108479-001-LITERATURE REVIEW

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: THE TUNISIAN CONTEXT

A deep understanding of local context is largely missing from research on why individuals join and leave violent extremist groups. Research highlights commonalities across multiple countries (the union of ideological, societal, and psychological motivations), but each country requires a deeper analysis into why violent extremism took shape as it did. Although a global phenomenon, the roots of violent extremism are local. Tunisia’s history of violent extremism is intertwined with relative deprivation: the sense of injustice arising from not attaining the quality of life expected. Although many Tunisian violent extremists are well-educated and come from middle-class backgrounds, they often hail from under-resourced regions. This lack of inclusion may be a driver of joining and exiting violent extremism.

Inclusion in the Tunisian context is a person with gainful employment or sufficient education, religious acceptance, political representation in the capital, civically engaged in their communities, and not socially isolated. Exclusion leads to violent extremism because it produces grievances that spark violent action.

I. Radicalization

Radicalization is a process that draws on psychological, societal, and ideological factors. Tunisian radicalized youth tend to be between the ages of 24 and 37 and come from tight communities, often where economic gains since the revolution had not been felt. Through Ansar al-Sharia, many fought in Syria for al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, while other stayed in North Africa to fight for offshoots of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State.

Academic literature pays scant attention to the line between supporting and perpetrating acts of violent extremism. According to one figure, about 8% of the Tunisian population finds acts of violent extremism morally justified. However, that is still a far larger number than actually participated in violent acts.

Ideological Motivations

Tunisian violent extremists want to impose Islamic law on the country through violence, ridding the nation of vice. Their ideology has its origins in Jihadist Salafi thought, which differs from movements that aim at power through constitutional and legal frameworks. Acting, as they believe, as the only true believers of Islam, they use setting events like the Syrian conflict to catalyze grievances and encourage recruitment. However, significant debate still rests as to whether the ideology incentivizes joining or takes place after confronting violence.

Psychological Motivations

Trauma, humiliation, identity crises, and a desire for glory or significance have been all been posited as psychological motivations for joining violent extremist groups. However, these indicators are very challenging to measure, and in Tunisia there are no public statistics on the prevalence of psychological factors in the Tunisian population. The role of psychology in radicalization among Tunisians remains one of the key gaps in academic literature.

Societal Drivers

Tunisians who left to fight in Syria for violent extremist groups were drawn from underdeveloped neighborhoods and regions where the gains of the revolution were not felt. As in many contexts, poor governance spurs distrust of civic actors and a desire to take matters into their own hands. Issues such as corruption, police brutality, marginalization, and communities of poor, disenfranchised neighborhoods have been well studied in Tunisia; however, the direct link between exclusion and joining a violent extremist group as opposed to smuggling or criminal groups requires further investigation.
II. Leaving Groups
Leaving violent extremism is a complex psychological and societal process involving a change in behavior and on occasion a complete transformation of beliefs. This process has occurred among defectors from violent extremist groups, rehabilitated fighters in prison, and even among Tunisian Salafists who voluntarily chose to deradicalize.

Disengagement & De-Radicalization
Despite a diverse range of academic research on radicalization, the exit process of disengagement and de-radicalization has not been studied at great depth, largely due to the challenge of accessing former extremists. Disillusionment and a change in priorities, often brought about by guilt, reaction to violence, or even new friendships, can drive a person to voluntarily disengage from a group. A similar process appears to take place for those who completely de-radicalize, either a shift in the ideological ends or a change in the morality of the means employed to achieve those ends. Although they require further study, rehabilitation programs showed some successes in Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia, while Algeria’s amnesty law provides a unique model for reintegration.

The Maghreb Economic Forum has chosen to focus on the link between exclusion and radicalization and the disengagement process because Tunisia stands at a crossroads. The same drivers that led young men and women to leave Tunisia for the Islamic State exist today. Seven years after the revolution many of the marginalization issues have coalesced into a growing violent extremist insurgency. In addition, many of the approximate 6,000 fighters are now returning to Tunisia. Without a coordinated approach to reintegrating them back into society and intervening to stop further radicalization, violent extremism will continue to hamper the safety and prosperity of Tunisia.
INTRODUCTION

Tunisia faces two direct threats from violent extremism. According to international estimates, just under half the number of foreign fighters who left for Syria and Iraq came from Tunisia. Some of these fighters have returned to Tunisia, while others remain at large. Secondly, the 2015 Bardo Museum attack by a splinter group of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb showed the ease of movement and training between Libya and Tunisia. Though there have been no successful attacks since, arrests of suspected terrorists have continued through March 2019.

Terrorist attacks have struck North Africa with some frequency over the last year, particularly in Egypt, Libya, and the Sahel. Operating increasingly as an insurgency, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operates primarily in Algeria and Mali with expansion efforts in Tunisia and Libya. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) is their most lethal offshoot based in Mali, while their offshoot Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade planned attacks in Tunisia. Meanwhile, the Islamic State maintains a presence through local violent extremist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya. Transnational organized crime support these groups with funding and logistical support, including through kidnapping and illicit weapons smuggling.

The Tunisian military has actively combatted violent extremist groups on the border with Algeria, while the African Union has led the fight in the Sahel with the aid of Western militaries. However, law enforcement remains unable to handle disengaged fighters and prosecute criminal groups with the speed needed to deter future attacks. While the groups easily coordinate across borders, the security and law enforcement actors in North Africa have largely failed to coordinate counterterrorism and countering violent extremism responses.

There is little consensus in the study of terrorism, primarily due to the challenge of obtaining verifiable data. In attempting to understand the motivations behind radicalized violence, this literature review views the instigators of violence as rational actors—not as individuals given to abnormal psychopathic tendencies—who make the choice to join and to leave out of a (perceived) limited set of options. This literature review presents the combination of context, means, and ideology that explain the decision-making and behavior of female and male fighters joining and quitting violent groups. It also provides context for why the fighters remain committed to their groups and some of the challenges they face in attempting to leave.

**Language Used**

Much of the language used to describe violent extremism is highly politicized and vague in meaning. This literature review aims to defend the use of several terms as used in the research project going forward, but first it uses a few key words as a foundation to describe the motivations for violent actions. In this case, terrorism is defined as the deployment of violence in order to intimidate the public. In general, violent extremism is the form of political violence legitimated by extreme ideological views and beliefs. As used in this literature review, “violent extremism” stands for one of its specific aspects: Jihadi violence, which is not particular to one nation or ethnic group and uses fundamentalist interpretations of Islam in its ideology as justification for the use of violence.

Radicalization is the adoption of the belief system legitimating the use of extreme means to achieve certain goals. However, involvement does not only mean directly perpetrating acts of violence: it can also include buying weapons, raising money, and recruiting other members. Disengagement means ending involvement with a violent extremist group. It entails a distinct behavior change, choosing to stop committing acts of political and ideological violence. It differs significantly from de-radicalization, which is a change in beliefs and mindsets that motivate extremist violence, specifically the belief that divine law must be imposed on others to save the world from vice.

**The Layout**

The literature review will proceed as follows. Section I describes inclusion and exclusion, particularly in the Tunisian context. Section II examines the behaviors that indicate support and participation in violent extremism in Tunisia. It continues by discussing the belief system adhered to and the psychological and sociological drivers of radicalization. Section III moves into a discussion of competing theories of de-radicalization and disengagement, with an emphasis on key gaps in prevailing literature. Section IV addresses prevailing international approaches to countering violent extremism with an aim at establishing what constitutes a successful program. Finally, the literature review concludes and examines the implications and further questions raised by these findings.

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I. INCLUSION

The connection between inclusion and violent extremism is an increasingly studied phenomenon, primarily by economists at the World Bank. The prevailing view holds that a lack of economic inclusion is the underlying driver for the experiences of injustice that drive young men and women towards violent extremist groups or ideology. These experiences of injustice will be discussed further on page 20, but there is far less consensus as to what level of “inclusion” prevents political violence.

In a social and economic context, inclusion is when people of a specific area can get the education, decent jobs, housing, and healthcare to live comfortably and participate in society as valued members of their community. Amartya Sen describes inclusion as “characterized by a society’s widely shared social experience and active participation, by a broad equality of opportunities and life chances for individuals, and by the achievement of a basic level of well-being for all citizens.”

According to Robert Putnam, communities that are civically engaged build “social capital,” the way in which a society builds norms and associations that enhance individual productivity. In his landmark essay, he charts the decline of social capital in the American context by tracing indicators such as religious affiliation, voting, union membership, educational associations, volunteering. In a new democracy, this social capital can be essential to encouraging civic engagement in areas previously unaccustomed to participating in the democratic process.

