POLICY BRIEF_THE ACCEPTANCE OF TUNISIAN RETURNEES

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IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA

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POLICY BRIEF

The Acceptance of Tunisian Returnees from a Social Point of View

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Historical Backdrop:

In January 2011, the Jasmine Revolution toppled the corrupt, autocratic leader Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. During the year following the revolution, expectations held by Tunisians turned increasingly optimistic.

Tunisians expected their economic situations would at least improve. Moreover, