Counter-terror in Tunisia: a road paved with good intentions?

By Lola Aliaga and Kloé Tricot O'Farrell

From the outside, Tunisia is perceived both as the sole success of the Arab uprisings and as a key battleground in the internationally-backed 'war on terror'. It is a space crowded with international actors and civil society organisations (CSOs). While most arrived following the 2011 uprisings to support its transition to democracy, today many are concerned with addressing 'terrorism' or 'violent extremism'. Drawing on the first-hand accounts of local and international CSOs, Tunisian officials, foreign diplomats, and people living in Medenine, Sidi Bouzid and Sidi Hassine, Saferworld's latest in-depth looks at threats to peace in Tunisia and how they are being handled.

When you ask people in Tunisia what their main concerns are, it quickly becomes apparent that the country's stability primarily depends on addressing inequality and injustice. Yet the Tunisian government's failure to deal with the chronic social, political and economic marginalisation, inequality and injustice that sparked the 2011 uprising risks fuelling further violence, and enables violent armed groups to exploit people's grievances with the state. Following the Bardo and Sousse attacks in 2015, the government declared a 'war on terror' and has relied on measures that are at times heavy-handed and repressive in response to security threats. This has reinforced discontent and undermined the state's legitimacy as people denounce short-term, reactive responses and the lack of a long-term strategy.

Western actors, meanwhile, have provided unwavering support to the Tunisian government's efforts to address security threats, with western security foremost in mind. This assistance is welcomed by some in Tunisia, but members of civil society have criticised western interventions in Tunisia for their lack of coherence and long-term vision, warning them against reinforcing the problems they most need to address. Many western actors hope they are contributing effectively to preventing violence through countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions. Yet attempts to reframe governance and development work to serve the security-driven CVE agenda can be criticised in Tunisia on a number of grounds.

This in-depth documents the shortcomings of counter-terror (CT) and CVE approaches, painting a nuanced picture of today's Tunisia in the words of its citizens and commentators. The views of those we spoke to suggest the need for the government to rethink these approaches while renewing its focus on peace by responding urgently to the public's hunger for faster and more meaningful reforms.

This research was conducted in partnership with the Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Centre. Read more about our methodology here.

Header photo: Tunisia, Sidi Bouzid. Young people walk by burnt-out police cars in Sidi Bouzid, the hometown of Mohamed Bouazizi. On 17 December 2010 he self-immolated in a protest against the authorities who had confiscated his street trader's equipment and continually harassed him. These events led to huge protests, the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and are considered the catalyst for the 'Arab Spring'. Photo: Samuel Aranda/Panos

I. Raising the stakes: the terror threat in Tunisia

On 18 March 2015, as people were appreciating Tunisia's cultural heritage at the famous Bardo Museum in Tunis, three men went on a shooting rampage, trapping people inside the museum for three hours. Twenty-two people were killed – all foreigners, mostly European tourists – and over 50 were injured. When Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack, it said: "[The attackers] have spread terror among Tunisian infidels and their hosts from crusader countries, and have spilt the blood of dozens of them." [1] This violent episode vividly captured the international community's attention, and threatened to destabilise the 'success story' of the 'Arab Spring'.

While Libya, Yemen and Syria descended into chaos and civil war, and Egypt returned to authoritarianism, after the 2011 uprisings Tunisia was able to hold successive elections, draft a new constitution and move away from the dictatorial model that dominated the country for decades. In the eyes of western countries, Tunisia demonstrates the potential for nations in the Arab world to take a democratic path. Yet increasing insecurity caused by violent groups has turned it into a potential security threat for European democracies, significantly disturbing both Tunisia's transition process and how the West approaches it.

While the Bardo attack reverberated across the international community, Tunisians had already been badly shaken by successive waves of violence since 2012. Militant groups have been targeting the state under an apparent strategy to elicit repressive responses by the authorities, delegitimise the democratic process, and enhance the alienation of potential recruits. [2] Groups have also targeted civilians perceived to support security actors. In particular, local shepherds in the mountains near Algeria have suffered retaliatory attacks after they complained to the police about their security and livelihoods being affected by violent groups who established strongholds there during the turmoil that followed the uprisings. [3]

In 2013, attacks against security forces intensified throughout the country, [4] and the escalation of violence culminated in the political assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi, two leading figures in Tunisia's secular left wing politics. These killings, claimed by IS [5], sparked the most serious political crisis in Tunisia since the uprisings. [6] However, the Bardo attack brought a new dimension: larger-scale violence against civilians, specifically tourists, which targeted the heart of Tunisia's economy.

Three months later, on 26 June 2015, came another large-scale attack. A Tunisian student appeared on Sousse's seafront, carrying a beach umbrella to hide a Kalashnikov assault rifle. In a few short minutes, he transformed the sunny beach into a scene of carnage, as he shot sunbathers and residents of the resort hotel nearby. Thirty-eight people were killed, all of them foreigners. Thirty were British nationals. Thirty-nine others were wounded. Again, IS claimed this attack "against the crusaders who combat the caliphate." Pointing to its recruitment strategy, the group warned that, "in Tunisia there are a lot of Muslim men who care a lot about jihad in Libya, Iraq, the Levant, etc." [7]

These attacks against foreigners were presented as retaliation for the West's actions in the Middle East. And, like the attacks against the state, their knock-on effect would be to weaken the democratic transition process, enhance people's grievances against the government, and capitalise on the challenges people face in their lives – ultimately entrenching divisions and attracting recruits. [8]

Amid severe unemployment, the weakening of the tourism sector – which provided nearly 14 per cent of Tunisian jobs in 2014 [9] – has put many jobs at risk. Tourism had already slumped since the 2011 uprisings, but the Bardo museum and Sousse attacks were a hammer blow: 440,000 British tourists travelled to Tunisia every year before the Sousse attack; 90 per cent have since stopped coming. [10] Violent armed groups gained from this destabilisation, which notably increased the pool of people from which they could recruit: we were told that some of those who lost their jobs following the Sousse attack joined violent groups in search of an income. [11]

Port El Kantaoui Beach, Sousse. Photo: Tony Hisgett

More attacks then followed. While they continued to target the Tunisian security sector, some were significantly bigger in scope. On 24 November 2015, a suicide bomber killed 12 members of the Tunisian presidential guard on a bus in the centre of Tunis. This attack was conducted by a 28-year-old resident of Tunis, and also claimed by IS.

By this time it was clear that these violent attacks were connected to the situation in Libya. Just like 70 per cent of Tunisian defendants in terrorism cases reviewed by the Tunisian Center for Research and Studies on Terrorism (CTRET) [12], the gunmen in the Bardo Museum and Sousse attacks had both trained in Libya [13], where IS and other groups have profited from state collapse and fragmentation to establish training camps for fighters. The explosives used in the attack against the presidential guards were also traced to Libya. [14] Indeed, members infiltrated smuggling networks that support the border economy to transport weapons and fighters between the two countries. They have also exploited the rivalries between militias and smuggling networks that compete for access to resources in order to establish bases along the border in Libya. [15]

The security threat from Libya grew graver still on 7 March 2016, when IS forces attacked and tried to capture the Tunisian border city of Ben Guerdane from Libya. Minutes after seizing Ben Guerdane's local mosque, armed militants were heard through the mosque's loudspeakers announcing the start of an attack. Fighters spread throughout the city, ambushing army barracks and police posts, as others chanted that IS had come to free the town from the "tyrant" army. [16] The fighters had counted on local support, but residents sided with the Tunisian military and police who clashed with the militants for three days until they were able to regain control of the city. During this period, seven civilians, 13 members of the security forces and 46 militants were killed. [17] Residents of Ben Guerdane later recounted having recognised some of the fighters who had attacked from Libya as they in fact originated from the border town. [18]

Since the fall of Ben Ali, between 3,000 and 7,000 Tunisians are said to have joined groups fighting in Syria, Iraq and Libya, in particular. [19] They represent one of the largest contingents of 'foreign fighters' [20] in those countries. [21] The extent of this phenomenon is so striking that even the leader of the militant group Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia (AST) lamented that the wars in Syria and Mali have "emptied Tunisia of its youth." [22]

The extent of recent attacks in, and international recruitment from Tunisia illustrate how strong violent groups have become in the country, most notably AST. While it has no formal affiliation with other violent groups in Tunisia, membership is porous and different groups sometimes act jointly. [23] AST was born within the Tunisian prison system, where inmates started planning its creation in 2006. After their release as part of a general pardon following the 2011 uprisings [24], they put their plan into action. AST was able to operate relatively freely in the first years of its existence and claims to have recruited 70,000 members between April 2011 and January 2014, thanks to its charity work and its capacity to capitalise on people's frustrations with the Tunisian government. [25] Several people we met highlighted the organisational skills of such groups: one said they operated "like a state within the state"; others claimed that they were better organised than the state and raised questions about the origin of their funding. [26]

"

The extent of recent attacks in, and international recruitment from Tunisia illustrate how strong violent groups have become in the country.