Exclusion is tied to violence because it produces frustrations that spur violence. The frustration of highly educated individuals is known as “relative deprivation,” since these individuals are educated to a high-school or university level but hold serious grievances as they feel deprived of good jobs and high wages. Ted Gurr’s 1971 book Why Men Rebel argues that a country’s inability to realize the benefits of modernization can lead to anger among those whose livelihoods have not changed, and therefore lead to violence. This concept is carried forward by J.F. Bayart, who explains how “cadets sociaux,” young people without economic opportunities and not politically engaged, channel their relative deprivation into radical politics. This phenomenon is exacerbated by young people realizing they cannot sustain or improve upon their parents’ way of life, a concept that explains violence among Tuaregs in Mali and Niger in the 1980s as well as violence among Middle East and North African immigrants to Europe. In fact, according to the World Bank, direct economic inequality was less of a driver of the Arab Spring as was dissatisfaction with the decline in the quality of life and inequality of wealth among middle class and wealthier groups.

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9 “Inequality, Uprisings, and Conflict in the Arab World.” World Bank Group, MENA Economic Monitor, October 2015.
However, this decline was in many ways a result of excluding certain groups of people from wealth and power. Repressive governments in the Middle East relied on a social contract, known as the “authoritarian bargain,” by giving their citizens free public services in exchange for support. However, as time went on political control of the economy hampered the creation of jobs in the private sector while restricting growth in the public sector, leading to a breakdown of this social contract. The breakdown particularly affected the middle class, who found themselves getting poorer and poorer, facing a shortage of jobs, and a decline in government services and effective governance. Both the lower and middle classes felt shut out of profits gained by the few, large Arab companies. These were the grievances that spurred the revolutions and violence of the Arab Spring and are often echoed by violent extremists as their motivations.

Unlike in other Middle Eastern countries where divisions fell largely on religious, tribal, and ethnic lines, in Tunisia divisions became apparent regionally. Tunisia’s development has largely favored its coast – interior regions and the south have significantly higher rates of poverty and unemployment, and therefore crime and political violence. According to one study, the Arab Spring started in Tunisia by jumping from community to community where the socioeconomic conditions were similar: starting from interior, underdeveloped regions. The World Bank assesses that youth not in education, employment, or training made up about 47% in these underdeveloped, rural areas. These youth were the most excluded, lacking access to many of the economic and educational opportunities afforded to residents of other areas of Tunisia, with women in these areas particularly excluded from the job market.

In the Tunisian context, a person is included when they have gainful employment or education, are religiously accepted, politically represented in the capital, civically engaged in their communities, and not socially isolated. The Maghreb Economic Forum has used this term instead of exclusion to better define exactly what approach programmatic and government actors should take. This research will endeavor to verify these theoretical findings with focus group discussions, before assessing their impact on disengagement from violent extremism.

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10 “Inequality, Uprisings, and Conflict in the Arab World.” World Bank Group, MENA Economic Monitor, October 2015.
13 See annex for an assessment tool of inclusion in the Tunisian context.
II. Radicalization

Radicalization in its simplest form can be broken down as process that turns extreme beliefs into violent behavior. In Tunisia these behaviors include support for violent extremism, recruitment, and participation in violent groups. The extremist beliefs that underpin these actions focus on key events or conflicts that represent injustice. Finally, it is the deeper psychological and sociological motivations that drive the belief system and the actions, sometimes independently of each other. As their experience within a violent group grows, so the ideology becomes more extreme and their commitment deepens.
II.A. Behaviors

Supporting violent extremism

A critical component of violent extremism’s strength is its support from specific populations across the world. For some, this support can be the first steps of joining a violent group. For others, it can be material support through donations, or simply encouragement on social media.

In developing countries, support for extremist groups and more specifically attacks against civilians tends to be from both men and women who are young, unemployed, and not highly religious but willing to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs. In a World Bank assessment of 27 developing countries using the World Gallup Poll, about 10% of individuals worldwide believed attacks against civilians were “mildly justifiable” or “completely justifiable.” There were higher concentrations of these individuals in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. While they found no difference of opinion between men and women, they did find commonalities for those that were under 33 years of age, poor, lived in rural regions, and with up to an elementary school level of education. Most importantly, all of the individuals with “extreme views” showed religion to be less important in their daily life but indicated their willingness to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs.

In the Middle East specifically, this support can also come from educated populations. A Brookings report analyzing Gallup data suggests that in the region a lack of sufficient job opportunities for educated Middle Easterners fuels support for violent extremist attacks. In Tunisia specifically, more than 8% of respondents indicated in 2017 that they believed the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks were morally justified. The Brookings report used the 9/11 attacks as proxies for support for violent extremism, indicating therefore that 8% of Tunisians supported violent extremism. Though there are flaws to this approach, this fact points towards “relative depravation” as a key motivator of support, since these individuals are educated to a high-school or university level but hold serious grievances as they feel deprived of good jobs and high wages. Relative depravation is particularly applicable to Tunisia, where the economic gains of the revolution have not been realized for the general population. In particular, unemployment has risen from 10.9% for men and 18.9% for women in 2010 to 12.5% for men and 22.9% at the end of 2017.

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The International Republican Institute divided Tunisian extremists into “behavioral radicals,” those who perpetrated attacks, and “cognitive radicals,” those who supported but did not perpetrate. In a community they analyzed in Beja, the source of a number of foreign fighters, participants also identified corruption, police harassment, and absent or incapable elected officials as reasons they felt hopeless. Overwhelmingly, they cited their belief that local officials do not care about Beja’s residents or do anything to improve their lives. In addition, many stressed the lack of social opportunities such as clubs and organizations that gave individuals a sense of prestige.17

According to the Gallup data, supporters of violent extremism were evenly split between men and women.18 Women have a long history of playing supporting roles in political Islam and violent extremism. Beginning in 1933, Hassan al-Banna (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) formed the Muslim Sisterhood department, consisting mostly of female relations of Muslim Brotherhood members. Many of these Muslim Sisterhood members became captivated by Sayyid Qutb’s writings legitimating the use of violence in political Islam, and they were likewise imprisoned by Nasser’s regime for political sedition.19

By the 1970s, most radical Islamist movements excluded any women from joining. However, they played key roles disseminating extremist ideology in their communities and maintained their support of violent extremists (and were later arrested) for sheltering fugitives, relaying messages, and smuggling weapons and money.20 Women played no logistical or military roles in al-Qaeda, but they were key supporters through intermarriage across different cells. As al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula began taking advantage of the internet, women played a modest role in creating and sharing content.

When the Islamic State emerged, women became researchers and disseminators on Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram. As key proponents of Islamic State propaganda, they spread five key messages: Arab and Muslim nation states are dictatorial and dependent on the West because they have abandoned Islamic principles, blame of Shi’a and the need for Sunnis to unite against them, the need to fight against the Western crusade against Muslims as evidenced by the invasion of Iraq, the Arab Spring and democratization has failed, and the caliphate of the Islamic State represents a utopia for Muslims to live and die for.21

18Bhatia and Ghanem op. cit.
20Ibid.
21Ibid.
Recruiting for violent extremism

Globally, there is no single profile for individuals joining violent extremist groups, coming from multiple social classes, genders, and levels of education and religious exposure. In September 2015, the Soufan Group estimated that a total of 12,000 individuals left 81 countries to join violent extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. 6,000 of them (about half) were from Tunisia. Notably among these, 700 were women. Within Tunisia, about 15.2% were from Ben Gardane, a smuggling hub in the South of Tunisia, 10.7% were from Bizerte, a coastal town, and 10.7% were from the capital of Tunis itself.

Tunisians who left as foreign fighters tended to be ordinary men and women between the ages of 24 to 37, who, unemployed and unmotivated, increasingly lacked self-esteem. When foreign violent extremist groups offer them self-respect, an income, and purpose in their lives, it became hard to refuse. They rarely displayed an interest in politics, at most opposing the government’s current policies, but rarely engaging in civil affairs. Most of the individuals were only moderately religious or not religious at all before recruitment, and during the recruitment process they became visibly more observant by growing beards, wearing niqabs, and stopping shaking hands with women. Coming from some of the poorest and most drug and crime-ridden neighborhoods of Tunisia, in one instance a sexually-abused woman lost hope in the police arresting her assailants. Without an education or career, she ended up fighting in Libya. In communities such as Sidi Hassine, drug dealers and thieves joined the Islamic State and Ansar al-Sharia. It was in many ways an ‘Islamization’ of criminals, as criminals joined a brotherhood and were ‘redeemed’.

