist party with the forces of the old regime, the controversial economic reconciliation law voted in September 2017 that gave amnesty from criminal prosecution to state officials and businessmen accused of corruption and embezzlement during the Ben Ali regime. During the Covid-19 crisis, al-Karama has likewise sought to identify itself with the pure, marginalized people ruled by an uncaring and “corrupt elite”.

7. Conclusion: rethinking counter-terrorism measures

The counterterrorism measures implemented in the country since 2011 have mainly linked de-radicalization strategies to the securitization campaign against religious actors and the “war on terror”. As shown in this chapter, what fueled radicalization and the growth of violent extremism was instead the combination of social, political, and economic marginalization. Since the inception of the Islamic State in 2014, and in parallel with domestic political changes, several feelings of exclusion and marginalization of several young Tunisians, and the sense of not belonging to humanity have been replaced by a stronger sense of belonging to an ideal community, that of the Islamic state.

⁵³ Blanc, Sigillò (2019).

⁵⁴ Blanc, Sigillò (2019).

⁵⁵ Blanc, Sigillò (2019).

Despite the launch of the “war against terrorism” and the government’s crack-down on religious actors, violent extremism is not over in the country and radical registers still pervade the political field. In June 2019 two suicide bombers killed one policeman and were injured in front of the French embassy in Tunis. In March 2020 two suicide bombers killed a police officer and injured five others plus a civilian near the American embassy in Tunis. In September 2020 a national guard officer has been killed and another wounded in a knife attack in the centre of Sousse. Finally, In February 2021, a landmine blast killed four Tunisian soldiers during a counter-terrorism operation in Mount Mghila, near the border with Algeria, adjacent to Mount Chaambi.

This chapter shed light on the notion of *radicalism* and the process of radicalization. Combining the analysis of post-Islamism and socio-economic marginality against the backdrop of the political changes that took place in the country from 2011 until 2019, it showed the evolution of Tunisian Islamic activism and radicalization as two trajectories that are not necessarily parallel. In this way, it broke the Islamism-radicalization nexus, presenting radicalism as a multifaceted notion and radicalization as a multidimensional process. Future counter-terrorism measures should address the issue of violent extremism with this complexity in mind.

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