While AST's action was initially largely non-violent [27], this changed after 2011. The Tunisian government held AST responsible for assassinating Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi, designating it a terrorist organisation. [28] Later in 2013, AST declared loyalty to Al Qaeda and several of its leaders then pledged allegiance to IS in 2014. [29] But although there have been attacks, many experts see the country as primarily a land of preaching and recruitment.

Nonetheless, these violent events have had real impacts in Tunisia as well as on the country's relations with western countries. Following the Sousse attack, the United Kingdom (UK) and Germany advised their nationals against "all but essential travel" to Tunisia [30], which

precipitated the dramatic fall in tourism. The travel advice – given to safeguard tourists – also exerted an economic pressure that encouraged the Tunisian government to take 'serious measures' to tackle insecurity. [31] Western governments backed these measures by significantly increasing their security assistance to Tunisia. [32]

Western security support also reflected concerns in Europe over the threat posed by violent individuals of Tunisian nationality or origin following attacks in European capitals. It was a French Tunisian man who drove a truck through a crowd in Nice on 14 July 2016, killing 86 people and injuring 458. The man who drove a truck into a Christmas market in Berlin on 19 December 2016, killing 12 people and injuring 56, was also a Tunisian national. While western governments have been supportive of Tunisia's democratic transition since 2011, more recent events have increased their stake in Tunisia's stability.

People we spoke to in Sidi Bouzid, Medenine, Sidi Hassine and Tunis generally felt that security had improved [33]: Tunisia has not seen large-scale attacks since early 2016. But they also noted that the Tunisian government's western-backed responses have had problematic impacts on the country's most significant structural challenges. These challenges pose both an immediate and a long-term threat to the country's peace and to those with a stake in it. The next section outlines the challenges facing Tunisia and concludes that addressing them requires a different, more strategic approach to sustainable peace and stability that balances short-term security imperatives with a greater focus on long-term, peaceful transition.

Header photo: Extra security and police patrol the beach of the Imperial Marhaba Hotel in Sousse, Tunisia. Photo: Alpha Press

Footnotes

1. Courrier International (2015), 'Tunisie. Attaque du Bardo : une double revendication', 20 March
2. International Crisis Group (2016), 'Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy', briefing n. 50, 22 June
3. Nadhif A (2017), 'Tunisia's poor population face death by terrorists', 14 June
4. Inkyfada (2015), Terrorisme en Tunisie: Carte interactive des événements après le 14 janvier
5. Gall C (2014), 'Tunisia: ISIS Fighters Claim 2 Killings', 18 December
6. This happened simultaneously to the discrediting and ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt.
7. Haqaeq online (2015) 'In a statement allegedly published by IS, the organisation claims responsibility for the Sousse terrorist attack and publishes a new photo of the perpetrator', 27 June
8. International Crisis Group (2016), op. cit.; Fahmi G, Meddeb H (2015), 'Market for Jihad: Radicalization in Tunisia', Carnegie Middle East Centre, 15 October; Meddeb H (2016), 'Les caractéristiques de la violence jihadiste en Tunisie', text of presentation made at the workshop 'Prévenir la violence extrémiste en Tunisie', Tunis
9. World Travel and Tourism Council (), 'The Economic Impact of Travel & Tourism 2015: Tunisia', p 4
10. Wintour P (2016), 'Tunisia urges UK tourists to return 18 months after Sousse beach attack', 6 December; Following the Sousse attack, the UK advised its citizens against all travel to Tunisia through the foreign travel advice page provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). This advice was lifted in August 2017.
11. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016
12. Inkyfada (2017), '"Terroristes" en Tunisie : Que révèlent les dossiers judiciaires ?', 4 January
13. ibid.
14. Amara T (2015), 'Tunisia says suicide bomber carried out bus attack claimed by Islamic State', 25 November
15. Meddeb H (2017), 'Precarious resilience: Tunisia's Libya predicament', Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture, 5 April, p 7
16. Amara T, Markey P (2016), 'Border attack feeds Tunisia fears of Libya jihadist spillover', 13 March
17. Agence France Presse, 'Tunisie: 10 jihadistes et un soldat tués dans des opérations à Ben Guerdane', 9 March
18. Amara T, Markey P (2016), op. cit.
19. Most estimates put this figure at 5,500. For instance, see: Souli S (2016), 'Tunisia: Why

foreign fighters abandon ISIL', 3 March; Malka H, Balboni M (2016), 'Tunisia: Radicalism abroad and at home', June

20. The term 'foreign fighters' is imperfect, not least because it does not differentiate between people who are actively fighting and others who travelled to territories held by IS in order to take part in the construction of the caliphate. However, we use this expression in this report for clarity purposes as it is the most commonly used terminology available to refer to people who have travelled to join violent groups abroad.

21. OHCHR (2015), 'Foreign fighters: Urgent measures needed to stop flow from Tunisia – UN expert group warns', 10 July

22. Counter-Extremism Project (2017), 'Tunisia: Extremism and Counter-Extremism'

23. In addition, while groups go by the name Ansar al-Shariah in Libya, Egypt and Yemen, they are not formally affiliated and do not have a centralised command structure. However, it has been established that AST and Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) share operational, financial and logistical links. See: Zelin A (2012), 'Know your Ansar al-Sharia', 21 September

24. A General Amnesty law was passed in 2011, which pardoned a number of prisoners of the Ben Ali regime

25. Counter-Extremism Project (2017), op. cit.

26. Participants in focus group discussion with youth, Sidi Hassine, February 2017; Participants in focus group discussion with adults, Sidi Hassine, February 2017

27. Werenfels I (2015), 'Going "Glocal": Jihadism in Algeria and Tunisia', in Steinberg G and Weber A (eds.), Jihadism in Africa. Local causes, Regional expansion, International alliances (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), p 63

28. Al Jazeera (2013), 'Ansar al-Sharia blamed for Tunisia killings', 27 August

29. Counter-Extremism Project (2017), op. cit.

30. Yerkes S (2016), 'One year after Sousse, it's the economy—not security—that worries Tunisians', Brookings Institution, Foreign Policy Trip Reports, 30 June

31. Interviews with civil society representatives and international officials, Tunis, October 2016

32. For instance, see: evolution of American security aid to Tunisia: For further analysis on international support to security in Tunisia, please see Section 4.

33. Focus group discussions, Sidi Bouzid, January-March 2017

II. The challenges facing Tunisia, as Tunisians see them

We repeatedly heard that Tunisia is a space crowded with international actors and CSOs. While most arrived following the 2011 uprisings to support the transition process, today many are concerned with threats from 'terrorism' or 'violent extremism'. Yet when you ask people in Tunisia what their main concerns are, it quickly becomes apparent that the country's stability primarily depends on addressing inequality and injustice.

In Medenine, a city close to the border with Libya, in Sidi Bouzid, where the uprisings began in December 2010, and in Sidi Hassine, a marginalised neighbourhood in greater Tunis, the people we spoke to did not list 'terrorism' or 'violent extremism' among their main concerns. Instead, they spoke of social and economic marginalisation and the state of institutional politics. These were the reasons why Tunisians took to the streets over six years ago. However, as we were told in "the cradle of the revolution", Sidi Bouzid, "nothing has changed." [34] In Medenine, people warned us that the risk of a second revolution should be taken seriously if their grievances were not. These grievances have given way to new waves of protests, sometimes violent, in 2016 and 2017. [35] And although violent groups do not enjoy widespread popular support in Tunisia, they have been able to capitalise on people's frustration to recruit members, especially among Tunisia's youth. [36]
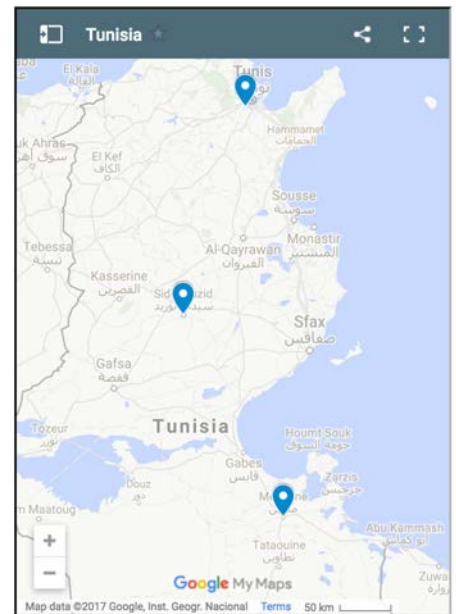
Tunisia's different worlds: haves and have-nots

Primarily, people have suffered from a lack of employment opportunities as well as access to resources and services. The resulting sense of marginalisation is particularly strong in Tunisia's peripheral regions which have historically been neglected in favour of the coastal cities of Tunis, Sfax and Sousse. [37] A lack of public and private investment and poor infrastructure have undermined economic development and led to high levels of unemployment, leaving many people trapped in poverty. Before the revolution, authorities promoted the coast at the expense of the interior and border regions, and recent governments have failed to deal with these disparities. [38]

People we spoke with also highlighted poor education in marginalised regions, and believe courses and trainings on offer are ill-suited to the Tunisian labour market. In 2017, national unemployment rates reached 15.3 per cent [39], but they are much higher in the periphery: in 2015, they reached 26.6 per cent in the south east and 22.3 per cent in the south west. [40] Still, even people in Sidi Hassine have not benefited from Tunis's socio-economic development. One person told us: "When I go to work in Mutuelle Ville [a neighbourhood in the north of the capital], I feel like I am entering a different world."