In North Africa, whole neighborhoods were recruited, particularly in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Many of these places have a history of exporting violence and terrorism. Ben Gardane in Tunisia had long been a smuggling hub, while fighters have been traveling from Derna, Libya since the 1980s to fight in Afghanistan, Iraq, and later against Gaddafi’s regime. These hotbeds of recruitment are essential for social network mobilization, where preexisting ties and bloc recruitment play key roles. Marc Sageman notes, “Preexisting networks are fertile ground for mobilization because they bring together like-minded individuals, promote peer-pressure, and encourage groupthink.” However, to understand how foreign fighters are recruited, it is essential to return to the geographic clustering and preexisting ties that predate their mobilization to war zones. Sageman defines bloc recruitment as the recruitment of an entire group previously organized around a different goal. When preexisting ties are extremely tight, members have a high level of trust and moral engagement, which makes them more susceptible to peer pressure in joining groups.

26 Ibid.
Young Tunisian men and women were recruited at cafes, universities, mosques, internet cafes, and jails and invited to participate in a harmless event, such as a charity. Recruiters convinced these young men and women that their problems were hopeless and would never improve, driving them closer towards religion. Sometimes they even offered unemployed recruits money to keep them involved. As time went on these young men and women attended increasingly more religious events where they were exposed to radical texts and messages. Since many of the recruits lacked formal religious instruction, recruiters twisted traditional religious texts to justify violence. The recruits became increasingly detached from the external world as they cut themselves off from TV and radio, their friends, and their families. Once they received training, they were ready to leave for Syria or commit violent actions in Tunisia. In communities in Tunisia such as Sidi Hassine, drug dealers and thieves joined the Islamic State.

In Northern Europe, most fighters had a history of petty crime and small time spent in prison. The new crop of Islamic State recruits came already accustomed to violence with a different set of skills honed through criminal activity. In a study of 809 French youth whose parents or local police believed they were being radicalized and reached out to her research center, Dounia Bouzar found an even split between middle- and working-class backgrounds. Many of them were university graduates from dysfunctional families, and their lack of self-discipline made it challenging to follow the strict regulations of Salafist life.

Female violent extremists display a similar variance to men. A sample of European, American, Middle Eastern, and African women who became violent extremists found that most were in their 20s or late teens and held a college degree. In France, women were over half of Bouzar’s sample, suggesting that families were more likely to recognize and report a daughter’s radicalization than their sons. Whereas previously women fighting for al-Qaeda or the Taliban tended to be wives and family to fighters, a large number of unmarried women joined the Islamic State. This more recent phenomenon may be due to the Islamic State’s use of targeted propaganda for women, and the availability of active roles in the caliphate’s administrative, judicial, and media bodies.

However, the Soufan Group’s analysis of the Islamic State’s social media outreach showed that while it effectively normalized jihad among some communities, it was more often direct human contact with radicalized friends and neighbors that persuaded them to fight. This method of direct contact was fast, a matter of weeks rather than months. In Algeria, this process starts in mosques, where they learn a binary view of the world. Violent extremist recruiters exploit past traumas and grievances of young people who often suffer from an identity loss and a feeling of displacement. The identity void left after colonialism and the failure of Arab nationalism persists today, creating a blank slate where violent extremism could grow. Overall, recruiters play a key role in selecting young men and women with sufficient dissatisfaction and fragility to desire to die for a cause; their unique advantage is that they can provide easy access to purpose in these young peoples’ lives.

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28“Root Causes and Drivers of Radicalization to Violent Extremism in Tunisian Communities.” op. cit.
29Abu Rumman and Abu Hanieh op. cit.
Fighting as a violent extremist

Tunisians have an extensive history participating in violent extremist groups abroad and within Tunisia. In Afghanistan in the 1980s they played a small role, contributing only about 400 mujahideen. Likewise, during the Iraq War they constituted only about 5% of foreign fighters in al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, in this time they built substantial linkages between violent extremist groups and local recruiters and financiers that facilitated a large exodus after the 2011 revolution.

The Tunisians Tarek Maaroufi and Seifallah Ben Hassine founded the Tunisian Combatant Group in 2000 to send Tunisians overseas to Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Europe, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Imprisoned in 2003, Ben Hassine was released after the fall of Ben Ali and founded Ansar al-Sharia. Ansar al-Sharia started recruiting heavily, a move that was tolerated at the time by the ruling Ennahda government despite their public intellectual and political spats. Tunisians flocked to Syria, many at first to join opposition groups but later joining al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State. Likewise, due to proximity and historical connections a large number joined the Islamic State in Libya. Traveling to Syria and Libya was easily facilitated due to a lack of airport controls in Tunis and visas in Libya and Turkey (the main entryway to Syria).

Within Tunisia, by 2013 Ennahda had cracked down on Ansar al-Sharia and in return they openly denounced the Tunisian government and its leaders. In 2012 they were behind an attack on the U.S. Embassy after a film that debased the Prophet Mohammed. As the flow of Tunisians to foreign violent extremist groups slowed, local violent extremist groups began waging a protracted insurgency against the Tunisian state. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb established itself on the Algerian border in Kasserine and renamed itself Katiba Uqba ibn Nafa’a (KUIN). Since it mainly targets police and security forces, it is an insurgency rather than a country-wide terrorist campaign. In 2014, part of KUIN splintered off and joined the Islamic State, renaming itself Jund al-Khilafah Tunisia. With less concern for civilian casualties, violence increased both in regions along the Algerian border and in more heavily populated areas. In 2015, they orchestrated three major terrorist attacks in 2015 in the Bardo Museum, Sousse beach, and a Presidential Guard bus. In 2016, the Islamic State in Libya even launched an attack across the border on Ben Guerdane and captured the city, though they were quickly pushed out.

While the Tunisian security forces have stepped up their raids and coordination abilities, both Jund al-Khilafah Tunisia and KUIN have about 175 to 185 fighters. Additionally, a number travel through the Libyan border, suggesting returning fighters will be a boost to their operations. Though a small force, KUIN is more closely associated with al-Qaeda’s operations across North Africa, particularly in Algeria. It has been easily able to replace lost fighters and work with local populations for basic needs, though it does not have a wide base of support. It is exactly this insurgency’s continued infiltration that makes addressing the root causes of radicalization so important.

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24 Malka and Balboni, op. cit.
II.B. Beliefs

It is the radicalized belief system that drives this type of political violence. The belief system lays out the morality permitting violent action. It is greatly varied, with some groups (such as Tanzim al-Jihad) adhering to an ideology that “innovates,” making jihad a collective obligation without the declaration of a Caliph, while others adhere to variants of Salafism that condone and occasionally advocate a violent response. For the most part, the ideology of violent extremism as used in this context denotes the necessity for imposing Islamic law on the world through violence. As not all Salafists become violent, so the ideology of violent extremism differs from strict religious belief; instead it presents a utopian vision of the early days of Islam, where the caliphate frees Muslims from oppression and injustice after an apocalyptic battle with the forces of non-Muslims.

Ideological Origins

As Xavier Crettez makes clear, this ideology is largely a rupture from established interpretations of Islam. In fact, it is partly this theorizing on the battlefield that splinters the ideology away from the theoretical and into extreme action. Violent extremist groups draw many of their justifications from Jihadist Salafi thought, which is one form of religious-based activism. Hugh Roberts lays out three types of Sunni Islamic Activism: Political, Missionary, and Jihadi. These are not different steps along the same path, measuring different levels of commitment, but three separate paths that try to solve different problems for Muslims. Missionary Islamist Movements fear the issue of diminishing belief, and so they attempt to strengthen Muslim faith and morals, warning others against the dangers of unbelief. Political Islamist movements see a problem of poor Muslim governance and lack of social justice, so they seek to achieve power non-violently through political parties and create change within constitutional and legal frameworks. Jihadist Salafists also face the same problem of poor Muslim governance but seek to violently overthrow these leaders. In Tunisia, it is Jihadist Salafism that drives violence, rather than Political Islam or Missionary movements.

In this context, “Jihad” means an obligation to engage in armed struggle on behalf of the global Muslim community. It is not a perversion of Muslim teachings, but in Sunni and Shi’i thought it within certain conditions. Religious-based activism sets the preconditions for recourse to violence, and both Sunni and Shi’a activists can take the form of either reform movements or violent groups. Historically, a Jihad or holy war was organized, funded, and channeled by public authorities. No individual could single-handedly call for Jihad, it had to be declared and sanctioned by the appropriate authorities to be considered as valid. However, the 1948 and 1967 Arab defeats against Israel combined with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan have “individualized” the concept of Jihad. Violent offshoots of political Islam have their origin with Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was imprisoned and tortured by Nasser’s regime in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially mostly theories Qutb put forward in his writings while in prison, they transitioned into practice and by the 1970s two main contenders were competing for supremacy over political Islam within the Sunni World.

Wahhabism is a conservative approach to Islamic scriptures championed by the Gulf Monarchies and especially Saudi Arabia. They funded fundamentalist preachers all across the Muslim world, preaching the same theological language as Jihadists, but reject their violent activism. Opposing Saudi-backed ideology were Islamic revolutionary groups, such as the Muslim brotherhood. They were composed of young people who had never experienced colonial domination and as such held the rulers of Muslim countries responsible for the current state of the Islamic World.

Extremist Islamist thought promotes the idea of a global Muslim community (the Ummah), a structure transcending national boundaries to unite Muslims under one flag. The goal is to restore Islam to its purest form. Muslims should be concerned with the salvation of their own souls. In that vein, “true” Muslims should emulate the way of the prophet and his pious companions, avoiding contact with non-Muslims and rejecting any ideas or practices that are not deemed properly Islamic. The Qur’an should be approached literally, and Muslims should look to it for orders to obey, rather than to learn or find solutions to problems. Their actions in this world are meant to secure their entry to heaven, and transform the world. The path to achieve that vision has differed for each violent extremist group. Defensive or irredentist movements attempt to resist non-Muslim powers and reclaim land occupied by them (Lashkar-e-Taiba in Kashmir). Internal movements fight against nominally Muslim regimes deemed impious (the GIA in Algeria and Tanzim al-Jihad in Egypt). Finally, global movements target the Western world to end their support of corrupt Middle Eastern regimes (Al Qaeda) or bring about an apocalyptic confrontation with the West (the Islamic State)39.

39Roberts, op. cit. 27-43
The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan from 1981 to 1989 saw Afghan Mujahedeen force the Red Army to retreat. After the retreat of the Red Army and the following collapse of the USSR, Arab Mujahedeen believed that their actions were solely responsible for the demise of communism and thus saw themselves emulating the early Islamic conquests which brought down the Sassanid Empire and challenged Byzantine supremacy over the Middle East. After the War, many jihadists hardened by years of fighting returned to their home countries and there, attempted to reenact the Afghan Jihad – violent extremism having become ideologically and logistically independent from the Gulf monarchies. However, unable to mobilize the masses, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Islamic insurgencies failed to achieve to overthrow the Arab regimes or weaken Western presence in the region.

Despite the rapid growth of the Islamic State, Gilles Kepel argues violent extremist groups are losing the fight. The increase in Islamist violence during the last few years is not so much a result of the movement’s success, but rather the physical emanation of its failure. If the 1979 revolution in Iran that brought down the Shah’s regime and the rise of a fundamentalist Islamic regime represents the apogee of revolutionary Islam, then Sunni movements have been unable to replicate Khomeini’s success and mobilize the masses. Indeed, in no other country were Islamists able to seize and hold power for more than a few years.

At a societal level, violent extremism is the violent emanation of a much broader cultural and theological transformation taking place within the Muslim World. Islam is ridden with theological divisions as it grapples with the question of what it means to be a Muslim in the 21st century. Some scholars have posited that violent extremism represents a reactionary front against the history of colonialism and Western influence in many Muslim countries. One of Islam’s greatest strengths rests in its ability to overcome any competing form of identity (national, tribal, ethnic), but violent extremism has warped it so that it weaponizes religion against Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Xavier Crettez and Ziya Meral emphasize that the ideology may not inform violence as much as their exposure to violence may inform their beliefs. Indeed, prominent preachers such as Abu Hamza and Osama Bin Laden made their names as mujahideen fighting in Afghanistan. In many ways, violent extremism is a reaction on an individual level to violence and at a societal level to colonialism. Meral puts forward, “Exposure to violence and injustice, seeing no ‘why,’ and looking for a ‘how’ to survive, requires theological responses in their rawest form: what is wrong with the universe? What is right? How do I understand what I see? How do I respond to the challenges and how do I live?” In his view, a recruit to the Islamic State will first see the world through their own personal and moral lens, and conclude that it is corrupt, chaotic, and unjust. Once they travel and start to experience violence but before they are disillusioned by it, the deeper questions of the necessity of jihad are already answered. In this sense, violent extremist ideology is largely informed by personal traumas in countries torn by war or repressive regimes.

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41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
Death is central to this ideology, and Islamic State fighters claim to “love death as you (the infidels) love life.” The extreme violence displayed by the Islamic State is meant to push Western powers to deploy their troops in Syria, thus fulfilling the prophecy about a final battle between crusaders and Muslim forces, resulting in the crusaders’ ultimate defeat44. For many fighters, death serves a double purpose – destroying an ungodly modern society that has rejected them while seeking an afterlife that will allow them to leave behind the anger and frustration of life here below45.

Violent extremists consider themselves the true practitioners and defenders of Islam, and all of those who oppose them are considered infidels, even if they claim to be Muslim. As such, Islam needs to be purged from all foreign influence, and ethnic purity is replaced by a religious one. The rhetoric of rupture is violent – the enemy is Kafir, one with whom no compromise is possible. The excommunication also includes their own family, the members of which are accused of observing Islam improperly, or refusing to convert to the “true” interpretation of Islamic scriptures. The centrality of declaring other Muslims as infidels helps explain the increase in sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi’a in the Middle East.

44Roy Le Djihad et la Mort. op. cit.
Ideology as propaganda

Despite fighting for violent extremist groups, not all fighters adhere to Salafist ideologies. Many fighters joined looking for monetary reward, while there are even some supporters of the Islamic State who identify as secularists or agnostics, fighting for the group because they have come to see extreme violence as necessary\textsuperscript{46}. According to a study of current fighters in Syria between 2013 and 2014, the goals of Islamists and the Free Syrian Army were remarkably similar. 79% of Islamist fighters stated they joined to take revenge on Assad, while 83% stated they joined to defend their community. In explaining why they chose their particular group, only one of the four reasons over 50% of Islamist fighters cited was that theirs was the only group that truly fought for Islam. The other reasons focused on inspirational leaders, better training opportunities with their group, and that the group would take care of their family if they fell in battle\textsuperscript{47}. As the survey on Syrians shows, the importance of defending one’s community from injustice appeared equally as appealing as following a specific set of religious teachings, which tend to have a very individualized and variable effect. This example highlights the complexity of ideology in violent extremism—the belief system is not necessarily based on religion but on values that explain the necessity for violent action.

Often, violent extremism is dressed in Islamic language and scripture because it can appeal to a large group that shares certain norms, values, and a worldview. With regards to religious motivations, there tend to be two types of recruits: those with deep knowledge of Salafism and those with a highly superficial knowledge of Islam. Most violent extremists in Europe possessed only basic religious education. They then experienced a rapid and recent trajectory of conversion/reconversion, usually through a group of friends or over the internet, but rarely in the context of a mosque\textsuperscript{48}. For highly religious youth, Wahhabi preachers or Quietist Salafism guide disenfranchised youths to a common sectarian identity in mosques or online. As they lean toward a strict version of Islam, they begin to grow bored of the rigid and monotonous Salafi way of life\textsuperscript{49}. However, adherence to these beliefs and dissatisfaction with the community can sometimes make them easy prey for recruiters.

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\textsuperscript{47} Mironova et al. op. cit.

\textsuperscript{48} David Le Breton. “Jeunesse et djihadisme”, Le Débat (1) 88, 2016. 119-130

\textsuperscript{49} Thomson op. cit.
Setting events are the key events that individuals focus on as symbolizing the greater oppression and injustice against Muslims. One example of these grievances is identification with injustice from across the globe, and the treatment of Palestinians or the actions of the Assad regime at the outset of the Syrian Civil War act as just such foci for individual’s frustrations. Omar Bakri Mohammed describes how, to many radical Muslims, there is no difference between historic events and the crises that serve as flashpoints for radicalizing Muslim youth today, especially Syria, Iraq, Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, Palestine, Afghanistan, and Somalia. Radicalization, in his view, is therefore the return to fundamental Islam to find solutions to modern problems. In identifying with oppressed Muslims half a world away, recruiters are able to reference the global Muslim community.