This situation affects the young in particular: approximately 33 per cent of those aged 15-29 – over one million people – are not in education, employment or training. [41] According to the World Bank, youth not in education, employment or training constitute the most excluded group in society: "[They] exemplify youth inactivity and discouragement, a more worrisome condition than youth unemployment, which does not include disengaged youth." [42] In a context where many young people refer to themselves as 'living dead', this has given way to high rates of suicide, self-harm, drug abuse and addiction. [43] Referring to individuals that have joined violent groups abroad, a health professional told us: "These young people have already suffered too much; they've already had to fight too much even before leaving." [44]

Generally speaking, we heard that many young people who lack social or professional opportunities feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, seeing their options as limited to migrating illegally (legal options are not accessible to most), getting involved in criminal networks or joining violent groups to sustain themselves. "We can either join ISIS or migrate illegally", one youth told us in Sidi Hassine. Another said: "We have two destinies: either we take the path of drugs or the path of terrorism." [45]

"

Many young people who lack social or professional opportunities feel stuck between a rock and a hard place, seeing their options as limited to migrating illegally, getting involved in criminal networks or joining violent groups.

These statements are illustrative of how violent groups have been successful in rooting their action in the Tunisian context, boosting their recruitment strategy by offering financial and material benefits to potential recruits. One young person told us: "I would be ready to join a terrorist group for money; I would even be ready to kill my father for money. That is why these groups recruit specifically among poor communities." Another said: "if they [violent groups] offer you what you need, you can't not obey them. You and your family will directly benefit from them." [46] Money and other material benefits have not only been used to recruit active members but also informants among local people. [47]

Demonstration in Tunis during the uprisings, January 2011. Photo: Wassim Ben Rhouma

Frustration and political disenfranchisement

The frustration felt by young people is also due to the lack of space to contribute politically to Tunisia's development. While they played a central role during the uprisings, many now feel disempowered and disillusioned as the change they called for in 2011 has yet to materialise. They are disappointed with the government's inability, or unwillingness some argue, to meet its commitments, in particular to create jobs and provide services. People have returned to the streets, but the government's stigmatisation of protesters has increased hostility toward the state. [48] A National Youth Congress, which consisted of dialogue between the government and young people in

locations throughout the country, did take place in 2016. [49] But, according to some, the initiative did not succeed in encouraging meaningful engagement among young people, or produce significant outcomes. [50] This frustration and disillusionment also explains why young people only make up 3.3 per cent of the 5.4 million people who have registered to take part in what will be the first free municipal elections in December 2017. [51]

In turn, the lack – both real and perceived – of political avenues for improving people's lives and fulfilling the promises of the revolution has increased the appeal of violent groups. [52] In Sidi Bouzid, a civil society representative told us: "Some people sympathise with terrorist organisations because they resent the state for its absence. This sometimes leads to individuals not denouncing concerning behaviour or actually being happy when attacks target the state." [53]

A 'no future' generation in search of a purpose

Social, economic and political marginalisation of Tunisian youth has led people to talk of a 'no future' generation which is particularly vulnerable to the lure of violent groups. [54] This would seem to confirm the findings of a CTRET study of court records of 1,000 alleged 'terrorists' of Tunisian origin, which found that three quarters of them were aged 18–34 years. [55] According to a Tunisian scholar, committing to violence symbolises the rejection of a corrupt and unjust society, and it grants those who had no opportunities to survive with the sacred or glorified status of victims. [56] Many of Tunisia's marginalised young people have little sense of belonging or purpose, and feel stigmatised for being on the margins of society. In addition, most people we spoke to were concerned by the absence of social, cultural and recreational activities which could positively contribute to young people's development and the construction of their identity.

Therefore, another important component of violent groups' recruitment strategy has been to appeal to people's longing for a place and role in society, and their rejection of the state and society which have denied them these things. [57] This may help explain the success of these groups in using religion to recruit members seeking both meaningful identity and 'moral' state institutions. [58]

The state's lacklustre response

The Tunisian state has struggled to address its citizens' grievances. A serious economic crisis and the fragile political situation has hampered the implementation of much-needed reforms and dampened post-revolutionary fervour. [59] Cooperation between Nidaa Tounes, a party which took power in 2014 and includes Ben Ali-era elites, and the Islamist party Ennahda, which won the first elections following the uprisings, has helped sustain Tunisia's transition. However, according to a journalist who covers the country's transition: "[…] beyond the level of elite coalition building [there] has been no real progress in battling corruption, reforming inefficient bureaucracy, or stimulating job growth and infrastructure investments." [60] More recently, this has been further complicated by in-fighting within Nidaa Tounes. [61]

In this context, acute corruption has specifically been blamed for slowing the transition. This is what pushed many Tunisians to take to the streets during the 2010-2011 uprisings and, six years on, corrupt practices are alive and well. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the country went from rank 59 out of 178 in 2010, to 75 in 2016. [62] However, following the election of Youssef Chahed as prime minister in 2016, the government has been moving to tackle corruption. According to anti-corruption experts, this is partly due to the National Anti-Corruption Authority (Instance Nationale de Lutte Contre la Corruption, INLUCC), which, led by Chawki Tabib, adopted a national strategy and workplan to tackle corruption [63], but also to the work of CSOs which reinvigorated public opinion against corruption. In turn, pressure has increased on the government to act, and a number of officials and businessmen have recently been arrested on corruption charges. [64] However, concerns persist about the ongoing lack of transparency in elite politics, the role of the military in tackling corruption rather than civilian institutions, and the failure to tackle the system that allows corruption to thrive, rather than a handful of culprits. [65]

There are powerful actors who stand to lose out from anti-corruption efforts, meaning that reforms are lagging and the INLUCC lacks teeth. And after having tried for two years, the presidency managed to pass on 13 September 2017 a controversial economic reconciliation law that will give amnesty from criminal prosecution to state officials and businessmen accused of corruption and embezzlement during the Ben Ali era if they repay stolen assets. [66] Supporters of the law argue that these funds would generate revenue amid an economic crisis, but others are demanding accountability and question how the repaid assets would be used. [67]

Graffiti of a gavel and block with the words 'I do not forgive', which is the name of a movement set up to protest against the economic reconciliation law. Photo: Kloé Tricot O'Farrell, Saferworld

In May 2017, the founder and director of the Tunisian news website Nawaat was harassed and questioned for six hours about an article that leaked details of the bill. As Amnesty International noted, the incident "sends a worrying signal that the Tunisian authorities are willing to clamp down on the right to freedom of expression." [68]

While most Tunisians still support the democratic transition [69], a recent study by the International Crisis Group suggests growing corruption is leading more people to wish for a return to authoritarian rule, believing that this could limit such practices. [70] The issue has also featured in violent groups' claims to legitimacy. As an international expert on corruption put it: "[...] radical groups will exploit grievances that go unredressed. They will enforce a rigorously puritanical code of behaviour; holding it out as the only prospect for achieving conscientious government in the interests of the community instead of the self-indulgent few." [71]

The government's lacklustre progress in addressing citizens' concerns has in turn led many people we spoke with to hold it responsible for the emergence of violent groups. Some also accused it of making up the terrorist threat to divert people's attention away from crucial problems. [72] Echoing what many people told us, one civil society representative in Medenine said: "The state's absence in the region has led to its marginalisation and underdevelopment which are among the main reasons why young people have turned to violence and are easy prey for violent groups." [73] It also mirrors research by CTRET which finds that a high proportion of terrorism suspects come from marginalised areas. [74]

All in all, this points to the need to address inequality and injustice – creating services, education and jobs to change the trajectory of parts of the country that have been left behind, in consultation with local populations. This has to be the priority if Tunisia is to evolve as quickly as possible into a more peaceful, inclusive and stable society. Disconnect between the state and these areas not only "[threatens] to plunge the country into violence", it also risks "further [fostering] the conditions in which radical groups thrive, so proficient are they at harnessing social anger." [75] As the next section explains, abusive and repressive 'war on terror' tactics have also increased people's resentment towards and distrust of the state and the security sector in particular. In addition, such practices have been both provoked and exploited by violent groups to recruit new members.

Header photo: Demonstration for freedoms and against violence, Tunis, January 2012. Photo: Amine Ghrabi

Footnotes

34. Focus group discussion with civil society, Sidi Bouzid, January 2017
35. For instance, see: Al Jazeera (2016), 'Tunisia unemployment protests spread to capital', 22 January; Al Jazeera (2017), 'Protests mark Tunisian revolution's sixth anniversary', 14 January; International Crisis Group (2017), 'Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia', Report 177, 10 May
36. Fahmi G, Meddeb H (2015), op. cit.; Meddeb H (2016), op. cit.
37. Saleh H (2016), 'Tunisia: after the revolution', Financial Times, 10 March
38. Meddeb H (2017), 'Peripheral vision: How Europe can help preserve Tunisia's fragile democracy', European Council on Foreign Relations, 13 January, p 2
39. Tunisian National Institute of Statistics (INS), Unemployment rates 2016-2017
40. Tunis Afrique Presse (2016), 'Tunisie – Emploi : 26,6% de taux de chômage dans les gouvernorat du sud-est (INS)', 18 February
41. The World Bank (2014), 'Tunisia: Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion', Report No. 89233-TN, pp 7-8
42. Ibid. p. xiv
43. Participant in workshop with civil society organisations, Tunis, March 2017
44. Ibid.
45. Participant in focus group discussion with youth, Sidi Hassine, February 2017
46. Ibid.
47. Interview with a civil society representative, Medenine, January 2017
48. Boukhars A (2017), 'The Geographic Trajectory of Conflict and Militancy in Tunisia', 20 July
49. Siebert L (2016), 'Notes from the Ground: Tunisia's National Youth Dialogue', 22 December
50. Interview with civil society representative, The Hague July 2017
51. Dhouib H (2017), 'Municipal elections: youth abstain, women to participate in greater numbers', 22 August
52. Chennaoui H (2017), 'Radicalisation et mouvements sociaux : même contexte, différents combats', Nawaat, 5 April
53. Participant in focus group discussion with civil society, Sidi Bouzid, January 2017
54. For instance, see: Mersch S (2017), 'Tunisia's ticking time bomb', 23 January
55. Inkyfada (2017), op. cit.
56. Meddeb H (2016), op. cit.
57. Fatafta M (2016), 'Beyond Closing Mosques and Shutting Down Facebook Pages – How Tunisia Can Address the Threat of Online and Offline Terrorist Recruitment', DGAP Kompact 24, December
58. Meddeb H (2017), 'Precarious resilience: Tunisia's Libya predicament', op. cit. p 3
59. International Crisis Group (2017), op. cit.
60. Marks M (2017), 'Tunisia's unwritten story: The Complicated Lessons of a Peaceful Transition', The Century Foundation, 14 March
61. Cherif Y (2017), 'Tunisia's risky war on corruption', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 July
62. Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2010; Transparency International (2017), Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, 25 January
63. Instance nationale de lutte contre la corruption
64. For instance, see: Cherif Y (2017), op. cit. ; Le Figaro (2017), 'Corruption : trois arrestations en Tunisie', 25 May
65. Cherif Y (2017), op. cit. ; Chaouch R (2017), 'Corruption en Tunisie : "Les arrestations coup de poing ne suffisent pas, il faut s'attaquer au système"', Jeune Afrique, 30 June
66. Human Rights Watch (2016), 'Tunisia: Amnesty Bill Would Set Back Transition', 14 July; Saleh H (2017), Tunisia parliament passes controversial economic reconciliation law, 13 September 2017
67. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, December 2016
68. Amnesty International (2017), 'Tunisian authorities must end harassment of independent media', News, 5 May
69. Marks M (2017), op. cit.
70. International Crisis Group (2017), op. cit.
71. Chayes S (2015), 'Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security', W. Northon & Company, p. 67
72. Focus group discussions, Sidi Bouzid, Medenine and Sidi Hassine, January-March 2017
73. Interview with a civil society representative, Medenine, January 2017
74. Inkyfada (2017), op. cit.
75. Meddeb H (2017), 'Peripheral vision: How Europe can help preserve Tunisia's fragile democracy', op. cit. p 2

III. Counter-terror responses and their impact

In 2015, after the Bardo and Sousse attacks, the Tunisian government declared a 'war on terror' and adopted a series of measures to deal with pressing security concerns. [76] However, many of these measures have relied on heavy-handed and repressive security tactics and, two years later, remain in place. And while the government has set aside 20 per cent of its national budget for internal security and defence [77], many of the people we spoke to denounced the government's reactive response and the lack of a political strategy to tackle the challenges the country faces. People have felt the effects of the government's CT approach both directly and indirectly throughout the country – increasing public resentment and lessening the legitimacy on which the government's authority depends. It has also created a favourable recruiting environment for violent organisations.

Excesses on the CT frontline

In July 2015, the government adopted a CT law which grants security forces broad surveillance powers, authorises incommunicado detention of 'terrorism' suspects for up to 15 days, permits courts to close hearings to the public and allows witnesses to remain anonymous to defendants. A few months later, it restored the state of emergency imposed after the 2011 uprisings. This allows the government to control the press and prohibit gatherings that 'may cause disorder'. Following numerous extensions, it remains in force today.

Such practices are portrayed as necessary to respond to the security threat. Many individuals and their family members have been arrested and detained arbitrarily, often based on their appearance or religious affiliation, and have suffered at the hands of the security apparatus, which is rarely held to account. [78] Notably, we were told of a young man who, in 2014, after the police violently raided his parents' home, was arrested on terrorism charges. During his detention, he was allegedly tortured and subsequently filed a complaint. While the terrorism charges were dropped in 2016, his complaint has never been addressed. [79] This is in spite of the fact that the government announced it had set up registries which contain information on complaints filed for acts of torture to ensure they are effectively followed up. [80]

In addition, authorities have prevented people from travelling inside as well as outside of Tunisia. Inside of the country, they have imposed assigned residence orders as well as restrictions to travel from one region to another (referred to as the S17 procedure). While the government announced that the measure targeted members of violent groups and returned 'foreign fighters', Amnesty International describes these measures as discriminatory, i.e. "based on appearance, religious beliefs or previous criminal convictions […] with disregard to the due process of law." [81] Family members of suspected individuals have also been targeted: we were told of a father who, having notified the police that his son was planning to leave Tunisia to join a violent group, was himself subjected to an internal travel ban. [82]

Those affected by travel bans are generally unaware that their movements have been restricted. Because they are not given a written copy of the decision, they are in turn unable to appeal it. [83] In addition, young people especially have reported being questioned when travelling outside their home towns despite not being subjected to a ban. [84] In a practice

reminiscent of the Ben Ali era, they have also been arbitrarily prevented from traveling outside of the country as part of efforts to prevent individuals from joining violent groups abroad. [85]

Not only have these practices had significant impacts on people's lives, by hampering access to employment, education, health, and in turn leaving many facing greater marginalisation and stigmatisation, they have also created a lot of anger and resentment toward the state and the police. A civil society representative in Tunis told us of a man arrested on terrorism charges whose family hadn't been informed of his detention. Before his release, his mother died of a heart attack, still believing he had gone to fight in Syria. "This clearly exacerbates anger toward security services," the interviewee explained. [86]

Graffiti in the Medina of Tunis says 'Freedom 2km away'. Following the uprisings, many Tunisians feel that freedom is still a long way off. Photo: Kloé Tricot O'Farrell, Saferworld

Security vs human rights

Underpinning these practices is rhetoric claiming that the protection of human rights and the achievement of security are incompatible alternatives. Such arguments remain influential: having lived under an authoritarian but stable regime for decades, "Tunisians are used to security rather than human rights", according to a prominent civil society activist. [87] Human rights organisations have thus been accused in the media of supporting violent groups and undermining the security sector's efforts by 'using' human rights to free 'terrorists'. Some people believe that terror suspects should not enjoy human rights, and that practices like torture, arbitrary arrests and police raids are necessary to prevent future threats. A judge in Sidi Bouzid also remarked that most police officers still think and act like they did under Ben Ali – as indeed many have remained in their functions. [88] Overall, although democratic gains have been made during the transition, the culture of human rights is clearly not yet ingrained.

To garner support for its CT efforts, the government has also directly appealed to the public's patriotism. In March 2016, it called on all Tunisians to contribute to a national fund to combat terrorism and support the efforts of the security establishment. [89] It has also organised several campaigns around the need for the population to support and rally behind the government's efforts. One campaign featured civilians performing a military hand salute with the message: "The Tunisian people salute their security services and army". [90] We were also told of a campaign in Sousse which featured a photo of a soldier from the CT brigade (Brigade Anti-Terroriste, BAT) with the message: "We are all actors in the fight against terrorism." [91]

According to several human rights groups, these practices show worrying signs of a return to a strong, militarised central government. Recent political developments appear to confirm

this trend. Parliament recently resumed debate on 'Draft law No.25/2015 on the Prosecution of Abuses against the Armed Forces' under which anyone criticising the police could be criminalised. [92] The draft law was introduced following the 2015 terror attacks but was blocked following backlash from civil society and international bodies. Two years later, a number of NGOs have expressed their dismay at the reintroduction of the draft law and expressed concern that it "risks silencing all criticism of the armed forces and reinforcing a culture of impunity already entrenched in the Tunisian security and judicial system, where extensive reform has been sorely lacking since the revolution." [93]