Violent extremism appears to stem more from political aspirations transformed into religion-based group ideology than it does with traditional and institutional religious learning. Derived from 20th Century theories of Political Islam, violent extremist ideology uses narratives and goals from Islamic theology to attract followers and legitimate the use of violence. However, beliefs in radical change may not be a precursor for violence as much as they are a result of involvement in a group or exposure to violence.

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50Horgan. Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements. op. cit.
51Omar Bakri Mohammad, qtd in Horgan. Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements. 123.
52Hamid op. cit. 47.
II.C. Motivations

Beneath the belief systems that legitimate violence are a combination of psychological and societal factors that radicalize young men and women. However, not all these factors drive an individual equally. Instead, individual incentives have the strongest effect, pulling young men and women towards violent extremist groups, structural motivators push them out of their communities, and enabling factors make them more prone to participating ideological violence.54

Psychology

At the individual level, the accumulated personal experience of men and women alike decides whether they commit violence. There is currently no evidence of a link between mental illness and participation in violent extremist groups. Though often referred to as ‘psychopaths,’ most individuals are psychologically normal. Importantly, while many may hold extremist thoughts, few act on their thoughts in the use of violence.55

Violent extremism can sometimes be the reaction to a series of unconscious processes stemming from an emotional event such as trauma, social isolation, and loss of a loved one. The brain prioritizes survival and naturally attunes itself to threats to an individual’s safety. Many actions the brain takes are governed by unconscious processes, and particular stimuli such as violence, stress, and love can dramatically change the way individuals behave socially. For example, a person excluded from a group of friends will become highly stressed, and this stress can make them incapable of processing new facts. Trauma often plays a large role in violent extremism. A number of the radicalized women Dounia Bouzar worked with had faced sexual abuse at a young age and turned to the niqab because they felt protected.56 Past experience of trauma can result in factors of alienation, emotional displacement, and humiliation. After trauma, a person makes decisions in a temporary emotional state that may support violent action, or as Niconchuk terms it, “heroic limbo.” At that point, the person no longer feels significant, and can choose a negative path of violence, terrorism, or addiction to assure themselves of their own significance. However, the person can also choose the positive path of resilience, sacrifice, and humility, avoiding retribution and breaking the cycle.57

55Niconchuk, Michael. “Towards a meaningful integration of brain science research in preventing And countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming,” in Contemporary P/CVE Research and Practice, ed. Lilah El Sayed and Dr. Jamal Barnes (Hedayah and Edith Cowan University, 2017), 21-40
57Niconchuk “Towards a meaningful integration of brain science research in preventing And countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming.”op. cit.
Emotional displacement is the loss of love or a key romantic relationship, which can frequently result in a person no longer feeling significant\textsuperscript{58}. Isolation plays a powerful role because as individuals go through trauma, depression, a break-up, or addiction they begin to lose their friends and social connections, lose the ability to tell the difference between fight or flight responses, lose meaning, and eventually lose a clear sense of “self.” Horgan quotes Adriana Faranda, a former fighter in the Italian Red Brigades, who says, “When you remove yourself from society, even from the most ordinary things, ordinary ways of relaxing, you no longer share even the most basic emotions. You become abstracted, removed. In the long run you actually begin to feel different. Why? Because you are different”\textsuperscript{59}.

Identity threats are threats to a person’s national origins, religious beliefs, and ethnic identity, such as information countering their strongly-held beliefs. Identity threats activate the threat centers of the human brain just like a physical threat\textsuperscript{60}. Once under threat individuals’ brains will make them less empathetic or logical, warping information and driving them to behave defensively even if it leads to violence to protect their identities. For violent extremist groups, identity protection reaches new heights with the protection of sacred values. Sacred values are the moral obligations and shared religious beliefs that make up a group or society’s fundamental worldview. Decisions made around sacred values are highly emotional, and in the brain they activate portions associated with rules formation, which differ significantly from the standard unconscious cost-benefit analysis the brain makes in decisions. Violent extremist groups use global threats to their values, such as the Palestinian conflict or Assad’s actions in Syria, in their messaging to encourage gut-level support for violence in those contexts. The Islamic State was particularly effective in portraying an apocalyptic vision of all Muslims under threat. These threats to values constitute the push factors towards violent extremism.

Distortion of reality is a key part of the radicalization process. Olivier Roy argues that violent extremism is a form of fantasy and rebellion. He puts forward the theory the “Islamization of radicalism” theory: fundamentalism does not produce violence, but the radicalization process does. Violent extremist groups have been able to integrate many cultural codes inherent in youth culture into their communication strategy, one of which is youth revolt. Roy believes violent extremists often want to turn against their parents’ tightly bound traditions\textsuperscript{61}. Violent extremist organizations have been able to harness the power of young people’s frustrations for their own benefit.

\textsuperscript{58}Niconchuk “Towards a meaningful integration of brain science research in preventing And countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming,” op. cit.
\textsuperscript{59}Horgan. Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements. 4.
\textsuperscript{60}Niconchuk “Towards a meaningful integration of brain science research in preventing And countering violent extremism (P/CVE) programming,” op. cit.
\textsuperscript{61}Roy op. cit.
Humiliation can also drive violence as a person’s desire to confirm their own significance by seeking to become greater than they are. Recruiters play on the desire to remove young men and women’s sense of shame by providing them a path to the ideal self, partner, and community, and an escape from their current existence to a better world. They then match ideological interpretations to each person’s personal traumas and beliefs. Personal shame and group shame are closely linked, and a blow to one’s social standing can feed identity threats. In that vein, violent extremism replaces the hate of oneself with the hate of others. The message carried by violent extremist organizations is simple and easily assimilated, “you did not fail, it is this society of Kuffars that failed you.” When prison is central to the radicalization process, the role between judges and convicts is symbolically reversed. He who was condemned by society is now the judge, he becomes the moralizer, the carrier of noble values fighting for justice and protecting the oppressed Muslim Community against the crusaders.

A personal questioning of identity can become a larger crisis of identity, particularly among second-generation immigrants in Europe or countries attempting to make sense of their colonized past. Many marginalized Europeans begin by exhibiting nihilistic behaviors because they feel excluded from French society. Rather than trying to improve their conditions through peaceful social mobilization, they form gangs and engage in criminal activities (theft, dealing drugs, etc.). Gangs offer them a sense of social mobility and access to wealth they might not otherwise attain. Externally, those young people display a sense of self-confidence, but behind this façade they suffer low self-esteem and loss of identity. Therefore, for second generation immigrants, violent extremism serves a double purpose. It gives them a new sense of identity and allows them to recover their lost dignity.

Conventional notions of masculinity and femininity play a large role. Nédra Ben Smaïl, a Tunisian psychiatrist who worked with radicalized teenagers believes that the question of masculinity and sexual identity is central to explain why men seek revenge from modern society. Injustice, when it refers to a “feminine position,” is not tolerable. The class difference is not a problem in Islam, because it is accepted as a rule of God when the rules of men are not equitable. Along those lines, there are “real” men and sub-men. Ben Smaïl links the absence of a solid paternal figure and a strongly mother-son relationship as driving Tunisian men to reaffirm traditional masculine values. During the current climate of conflict, displacement, unemployment and political uncertainty, men had begun to feel emasculated and “uncertain about or unwilling to accept change that might ease their heavy burden of societal imposed patriarchal duty.” As such, the jihadi fighter represents an idealized vision of the warrior figure, an Islamic version of the medieval knight who vowed to fight injustice and protect the innocents against tyrants.

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62 Roy op. cit.
64 Ibid.
66 Khosrokhavar op. cit.
The desire for glory or significance results during heroic limbo, when individuals are recovering from a traumatic event. In these moments, goal formation is highly influenced by the individuals around a person and the circumstances under which they find themselves. The more stressful the context, the more likely individuals are to try to alleviate their own or another’s suffering. Dying a hero and a martyr in a violent group for a meaningful cause is often a manifestation of a youthful quest for glory. The French philosophe Rousseau best epitomizes it in his use of the terms amour de soi-même (self-love) and amour propre (appreciation of self that is dependent on others’ appreciation). It is when fighters’ find their significance is confirmed by others (amour propre) that young men and women seek glory as foreign fighters in the Islamic State or by joining movements within their own countries. Participation in a violent group also becomes a quest for control, particularly when individuals feel marginalized and powerless within their own communities. Fighters are willing to use violence to attain the vision they desire and exclude those who do not agree with them, as evidenced by the Islamic State’s goal of a caliphate and the purity of the few who join it. Some individuals were suicidal before recruitment, and suicide bombing became the best way to act out their desire for self-destruction.