Meanwhile, the necessary safeguards to prevent abuses are not in place. [94] While Tunisians have enjoyed greater freedoms of expression, assembly and association since the uprisings, the government has recently increased scrutiny of CSOs. In June, it ordered organisations to disclose all funds they receive from abroad or face dissolution in case of non-compliance. The government has also proposed amending the existing Decree on Association to address certain flaws - but CSOs fear this will morph into an attempt to impose restrictions on their freedom to operate. [95] Several state accountability mechanisms have been created since 2011, on issues including human rights, torture, corruption and CT but they have struggled to do their job because of a lack of political and financial support. According to some, this reflects official reluctance to see them deliver effective oversight:

> *"They [the government] say there is no money, but we know there is. At the same time, they claim there is no torture, so maybe they just don't want the commission to be able to function properly". [96]*

Tough conditions for border communities

One area where security measures have negatively impacted local populations has been border control. The Tunisian government has taken steps to address the threat posed by over 1,400km of porous borders. To the east, it has sought to militarise the border to prevent spill-over from the Libyan conflict and the incursion of violent groups. This has severely restricted informal cross-border trade – on which many people's livelihoods depend – and has resulted in confrontations between citizens and security services during tense protests. [97] Due to the economic paralysis and violence it causes, people we spoke to in Medenine actually identified border closure as a source of conflict and insecurity. [98] These concerns, along with the inability of the Tunisian government to provide alternative livelihood options and effectively regulate cross-border trade – due in part to the collusion between local security providers, politicians, businessmen and smuggling networks – have in turn granted violent groups leeway to exploit social anger in Tunisia's south. [99]

Tunisian security forces continue to pursue al-Qaeda linked terrorists in Jebel Chaambi.
Photo: Magharebia

Close to Tunisia's western border with Algeria, the government has conducted aerial bombardments and designated the area where violent groups have established their strongholds as a closed military zone – making it accessible only with a permit. [100] With their livelihoods in ruins and exposed to considerable insecurity, frustration is growing among local people, who resent the lack of political will to address their needs and concerns. [101] And although local communities have traditionally not supported these violent groups, some have established peaceful relations with them to ensure their livelihoods as well as their security. As a journalist covering this part of the country concluded:

> *"All security and military solutions will remain impotent unless accompanied by economic solutions that strengthen the social fabric in the mountains in order to counter terrorism".*
> *[102]*

The need for such measures is not lost on the Tunisian government. Recently, Foreign Minister Khemaies Jhinaoui, recognised the need for "a comprehensive approach against ISIS that also supports economic growth and employment, notably for youth." [103] However, as we have seen, the socio-economic and political public goods that need to be part of such an approach have been slow to arrive amid a serious economic crisis and fragile political situation. [104]

Winning hearts and minds?

The government has attempted to develop narratives that provide young people with a sense of purpose and belonging as an alternative to those of violent groups. [105] One campaign showcases the positive experiences of young Tunisian entrepreneurs, writers and artists. The aim is to inspire young people while sharing the message that they must count on themselves to succeed. One state official told us: "In the current context, you can't count on the state to respond to young people's problems. It just isn't possible." [106] But such messages can only go so far unless they are accompanied by more concerted efforts to offer young people concrete opportunities.

Some efforts to prevent people from joining violent groups carry the risk of further marginalising individuals and groups who are already on the fringe of society. Notably, while many have looked to religion in search of a meaningful identity, the government has tried to restore control over the religious sphere by closing mosques and religious associations or replacing imams deemed to be radical instead of supporting peaceful religious diversity. Some take the view that tackling religious leaders and institutions that incite violence has become necessary following the revolution which opened up political space and allowed even advocates of violence to express themselves. However, it is essential to distinguish between a criminal justice response to inciting violence and a more general clampdown on religious thought, belief and practice. In addition, those who question the state's legitimacy will also likely question the version of Islam it is trying to promote in the absence of a broader effort to generate trust through reform and measures to tackle marginalisation. These efforts risk alienating conservative or religious segments of the population which, in turn, could look to support or join more 'welcoming' groups. [107]

Returnee dilemmas

Many of the issues highlighted above are taking on new dimensions given the concern of Tunisian authorities over the return of 'foreign fighters'. Already, between 600 and 800 Tunisians who joined violent groups in Syria, Libya and Iraq are thought to have returned home. [108] Other fighters from these groups may well return in increasing numbers and organise violent operations in Tunisia. Specifically, individuals and families who travelled abroad to establish and contribute to life under a caliphate may hold the same objectives in their home country. [109]

The debate on how best to respond to this challenge has generated controversy. Specifically, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed announced at the end of 2016 that "those who come back will be arrested immediately after their arrival on Tunisian soil and will be judged under the anti-terrorism [sic] law." [110]

This raises concerns on several levels, not least because Tunisian prisons require reform and have in the past proved fertile ground for the growth of violent movements. [111] Due to an excessive preventive detention policy, which was bolstered following the adoption of the

2015 CT law, prisons are severely overcrowded. In this environment, condemned prisoners and detainees awaiting trial are not separated and live in dire conditions. [112]

While of concern in themselves, these elements have also facilitated recruitment of people by violent groups. [113] According to the Tunisian General Directorate for Prisons and Reeducation: "Overcrowding will […] cause frustration, violence and tension, which [leads] to prisoners seeking protection by joining or belonging to violent extremist groups, as they will provide the psychological and material care that is absent from the prison administration". [114] As one person told us: "Some people go in for minor offences, and come out as terrorists." [115] Moreover, while it can be hard to prove whether individuals have committed crimes, some returnees have been put under house arrest and closely monitored by the police [116], a practice which some find concerning given it is taking place outside a legal framework and in the broader context of emergency security measures.

Steps in the right direction?

Nevertheless, some progressive measures have been put in place to respond to certain drivers of instability in Tunisia. Notably, a recent step consisted of amending the repressive law on narcotics (Law 52) that imposed a year in prison for anyone caught using or in the possession of even a small quantity of drugs, including cannabis, and a minimum sentence of five years for repeat offenders. [117] This punitive law significantly contributed to prison overcrowding and had devastating impacts on young people especially. [118] An amendment, which grants judges the power to impose alternative sentences, has now been adopted to prevent young people from spending time in prison. [119] This is crucial: former detainees cannot access education and certain types of employment if they have spent more than three months in jail; and after release, stigma can prevent young ex-convicts from enjoying social and family life, making it harder to marry and start a family. While this is a positive step, an anti-corruption expert told us that some within the judicial and security sectors were opposed to efforts to reform the narcotics law because they benefit from it, including in the form of bribes received for turning a blind eye in certain cases. [120]

In spite of increased pressure on CSOs, they have been playing an important role in monitoring and holding the government to account. Some people we spoke to have suggested that despite government hesitancy over substantive engagement with CSOs on sensitive matters, there is a willingness to engage civil society on how to address security concerns. However, others saw this less as willingness to allow CSOs to help shape security approaches, than as an effort to co-opt civil society in the service of state-driven CT strategies. For instance, some questioned whether their involvement in a recent workshop organised by the National Counter-Terrorism Commission on community-based reintegration of returning 'foreign fighters' was merely a box-ticking exercise. [121]

Ways forward

Although positive steps have been taken, much remains to be done to address the problematic behaviour of the state and tackle key drivers of future instability. Some efforts have been made as part of the transition process, but the security situation has apparently been used to justify delays. Many people we spoke with pointed to the unwillingness of some within the government, especially within the Ministry of Interior (MOI) to embrace reforms, leading to the return of repressive practices. Specifically, some ascribe resistance to change to fear that the democratic transition will threaten the privileges which corruption and impunity provide.

After the revolution, a transitional justice process was set in motion to investigate gross human rights violations by the Tunisian state from 1955 until 2013. This was meant to mark a break with the past. [122] However, organisations monitoring this issue confirm that torture is still being used – especially against terror suspects. [123] And while officials praised a reduction in torture cases, these organisations believe the reduction in complaints filed merely reflects the climate of impunity and a fear of reprisals. [124]

Corruption is a critical issue for Tunisian peace and security: it negatively impacts people's perceptions of and relation with the security sector, and can easily undermine the effectiveness of efforts designed to address violence. Despite recognition of corruption as a critical issue for the country, a civil society actor told us that corruption within the police tended to be overlooked because of their role as the primary bulwark against 'terrorism' and

'violent extremism'. [125] However, in many ways, corruption is a boon to violent groups. According to a Tunisian anti-corruption expert: "Violent groups depend on smuggling for their financial and material survival, and smuggling cannot take place without state corruption." Referring to the weapon arsenals which have been found in Tunisia in past years, he went on to say: "They have had to go through numerous customs, army and police controls, and cannot have done so without official collusion." [126]

While the international community has provided security support to the Tunisian government through this challenging period, there have been important shortcomings in Tunisia's CT approach that are impacting on issues that pose risks to the country's stability. It is crucial that international actors use their leverage as strategic partners to promote and support efforts to respect human rights, tackle corruption and ensure accountability, and do everything in their power to encourage the government and civil society to build a consensus on the progress that is needed in these areas.