The most powerful pull factor is the desire to belong. Once identity threats divide the world into ‘them’ and ‘us,’ peer influence can be intoxicating. Bonding hormones such as oxytocin are released, which intensify group activity. Outside threats make internal cohesion within groups stronger, and it can often lead individuals not to question group norms while dehumanizing those outside of their group (particularly out-groups). This dehumanization process results in the brain not activating areas responsible for recognition of another person’s emotional and mental state, resulting in unpleasant and sometimes violent behavior towards them. Relative deprivation, as identified in Tunisians in Beja who feel they have an unjust disadvantage, again plays a strong role. It is linked to a powerful desire for retribution, and for many a collective injustice demanded a collective action.

Trauma and emotional displacement can make young men vulnerable to a distortion of reality, where identity threats and threats to sacred values take hold. Humiliation or an identity crisis and the resulting desire for glory can lead to violence, while the satisfaction that comes from belonging to a group keeps them from questioning the group’s values and actions. However, the reasons behind the commission of an act of violence and the factors that drive someone’s involvement with a violent group are distinct. Humiliation, trauma, and emotional displacement may all result in individual acts of violence, but psychological explanations do not entirely explain why a person would join a group, only as precursors for participation and the benefits they might receive from staying involved. It suggests that the main pathways into groups come from their networks of relationships and communities.

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67 Bouzar op. cit.
68 Niconchuk op. cit.
69 Max Taylor, 1988 qtd in Horgan and Taylor op. cit. 178
**Societal Drivers**

The societal level is the extent to which the larger community, the system of employment, incentives, and attitude to youth, impact young people’s decisions to join violent groups. It is an enabling environment at the political, community, and family levels. There is a distinctly generational quality about the radicalization process in its current form, with fighters made up (primarily) of men between the ages of 20 and 40.

Poor governance contributes to violent extremism because young men and women lose faith in or are actively abused by existing structures of justice and choose violence. Repression, full state collapse, and state “rot,” characterized by corruption and injustice, all encourage violent extremism in different ways. Countries that limit civil liberties on average tend to produce more terrorism, and coups or anti-terror laws can have the opposite effect of increasing violence. In the case of Egypt, Shadi Hamid argues that the coup against Muhammad Morsi led to the imprisonment of the older leadership and the failure to enact Islamic reform. The resulting generational shift within the Brotherhood created a loss of faith in the Muslim Brotherhood’s policy of gradual change through the democratic system. With the long-term reformist strategy in ruins, inexperienced junior leaders chose simply to resist and began adhering to more extreme voices with different aims. Violent attacks in Egypt increased sharply, as responses to Sisi’s increasingly repressive policies, which encouraged many Egyptians to take up arms and resist with violence. Groups such as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, the violent group in Sinai who have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, capitalized on Islamist sentiment shared with the Islamic State but primarily drew on the local Sinai population’s resistance to the government’s repressive and exploitative policies. The cases of Egypt demonstrate how repression and injustice can draw locals to confront the government with arms.

Political collapse of states plays a powerful role in the formation of armed groups. The collapse of parliaments and judicial bodies in places like Syria and Libya make violence the primary method for political interaction. Insecurity encourages new criminal organizations to take advantage of the situation, and violent extremist groups feed off of criminal organizations for funding and weapons. Perhaps the most relevant societal drivers in Tunisia is “state rot,” where corruption, abuse by security forces, and lack of civic engagement maintain their presence before and after the 2011 Jasmine Revolution.

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70 Magouirk, Justin et al. “Connecting Terrorist Networks.” Studies in Conflict & Terrorism. No. 31 (2008), 2
72 Hamid, op. cit. 47.
73 Mark Jacobsen. “The Scramble for Political Order: State Breakdown and Armed Group Proliferation in Civil War.” Stanford University, November 2017
The International Republican Institute characterizes them as the grievance nexus, where Tunisian expectations were high after the Arab Spring, but state institutions remained largely unresponsive. A 2016 IRI poll found that 64% of Tunisians did not believe the government was addressing their needs. Corruption, especially of security services and courts, contributes to a sense of injustice and often real acts of discrimination that encourage individuals to join violent groups. In Tunisia, the perception of broad institutional corruption blocking access to jobs and key services was often cited, particularly in Beja. Abuse by police plays a strong role in communities such as Sahline, a coastal town in Tunisia, where police targeted mosques and blacklisted attendees. Checkpoints disproportionately target veiled or bearded Muslims, and the police retain impunity well after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. The resulting alienation encourages young men and women to find ways to rebel against the state. Finally, marginalization affected places such as Ben Gardane and Kasserine, on the Libyan and Algerian borders, where the government has barely invested.

Poverty has a minimal direct effect in motivating violent extremism. Violent extremists often come from poorer neighborhoods in relation to others in their cities, and violent extremist groups often provide social services in places such as Lebanon. In conflict zones, the Islamic State was the highest payer, and locals in Sidi Hassine, on the outskirts of Tunis, informed Search For Common Ground that many of their friends or acquaintances who had left to join the Islamic State in Syria showed off their wealth and wives to signal how much their lives had changed. However, poverty alone does not account for the mass participation in violent groups worldwide that we see today. A 2015 Mercy Corps survey of youth in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Somalia suggested that it was not poverty or the lack of a job that led young people to join groups such as the Taliban, al-Shebab, and the FARC, but reactions to injustice in a number of different forms: discrimination, corruption, and normalized violence. It appears that youth with a history of civic action, rather than loners, are the most likely to fight in violent groups. Armed groups take advantage of young people’s frustration over injustice rather than simply unemployment, and channel the frustration into violence.

As Tunisia grapples with a new identity after the dictatorship, its education system has largely been incapable of filling in the gap. Education programs were unable to answer questions about religious and cultural matters, leaving students easy prey for the narratives and conspiracy theories used by recruiters. In fact, a young women in Bizerte was able to counter a recruiter because she had a deeper knowledge of the Prophet’s use of women in jihad than the recruiter.

Violent extremism is influenced by traditional gender roles. Khoroskovar believes that with the collapse of the patriarchal order, Western men are considered weak and lacking maturity. When it comes to gender relations, jihadi movements have been able to exploit the so-called “crisis of masculinity.” Jihadists are perceived as serious, sincere and committed, as opposed to Western men who are more interested in enjoying the pleasures of life.

75 “Root Causes and Drivers of Radicalization to Violent Extremism in Tunisian Communities.” op. cit.
76 Ibid.
78 “Root Causes and Drivers of Radicalization to Violent Extremism in Tunisian Communities.” op. cit.
Friends, family, and easy access to violent extremist groups act as enabling factors in youth joining violent extremism\(^79\). According to survey data with 300 fighters in Syria in 2013 and 2014, 44% mentioned joining because all their friends joined\(^80\). According to a study conducted by Sageman ‘about two-thirds of those who joined the jihad did so collectively with their friends or had a long time childhood friend already in the jihad. Another fifth had close relatives already in the jihad.\(^81\) These friendships are more important than the ideology. Recruitment is a social process, where the entire structure of these groups are essentially collections of personal relations, formed in the location they are fighting and then connected across continents to the network of people around the neighborhood in which they first radicalized\(^82\).

Once engaged, fighters belong to a community that uses both peer pressure and the desire to fit in to re-forge their views after they have joined. There is a parallel to Ibn Khalidun’s foundational political theories, especially in his concept of asabiyah or group feeling. A strong sense of group identity can be inspiring and somewhat addictive, and therefore recruitment can be explained by a social need to belong. Dounia Bouzar describes a relational indoctrination (joining a new group) and an ideological indoctrination (believing new beliefs). The shared ideology connects a young recruit to the group, and likewise the social bonds strengthen commitment to the ideology\(^83\). Scott Atran notes that while young people may first be attracted to the ideology, they are most satisfied by the social bonds. These friendships are the hardest to counter\(^84\). The result is a high level of loyalty and collective identity among its members, who replace past values with new sacred values and new visions for the future.

They are continually asked to prove their loyalty and commitment. A pattern of participation emerges, with simple daily activities in the group culminating in a final test of commitment with an extreme action—something deliberately selected as inconsistent with previous beliefs and visions, and often allow return to that old life very difficult. There is also a steady process of desensitization and loss of the ability to empathize with “the other”\(^85\). This process results in deep commitment, and it can make individual members blind to opportunities to quit and alternatives to suicidal violence\(^86\). Societal drivers are highly context-specific, but the community built around grievances drives recruitment and the adoption of a new ideology.