Header photo: A Tunisian guard during the 2014 parliamentary elections, Tunis. Photo: Xinhua/Pan Chaoyue

Footnotes

76. Strasser F (2017), 'Aid Remains Key to a Counter-ISIS Plan, Tunisia Says', USIP Analysis and Commentary, 16 March
77. Ibid. ; Meddeb H (2017), 'Precarious resilience: Tunisia's Libya predicament', op. cit. p 6
78. Amnesty International (2017), '"We want an end to the fear": Abuses under Tunisia's state of emergency', 13 February
79. Telephone interview with a civil society representative, June 2016
80. Tunisian Report to the UN Human Rights Council (2017), ref A/HRC/WG.6/27/TUN/1, 20 February, p 13
81. Amnesty International (2017), '"We want an end to the fear": Abuses under Tunisia's state of emergency', op. cit.
82. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
83. Human Rights Watch (2016), 'Tunisia: Abusive House Arrests', 24 October
84. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, December 2016
85. Human Rights Watch (2015), 'Tunisia: Arbitrary Travel Restrictions', 10 July
86. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
87. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
88. Interview with Judge, Sidi Bouzid, January 2017
89. Agence France Presse (2016), 'Tunisie: les autorités appellent aux dons pour la lutte contre le terrorisme', 12 March
90. Kapitalis (2014), 'Les médias lancent une campagne contre le terrorisme', 23 July
91. Interview, Tunis, March 2017
92. Projet de loi n° 25/2015 relative à la répression des atteintes contre les forces armées
93. Letter sent to Members of the Assembly of the People's Representatives (2017), 'Appeal to the People's Representatives to Abandon Consideration of the Draft Law on Prosecution of Abuses Against the Armed Forces', 26 July
94. Human Rights Watch (2016), 'No to Terrorism, Yes to Human Rights', 28 April
95. For instance, see: the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (2017), Civic Freedom Monitor: Tunisia, 27 July; Nadhif A (2017), 'Tunisia cracks down on NGOs', 23 June
96. Interview, Tunis, December 2016
97. Meddeb H (2017), 'Precarious resilience: Tunisia's Libya predicament', op. cit. p 7
98. Focus group discussions and interviews, Medenine, January 2017
99. For instance, see: International Crisis Group (2013), 'Tunisia's borders: Jihadism and Contraband', Report 148, 28 November
100. Tunisie Afrique Presse (2014), 'Tunisie : Arrêté républicain déclarant zone militaire fermée les monts Chaambi', 16 April; Amara T (2013), 'Tunisia bombs Islamist militants in mountain hideouts', 12 August
101. Hamza Meddeb (2017), op. cit.
102. Nadhif A (2017), 'Tunisia's poor population face death by terrorists', op. cit.
103. Strasser F (2017), op. cit.
104. International Crisis Group (2017), op. cit.
105. Interview with a Tunisian government official, Tunis, March 2017
106. Ibid.
107. Fahmi G, Meddeb H (2015), op. cit.
108. Argoubi M (2016), 'Tunisian foreign fighters to be dealt with under anti-terrorism law:

PM', 30 December

109. Interview with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016

110. Argoubi M (2016), op. cit.

111. Djilali E (2017), 'Tunisia: Returning jihadists highlight desperate need for prison reform', 28 February

112. Avocats Sans Frontière (2015), 'Detention in Tunisia: Sanctions that go beyond deprivation of liberty', 13 April; Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor (2016), 'Tunisia guilty of medieval practices in prisons, detention centers', 6 October

113. Djilali E (2017), op. cit.

114. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (2016), 'Handbook on the Management of Violent Extremist Prisoners and the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Prisons', p 12

115. Interview with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016

116. Gall C (2017), 'Tunisia Fears the Return of Thousands of Young Jihadists', 25 February

117. Human Right Watch (2017), 'Tunisia: Amend Draft Drug Law', 19 January ()

118. Human Rights Watch (2017), 'Tunisia: Events of 2016', World Report

119. HuffPost Tunisie (2017), 'Tunisie-La loi 52 a été amendée: "Une étape considérable franchie" se félicite l'avocat Ghazi Mrabet', 25 April

120. Interview with civil society representative, The Hague, July 2017

121. Hedayah Centre (2017), 'Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters Workshop in Tunisia'

122. UNDP (2014), 'Tunisia launches Truth and Dignity Commission'

123. Organisation mondiale contre la torture (2016), 'L'impunité, pourquoi ? Analyse des dossiers juridiques', Annual report, December 2016, pp 20-21

124. Telephone Interview with a civil society representative, June 2016

125. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, December 2016

126. Interview, July 2017

IV. International support for counter-terror and countering violent extremism in Tunisia

Tunisia is connected to global dynamics, and international actors play a role in shaping the country's trajectory through the assistance they provide to the government and CSOs. In that sense, when prioritising CT and CVE [127] in Tunisia, international support "influences the understanding of the phenomenon and the responses put in place in the country", as noted by a Tunis-based analyst whom we met during our research. [128]

In addition, western actors' efforts to deal with security threats at arm's length impacts both the type of support offered and how it is provided. Their interventions thus aim to build the capacity of Tunisian security and justice institutions while supporting state and non-state entities perceived as relevant to reducing recruitment into violent groups.

Then European Parliament President Martin Schulz delivers a speech at the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, Tunisia. Photo: European Union 2016 – European Parliament

Security first

Since 2014-2015, western actors [129] such as the US, the UK, France, Germany and the EU, have ramped up their security assistance to Tunisia. [130] They have provided training and equipment to the Tunisian police and military, including for border control, intelligence and strategic planning to strengthen the government's CT capacity and prevent a spill over from the conflict in Libya. While this assistance is welcomed by many in Tunisia, members of civil society criticised the interventions of western actors in Tunisia for their lack of coherence and long-term vision, which risks them unwittingly reinforcing some of the dynamics they intend

19

to address. In their view, foreign assistance should not merely reinforce the capacity of the Tunisian government but also exhort it to become more accountable, transparent, respectful of human rights, and compliant with the rule of law. [131] As such, many highlighted the failure of the international community to urge and encourage the Tunisian state to embrace meaningful reforms as part of a coherent political strategy.

By prioritising capacity building over reforms, western engagement risks emboldening or overlooking the problematic behaviour of some state actors which has exacerbated tensions and contributed to the appeal of violent action. This does not mean that enhancing the capacity of the state to protect its citizens and people on its territory is not necessary: it is, as the ineffective response to the Sousse attack illustrated. [132] However, the international community must also recognise the Tunisian state's role in perpetuating grievances on which violence builds, be it through repressive policing and CT measures or limp efforts to address marginalisation, poverty and inequality.

Unfortunately, the "exceptional" support provided by western actors to Tunisia [133] to an extent legitimises the government's actions. In particular, security institutions, which receive considerable assistance, are benefiting from this support although they are among those resisting reform the most. For instance, several internationally sponsored security sector reform (SSR) programmes have reportedly been halted because of government blockages. According to some, this is because the Ministry of Interior (MOI) benefits from the current status quo and "is strong enough to maintain [it]." [134] In particular, we were told of the fragmentation within the ministry, where different clans are looking to protect their interests and achieve their own objectives. [135]

Many, including western actors, have highlighted the importance of reforming the MOI to achieve greater transparency, accountability and respect for human rights. However, in the current context, where securing the country is the utmost priority, "[SSR] in the deeper sense is not foremost on anyone's agenda." [136] As such, according to many interviewees, the international community "provides equipment whether or not reforms are carried out because it does this for intelligence first and foremost." [137] A Tunisian security sector analyst also noted: "The provision of training and equipment, i.e. what the Tunisian government is after, is a way for the international community to buy influence, which is problematic." [138]

This is not to say that no positive efforts have been put in place. For instance, community policing programmes [139] and innovative peacebuilding projects [140] have been supported in different localities throughout the country and are a good way to encourage more accountable security provision focused on people's concerns. However, insufficient pressure on the government to pursue structural reforms is robbing international support of vital coherence. Individual or localised interventions designed to change the behaviour of the security sector cannot erase the overwhelming support that western actors are providing to the status quo. As short-term security responses take precedence, the prime importance of longer-term peacebuilding and development including economic opportunities is all too easily under-recognised and undermined. This could well prove counterproductive in the long run – as it often has elsewhere. [141]

While many Tunisian officials and foreign diplomats have commended the mainstreaming of human rights across international interventions [142], anti-torture experts expressed concerns that "a few PowerPoint presentations on human rights" would not bring about the required changes within the security forces. [143] And whereas corruption has been widely recognised as a critical challenge in the 'fight against terrorism' [144], a Tunisian anti-corruption expert noted that western actors have failed to place anti-corruption front and centre of their interventions. [145] For some civil society actors, this lack of coherence amounts to hypocrisy. As a Tunis-based civil society anti-torture specialist argued: "What is the point of supporting youth in marginalised areas when these young people are not able to travel outside of their regions because their movements are limited by procedure S17, or they get thrown into prison for smoking a joint?" [146]

Military presence in the centre of Tunis. Photo: Wassim Ben Rhouma

Vying for access

Beyond jeopardising Tunisia's long-term stability by prioritising stability over meaningful change [147] western states operating in Tunisia also undermine the coherence of their efforts by competing with each other.

Diplomats are required to follow 'the political imperative' stemming from their capitals, in particular due to public pressures at home. [148] This can be apparent in a tension between the political and operational units of foreign missions in Tunisia, where the political imperative (i.e. security) can dominate the design of interventions. [149]

Pressure from headquarters also exacerbates competition and incoherence between international actors, with pressure from capitals cited as a key contributory factor. [150] Since security assistance is a means to access valuable information, donors often compete for privileged relationships with the Tunisian government. Several units with different foreign backers have been set up within the MOI and Ministry of Defence. [151] The fact that "international aid is fragmented" and different actors sometimes "attempt to undermine the projects of others" risks leading to duplication and unsustainability. [152]

However, coordination has increased thanks to the establishment of the G7+ mechanism following the Sousse attacks. In this framework, the EU, the UK and Germany each chair working groups (on CT/CVE, tourism and protection of critical infrastructure, and border security respectively). Interestingly, some within the government are reportedly frustrated at this move as they can no longer go to different states with a "shopping list of demands." [153]

Yet, despite these coordination efforts, the rapid and frequent changes in context and personnel contribute to a confusing and opaque environment. [154] Considering the multiplicity of actors involved, the fluidity of the environment and the domestic interests at play, civil society actors have questioned the transparency of international assistance, and have criticised the opacity of foreign governments who work with implementing agencies for failing to coordinate with local civil society actors. [155]

CVE: addressing, reinforcing or ignoring drivers of violence?

Some western actors are attempting a more preventive approach, in particular by supporting CVE actions. These are often presented as a softer approach to CT since they do not focus on hard security measures. CVE is spreading in Tunisia through "increased funds offered by the UK, US and EU [which] are leading a growing number of organisations to focus on so-called alternatives to terrorism." [156] But this has led to CVE being perceived as imposed from the outside, generating mistrust. A Tunisian civil society governance expert explained: "It starts

with international non-governmental organisations and then leads to Tunisian organisations focusing on such programmes." [157]

A consequence of the CVE approach is the securitisation of governance and development work, where non-security programmes are perceived as vectors through which to advance CT and CVE objectives. While some western actors perceive CVE simply as an additional outcome of "the kind of work that we would have done anyway" [158], it is not certain that the CVE focus actually contributes to advancing genuine governance, education or human rights goals – as it narrows the scope of projects. Addressing people's problems only "in as far as they seem relevant to stopping [them from] joining violent groups" can significantly contribute to further marginalising and stigmatising individuals and groups. [159]

For instance, a Tunisian health professional recounted having been asked to take part in a cultural project for poor and marginalised youth: "but my contribution to this project was in fact aimed at profiling young Tunisians, with a view to identifying people who could potentially turn to violence." [160] This type of distortion of well-meaning activities can lead to mistrust and anger among the beneficiaries and be detrimental to the image of those who put them in place. Also, we were told that some organisations lack the expertise to carry out CVE activities but are nonetheless receiving funding to do so. Considering the risks of doing harm with clumsy CVE programming, this is worrying.

Given the significant funds now available for CVE activities, some are concerned about CSOs being co-opted to support state-driven and western-imposed approaches to security as opposed to tackling the drivers of instability of greatest concern to Tunisian people. While engagement between civil society and the government on security issues has increased – notably in the context of the tripartite dialogue between the EU, the Tunisian government and civil society to discuss matters of security among others – several people noted that CSOs are not able to engage meaningfully in security discussions. A human rights activist told us: "The government doesn't understand civil society and wants to control it." [161]

The narrow focus on CVE has led to targeting the symptoms rather than the causes of the problem. Trying to disturb the recruitment chain, including at the individual level, does not necessarily provide responses to the big issues that people see as potential drivers of future instability. Some CVE projects actually focus on producing 'alternative narratives' to guide people away from 'radical discourse'. [162] However, referring to an internationally-sponsored project that she came across, a Tunisian activist told us: "Projects to prevent youth from being radicalised don't work. You don't promote resilience by distributing tote bags." Instead, she argued, "Those projects should focus on providing young people with social, educational and economic opportunities." [163] Similarly, an activist expressed amusement at the idea that a Facebook campaign could prevent young people from joining violent groups, who actually put a lot more effort into their recruitment strategy. [164]

"

Projects to prevent youth from being radicalised don't work. You don't promote resilience by distributing tote bags".

However, even if they are well designed, CVE actions when conducted in parallel to CT interventions, as is the case in Tunisia, cannot erase the downsides of the CT approach. Without addressing the repressive aspects of Tunisian governance, efforts to address marginalisation and unemployment, for instance, could prove inadequate.

Anger at western governments' policies in Tunisia and beyond

According to several Tunisian interviewees, the abuses committed with impunity by western states in Muslim countries especially in the context of the 'war on terror', are a reason why some people in Tunisia support and join violent groups: "As long as the international rules of play aren't in place, feelings of injustice and anger will continue". [165] If western actors are unwilling to behave according to international norms and standards, admit mistakes, provide reparation and strive to develop just solutions to the challenges faced by people across the

Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the claims of violent groups to be offering a path to justice will remain very appealing within Tunisia and beyond. [166] Resentment against the West ought to be taken seriously, as this global dimension of the problem could persist, no matter how positive international interventions in Tunisia may be. It is therefore essential for western actors to strive for more coherence, transparency and accountability in their foreign interventions. One suggestion offered by another Tunisian expert was for western actors to address the financing of violent groups, preventing businesses from contributing to those flows, applying political pressure on countries of origin and also increasing the sharing of financial information.

Tunisia needs long-term, comprehensive and coherent engagement in support of sustainable peace. Instead, as shown in this section, it seems clear that international actors have adopted a short term, narrow and overly securitised focus on CT and CVE – hampered further by an unhealthy dose of competition where there should be cooperation. In adopting this approach, international actors are at best neglecting but at worst reinforcing drivers of future instability in the country. The next section outlines a series of forward-looking recommendations for sustaining a peaceful society in Tunisia.

Header photo: Tunisia is setting up barriers, watchtowers, and moats along its Libyan border to prevent the infiltration of arms and terrorists. Photo: Anadolu Agency/Getty

Footnotes

127. While 'preventing violent extremism' (PVE) is increasingly being used instead or alongside 'CVE', we believe that in practice they pose similar questions and entail the same risks. Therefore, in this report, we will only refer to CVE for the sake of brevity.
128. Participant in workshop with civil society organisations, Tunis, March 2017
129. Non-western actors are also active in Tunisia, in particular Turkey, Algeria and Gulf countries. The scope of this long read does not extend to analysing the role that those actors play in Tunisia, as the research focused on that of Western actors, in particular the EU, US, UK, Germany and France. Nevertheless, this long read acknowledges the involvement of other actors and the need for Western states to coordinate their efforts with them in order to ensure coherence in international support to Tunisia.
130. British Embassy Tunis (2016), 'UK Support for Tunisia 2016-2017', 14 October; McInerney S, Bockenfeld C (2016), 'The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2017: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East & North Africa', Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), April 2016
131. Interviews with civil society organisations, Tunis, October 2016 – March 2017
132. Grierson J (2017), '"Cowardice" to blame for delayed response at Sousse attack', 8 February
133. Interviews with Tunisian government officials, October and December 2016
134. Interviews with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
135. For more information: Aliriza F (2015) 'Tunisia at Risk: Will counter-terrorism undermine the revolution?', Legatum Institute, 16 November
136. ibid. p 13
137. Interviews with a security sector expert, Tunis, October 2016
138. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, December 2016
139. For instance, see: UNDP (2014), 'Model police stations launched in Tunisia', 5 June
140. For instance, see the work conducted by International Alert in Tunisia
141. See Saferworld work on the dilemmas of counter terrorism
142. Interviews with Tunisian government officials and international donors, Tunis, December 2016
143. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016
144. For instance, see: Transparency International (2015), 'Tackle instability and terrorism by fighting corruption', 4 February; Ndung'U I (2015), 'To fight terrorism, fight corruption first', Institute for Security Studies, 9 October
145. Interview, July 2017
146. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016 - NB: this comment was made in October 2016; since then, the law on narcotics (Law 52) has been amended after years of civil society advocacy on this issue – see section 3 for more information.
147. Kubinec R (2016), 'How foreign aid could hurt Tunisia's transition to democracy', 19 December

148. Interview with international donors, Tunis, October 2016 - March 2017
149. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, March 2017
150. Interview with an international donor, Tunis, October 2016
151. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, December 2016
152. Ibid.
153. Interview with an international donor, Tunis, December 2016
154. Interview with an international donors, Tunis, October 2017
155. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
156. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
157. Interview with a civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
158. Interview with an international donor, Tunis, March 2017
159. Attree L (2017), 'Shouldn't YOU be countering violent extremism?', Saferworld, 14 March
160. Interview with civil society representative, Tunis, March 2017
161. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016
162. Interviews with civil society representatives and international donors, Tunis, March 2017
163. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016
164. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016
165. Interview with civil society representative, Tunis, October 2016
166. Interviews with civil society representatives, Tunis, October 2016

V. Conclusions and ways forward

If Tunisia is to remain a positive example of what the Arab uprisings were meant to achieve, there is important work ahead. As a Tunisian civil society actor told us: "The process is ongoing and the required elements are there but a lot of work remains to be done to ensure that the transition achieves its democratic objectives." The Tunisian government, with support from the international community and civil society, therefore needs to focus on delivering the democratic transition process to address the longstanding grievances of Tunisians – but also show that change can be achieved through a peaceful revolution and not only through violent means. As such, the priority of western actors in Tunisia should be on consolidating the democratic transition and building a sustainable future rather than simply on countering terrorism.