In the study of violent extremism, the aspects that are the least understood (and therefore the most critical) are why people join and why they leave. Max Taylor and John Horgan coin the term ‘Arc of Terrorism’ to describe overall three phases of involvement, engagement, and disengagement\(^87\). Radicalization is a long, drawn-out process of push and pull factors, where a person’s decisions to join a violent group depend on the his or her psychology, combined with a response to the social and political environment around them\(^88\). Individuals also focus on key events or conflicts that represent injustice, and allow their ideology to drive them into action.

\(^{79}\) Khalil and Zeuthen op. cit.
\(^{83}\) Bouzar op. cit.
\(^{84}\) Scott Atran. “terroristes en quête de compassion,” in Cerveau et Psycho, 2015, No 11.
\(^{87}\) Horgan and Taylor. op. cit. 179
\(^{88}\) Hamid op. cit. 47
III. DERADICALIZATION

Many women who came back from Syria did not do so because they lost faith in violent extremism but rather because they became frustrated with their assigned role within the Islamic State rigid structure. An as-yet unexploited opportunity is encouraging violent extremist to voluntarily give up fighting. Some men and women simply disengage, ceasing to engage in violent acts. Others entirely renounce their beliefs and de-radicalize. Clear approaches to countering violent extremism, including prevention, imprisonment, and amnesty must ensure that violent extremists do not re-join at a later date.
Choosing to renounce violent extremist behavior, namely planning, conducting, or abetting violent attacks in the name of Salafi Jihadist cause, is called disengagement. Effective disengagement can be achieved without a major change in beliefs. John Horgan believes that the process of disengaging from a terrorist group is just as varied as the process of joining, and it has its roots in experiences while many individuals are still deeply committed to fighting. Therefore, it is a gradual process that may not involve a complete rupture from the movement.

Horgan reduces the factors for disengagement as psychological or physical, and one can be a catalyst for the other. These can be either voluntary, where the individual chooses to leave, or involuntary, where the person is forced by an external issue. However, he qualifies that a person may stay involved despite significant reasons to quit because they do not perceive avenues of disengagement as open to them. In addition to the motivations of disengagement, the concept brings up a number of other questions. There is a need to clarify the relationship between the attractions of joining a group and the decision to leave and to determine whether de-radicalization is necessary for disengagement. Horgan posits that one of the most important beliefs that must change is whether engaging in violence to achieve the fighter’s goals is permissible.

There is sparse literature on why individuals choose to leave violent extremist groups, but a few key motivations have been identified. These are disillusionment, a search for new roles and identity, social relationships, goal change, and exposure to violence. For disillusionment, Horgan proposes that disengagement may occur because of dissonance between the initial hopes and needs that drive involvement and the later realization of what involvement truly entails. This disillusionment is closely tied (though not identical) to the amount of meaning an individual may derive from involvement in a violent group, and they highlight a certain level of disappointment in the reality of engagement.

The buildup of minor disagreements and irritations can also lead to burn out, which manifests as a disparaging of peers whose everyday demeanor may be culturally very different or unpleasant (especially for foreign fighters). However, many individuals may continue to participate in violent actions while also being completely disillusioned, which highlights the distinction between being deeply engaged in a role in the violent organization and being deeply committed to it. Group dynamics such as disagreement over tactics or beliefs and disgust with other fighters’ actions often clash with the romanticized views of the violent organization that individuals held before joining. This disillusionment, if presented with pathways out of a group, leads fighters to disengage.
Another factor driving exit is new friendships, especially the formation of new social connections such as marriage. As extremist groups are highly socially-oriented, the people with whom fighters choose to have friendships or romantic relationships can decide both their trajectory into a group and out of one. If family ties become more distant, extremists will be forced to build stronger relationships outside the group, which can decrease commitment. In previous conflicts in Syria, foreign fighters married locals and so lost their motivation to continue fighting\textsuperscript{94}. In addition, age becomes a driver not only because of physical weakness, but also improved ability to make decisions based on experience and the perception that they ought to have seniority in a group\textsuperscript{95}.

Priorities change after marriage or having a child (for both men and women), as well as when an individual takes an extended period of time away from the violent group. Ziad Jarrah, the 9/11 hijacker who piloted the United flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania, directly disobeyed the ringleader Mohammed Atta’s orders to cut all ties with his family and continued contacting his wife while he was in the U.S. According to the 9/11 Commission report, Jarrah needed constant encouragement from his fellow hijackers and terrorists in the U.S. and Europe to continue engaging, which suggests that sustaining connections outside the group has the potential to disrupt a person’s continued involvement. Horgan suggests that different social communities can challenge the identities of those individuals deeply committed to involvement\textsuperscript{96}.

Disengagement can be spurred on by guilt and reaction to violence. As Hundeide argues, any path out of a violent group requires facing conflicting actions and choices that most will not face outside a personal crisis or sudden immediate danger\textsuperscript{97}. This suggests a specific trigger spurred on by traumatic experiences. One of the primary motivations for gang members to get out was their experience with violence, especially disillusionment about the ‘mythic violence’ of gang warfare and the real consequences of violence\textsuperscript{98}. In a highly relevant report, Garfinkel examined the psychological transformation in moving from violent activities to non-violent activities with militants from Nigeria, Israel, Kashmir, and Lebanon. She found moments of vulnerability due to stress, trauma, and crisis drove a reorientation in beliefs, often vitally impacted by personal relationships\textsuperscript{99}. While Ziya Meral explained how violence can alter a person’s faith and make them turn towards interpretations that permit violence, it can also make individuals question the assumptions under which they act and modify their beliefs in the opposite direction\textsuperscript{100}. Violence triggers emotional arousal, intensified by perceived responsibilities, which allows for great pressures to push an individual to exit\textsuperscript{101}.

\textsuperscript{95}Horgan and Taylor op. cit. 178
\textsuperscript{96}Horgan. Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements. op. cit.
\textsuperscript{97}Hundeide, op. cit. 112.
\textsuperscript{100}Meral, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{101}Horgan. Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of disengagement from radical and extremist movements. op. cit.
III.B. Beliefs

De-radicalization involves the complete rejection of all beliefs associated with violent extremism. To date, there have been few scientific studies on the drivers of de-radicalization, but existing studies point to a root cause: participation in violent groups does not give members the significance they sought when entering them. Kruglanski isolates de-radicalization into two factors, Means Shift, where the means of violence becomes immoral and therefore ceases to bestow significance on the fighter, and Goals Shift, where the fighter’s political and personal goals change. In Means Shift, fighters become unwilling to fight because they begin to empathize with the other side and become more tolerant of views not identical to their own. One example of Means Shift is an entire group declaring their own violent actions immoral and ceasing to operate. The Gama’a Islamiyya in Egypt wrote 25 volumes urging all its followers to stop fighting, while one of the commanders of Tanzim al-Jihad, also an Egyptian named Dr. Fadl, wrote a book denouncing terrorism and even traveled to prisons convincing his former followers to give up violence.

Interestingly, when these two organizations disengaged as a group, it was the leaders who first declared the use of violence as immoral and appeared to wield considerable influence over the fighters lower down on the chain of command.

In Goals Shift, priorities change due to the fading of a desire for significance, finally feeling significant, or the creation of new goals of self-preservation, comfort, and safety that supersede the previous desire to matter. The desire for significance can fade when the fighter no longer feels humiliated, or when fighters’ political and personal goals have been met, such as when they feel they have contributed all they could to their cause. At a similar moment, new goals emerge with those of comfort and safety overtaking the need to fight. Both Means Shift and Goals Shift represent ideological transformations, and are therefore both components of de-radicalization.

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103 The Gama’a Islamiyya wrote repudiations entitled the Tashih al-Mafahim (The Correction of Concepts), and Dr. Fadl, whose real name is Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif, wrote Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World.
105 Ibid.
By the mid-2000s, accepted counterterrorism practices that focused on the identification, targeting, and elimination of violent extremist threats began to give way to a whole-of-society approach. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) began promoting jobs, training, and small grants for youth whom they identified as susceptible to violent extremism in Iraq. They divided drivers of violent extremism into “push” factors (social marginalization, government repression, and corruption) and “pull” factors (money, a sense of belonging, status, and glory) and adapted development assistance to many of these factors in places such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Niger, and Tunisia. The efforts coincided with the Department of Defense’s counterinsurgency strategy: to influence populations through political, psychological, and economic operations. Academic literature has widely disagreed about the effectiveness of USAID’s practices, known as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), and the Department of Defense’s Counterinsurgency (COIN). Largely, they focused on preventing recruitment to violent extremism.