Addressing grievances, once and for all

Over six years since the uprisings, there is a strong sense of disillusionment with the government, as it is perceived to be unable or unwilling to fulfil the promises of the revolution, including reducing economic inequalities, enhancing social justice, and guaranteeing human dignity. However, while the government is struggling amid a serious economic crisis and a fragile political situation, it needs to demonstrate that it is serious about change, and provide concrete improvements to people's lives. To do so, it must meaningfully engage with communities and individuals throughout the country and adopt strategies that comprehensively address their needs and grievances. If it fails to do so, there is a risk that discontent and instability will grow. As recent Tunisian history has shown, discontent could lead to instability, providing the conditions that enable violent groups to make further advances.

Specifically, **social and economic reforms** are urgently needed to address the disparities between the different regions of Tunisia, and ensure the development of peripheral, marginalised areas like Medenine, Sidi Bouzid and Sidi Hassine. This requires the government to invest and encourage investment in these areas, through positive discrimination policies for instance, but also to improve the quality of education and provide courses and traineeships that take into account local realities and correspond to labour market needs.

Respondents to our research also emphasised the need for better public services, with some expressing hopes that this will be achieved with the election and establishment of regional councils following the municipal elections that will take place in December 2017.

Finally, these measures need to be accompanied by efforts to open up real opportunities for people from marginalised regions, especially unemployed youth. In that sense, the amendment of the narcotics law is a step in the right direction to alter patterns of discrimination.

Security and governance reforms are also needed to improve state-society relations. Whether they were concerned with police behaviour or requested increased security presence to prevent crime and violence, most respondents expressed the need to reform the security sector. Specifically, they called for an end to corruption and impunity when

abuses are committed and for security provision to be more responsive to people's concerns and compliant with human rights. In this regard, people we spoke with highlighted the importance of encouraging civil society's role in monitoring security institutions to hold them and the government to account.

Supporting agents of positive change

Governance weaknesses and abuses have had negative consequences on peace dynamics in Tunisia. In this context, western actors must think strategically about *how* they provide support to state and non-state institutions. Their future engagement could be enhanced by being configured around a shared **long-term vision for peace** based on a realistic assessment of capacities and incentives. This should include 'milestones' for progress on which to base further support. Bearing in mind the lack of willingness from some within the government to undergo reform, several Tunisian CSOs have suggested that 'train and equip' support, for instance, be tied to state officials taking serious steps to meet their commitments on democracy, human rights and rule of law in the context of a 'more for more' approach. This would be particularly important regarding support provided to the MOI and to ensure that the international community is focusing on addressing endemic corruption, shortcomings in policing and CT practices, dire conditions in prisons, and so on.

To strengthen the democratic transition, western actors in Tunisia should consider ways to support and reinforce **check and balance mechanisms**, such as the independent bodies working to support the reform agenda. The civil society actors we consulted warned that all the necessary safeguards are not yet in place in Tunisia and many lamented a lack of political will on behalf of some within the government to see these accountability mechanisms operate effectively. International interventions in Tunisia should therefore strengthen the setup of those independent bodies, and enhance their potential to meaningfully engage with the government and contribute to improving state-society relations.

In addition, western actors can play a constructive role by **empowering civil society**, which is critical to ensuring the success of Tunisia's democratic transition. In particular, instead of imposing a CVE lens, the framing of which prevents civil society from being impartial and challenging the state to improve, they should redouble investment in peace, rights and governance efforts focused on pushing for progress on the issues that matter most to Tunisian communities.

Western interventions in Tunisia should also seek to broaden debates on security, supporting the engagement of a diverse range of civil society and community actors in discussions on what the response to security threats should look like and how the security sector should improve. Ensuring security debates are more inclusive is crucial for developing relevant and sustainable solutions to insecurity in Tunisia.

This research also highlights the eagerness of **youth** from marginalised areas to contribute to shaping their country's future. Participants in focus group discussions thanked us for having given them a chance to discuss important issues and expressed their "need to be listened to". [167] In view of increased disillusionment and hostility toward the state, reaching out to young people and demonstrating that their views count and are taken into account should be the number one priority of both the government and its international friends. Political exclusion is one of the key grievances of marginalised Tunisian youth, and their willingness to contribute to a fairer society is one of Tunisia's key strengths in the current context.

Overall, there are no shortcuts to achieving Tunisian and western security objectives in Tunisia. As there remains a strong constituency for change and valuable space for debate, the focus must be to address drivers of instability that are priorities for people. As such, Tunisian and international stakeholders must strive for more coherent strategies that support long-term peace and stability in Tunisia. Tunisians deserve no less.

Header photo: 3D mosaic in Tunisia. Photo: Walid Mahfoudh

Footnotes

167. Focus group discussions, Sidi Bouzid, Medenine and Sidi Hassine, January-March 2017
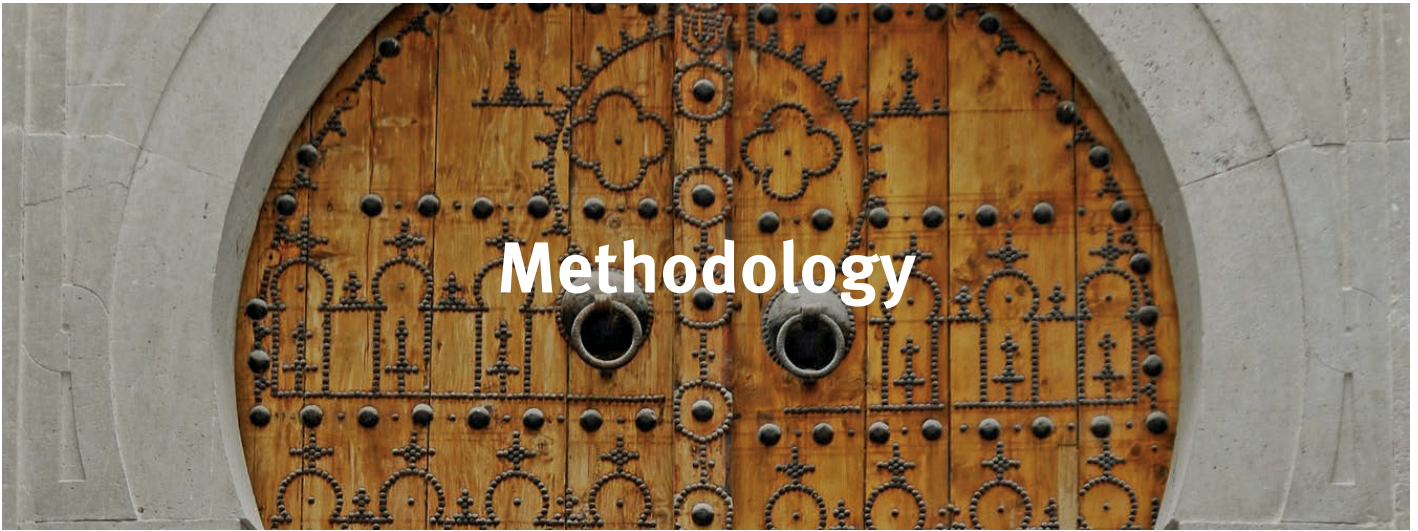
Methodology

From September 2016 to July 2017, Saferworld conducted qualitative research in Tunisia through an extensive literature review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Through this, we gathered views and perspectives from people in Tunisia and from civil society organisations that work closely with them.

In October 2016, December 2016 and March 2017, we conducted 38 interviews in Tunis with prominent Tunisian and international civil society members, western policy actors and Tunisian government officials. During these meetings, we asked how Tunisia is responding to violence and instability, what support the international community is and could be providing in this regard, and what role civil society organisations are or could be playing, including to contribute to addressing the drivers of violence and instability.

In partnership with the Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Centre, we carried out nine focus group discussions and eight key informant interviews in Sidi Bouzid, Medenine and Sidi Hassine, in January and February 2017. We spoke to 114 people in total, including youth, women and men from communities, local authorities and local CSOs, to gather information in each location on: people's perceptions and experiences of insecurity and instability; people's perceptions and experiences of the impact of CT/CVE measures; and people's recommendations for Tunisia's effective transition to democracy.

We organised a workshop in March 2017 to share and discuss our initial research findings with a group of civil society representatives. This informed the analysis and recommendations contained in this in-depth.

Header photo: Dennis Jarvis