The U.K. broadened the scope of previous CVE approaches by launching the Prevent Strategy, which focused primarily on combatting ideology at three levels: the dissemination of ideology at-risk youth, and institutions where radicalization took place. In the first angle, it emphasized police cooperation with communities, working with madrassahs, and deporting preachers to disrupt the spread of extremist ideology. In the second angle, it had police, social workers, and housing groups refer at-risk youth for what they term “de-radicalization.” This de-radicalization, aiming at ending the influence of violent extremist groups on each youth, differs from other versions as it is designed for those who are in the process of being radicalized but have yet to commit violence acts. Finally, in the third angle the strategy aims at cooperating with prisons, health institutions, and schools to strengthen their ability to counter violent extremist ideology. The program differed from USAID with its focus on ideology, perhaps reflecting the differing drivers of a developed nation such as the U.K. and the drivers in a conflict zone such as Iraq.

Preventing the recruitment of foreign fighters is a very different challenge from countering an active insurgency within your own borders. Pakistan used a combination of military operations and drone strikes to curb the spread of violent extremist groups on its borders. It modernized educational systems, particularly at madrassahs with a focus on science and information technology to increase rural residents’ access to jobs. In addition, it opened up negotiations with the violent extremist Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, which eventually collapsed due to terrorist attacks.
Some countries have put little focus on preventing violent extremism, instead focusing on various methods for disengagement, de-radicalization, and reintegration. Sri Lanka had perhaps the most successful rehabilitation program over the last decade after a Presidential Amnesty following the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009. The government founded Protective Accommodation and Rehabilitation Centers (PARCs), which helped 11,500 individuals reconnect with familial, social, and religious ties while changing their hate-filled ideology over the course of two years. There was a lot of resentment from civilians, largely those in the north not affected by terrorist attacks, but contact was encouraged between communities and former fighters. Saudi Arabia developed a six-week rehabilitation course in 2004 under the Ministry of Interior for about 4,000 prisoners that includes counseling sessions and an after-care program. The program emphasizes religious dialogue to address each detainee’s understanding of their ideology, combined with vocational training and educational programs on history and culture. Each detainee’s family is closely involved, and the program boasts a low recidivism rate (with a few notable exceptions).

In France, Dounia Bouzar developed a novel method for intervening with radicalized youth. Referred by families of violent extremists, her program addressed flaws in extremist reasoning, combined with specific actions designed to re-humanize participants, recalling childhood memories to end the isolation imposed by recruiters. Eventually, about 700 participants eventually became more open to new ideas and let their own doubts lead them out of violent extremism. However, the French government’s de-radicalization program was less successful, shutting down after about a year. The Pontourny Center separated French radicalized youth from their families and gave them lessons in French history, culture, and even sang the French national anthem every morning. Though the program showed evolution in the way attendees thought, a series of protests and resistance from neighboring residents forced the indefinite closure of the facility.

Australia developed a prison-based intervention called Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) for convicted terrorists or at-risk individuals at least two years before their release date. The program is consent-based, and inmates are presented with different schools of religious and political thought often in cooperation with the Muslim chaplain. Though currently a small caseload, the program appears to have found an effective balance between interventions aimed at disengagement and de-radicalization.

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112 Bouzar op. cit.
North African countries have experimented with disengagement programs to a limited extent. Morocco maintains restrictive control over its own population, which enables it to surveil any potential threats, both within the country and abroad. Additionally, the state controls the religious establishment with the king as the overall religious authority. Through this authority the government maintains an imam-training program and a religious council for Moroccan diaspora in Europe. It also brings religious scholars into prisons and attempts to reintegrate violent extremist prisoners through an Amnesty initiative should they adopt more moderate approaches to their religious beliefs\(^{115}\). However, all these efforts largely amount to responses to the problem of radicalization, with few efforts focused on addressing the underlying causes. Algeria took a similar path, choosing to implement an Amnesty and Peace Law in 2006 after a long and bloody war with the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). The law permitted the reintegration of 15,000 former violent extremists, who were encouraged to speak out about their experience\(^{116}\). Some received financial compensation and brought into given job opportunities. Eventually many formed political parties\(^{117}\).

Tunisia has cooperated extensively with international partners to improve its counterterrorism and CVE capabilities. The revolution resulted in the disbandment of the widely-hated Directorate of State Security, but the Ministry of Interior maintains a number of the same officials with little interest in oversight. It has concentrated on border security to prevent proliferation of fighters from Libya and Algeria. However, notably the country still struggles with money laundering for terrorism and it lacks any program for the reintegration of violent extremist fighters\(^{118}\).

\(^{115}\)Dworkin and El Malki. op. cit.
Violent extremism is a matter of perception. An individual’s perception of injustice leads them down the path towards violence, and in Tunisia that perception is often relative deprivation: the belief that you are not getting what you deserve. It is also a generational event. Its drivers are in many ways unique to youth of a particular age, suffering from a crisis of identity but maintaining a powerful desire to reshape the world. While structural changes to the economy and local governance may make it more inclusive, radicalization will likely not cease until individual motivations are addressed.

This literature review arrives at a few clear hypotheses for radicalization, de-radicalization, and disengagement. Radicalization begins with accumulated personal experience: psychological drivers such as trauma, humiliation, and emotional displacement resulting from societal abuses make young men and women hyper sensitive to threats, particularly threats to their identity. They begin to distort reality around the setting events that inflame their desire to protect Muslims around the world. When stymied by poor local governance they fall prey to violent extremist recruiters, many of whom are friends or family, who adapt religious texts to their psyche. Soon they have cut their ties with their friends and communities and commit to an ideology that legitimates violence, gaining in return a powerful friend group and pathway to changing the world. Instant gratification, except the results are devastating.

Disengagement and de-radicalization are closely tied. Disillusionment, new friendships, and changing goals raise doubts in violent extremists’ minds. When they realize that their actions are no longer in line with their motivations, they reject beliefs that legitimate violence and leave the group. Some go even further to complete reject the Salafi beliefs they held; others retain their beliefs but remain peaceful.

No instance of radicalization or de-radicalization follows this exact pattern, but the essential point remains that each driver to join or leave interacts with others. As multifaceted individuals, multiple motivations and pressures create the conditions necessary for young women and men to join violent extremism. So far, the only available tools for confronting violent extremists after they have committed violent acts are law enforcement, but with thousands of returnees Tunisia will soon need to identify rehabilitation and reintegration methods. To this end, changing perceptions about inclusion could have a wide-ranging effect on willingness to join violent extremism.
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## Annex 1: Assessment Tool of Inclusion in the Tunisian context

### Focus Group Discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
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| **Comparison** | **Action:** everyone raise your hands when this applies to you  
Did you leave because you didn’t like it, had to come back, or wanted to? Do you want to leave again? | Choice to leave |
|  | Why didn’t you like it?  
What were you doing there that you weren’t here?  
For those who wanted to come back, why? What were you doing there you weren’t here? | Identifying perception of exclusion during trajectory |
| **Expectations** | Is what you want for yourself what your parents want for you? Why? | Education, gainful employment |
|  | If you had to raise your own family, where would it be? Why? |  |
|  | Did you go to school for something you wanted to do or bc your parents wanted it? | Education |
| **Civic Engagement** | **Action:** everyone raise your hands when this applies to you  
How many have participated in social clubs (like team sports), political party, union? | Civic Engagement |
|  | Why did you join political party? Union? | Civic Engagement: Political Engagement |
|  | Did you achieve your goals as party/union? |  |
|  | Does participating in a party/union provide you with a sense of belonging to your community? | Relationship between civic engagement and inclusion |
|  | For those who did not join any, why? | Civic Engagement (Control Group) |
## Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>Name, Marital Status</td>
<td>Education: Level Attained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level of education: (not finished high school, high school, technical degree, university degree, master's)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did it help find you a job?</td>
<td>Relationship between Education and Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gainful Employment</strong></td>
<td>Are you employed?</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are you making enough money to meet your needs?</td>
<td>Gainful Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civic Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Circle all that apply: Did you join social club before leaving Kasserine or after</td>
<td>Civic Engagement: Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you join a political party before or after</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you join a union before or after</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did you vote in the last elections? Municipal?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write the name of the member of the local council who represents you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Inclusion</strong></td>
<td>How often do you go to the mosque? (Daily, weekly, monthly)</td>
<td>Religious Participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>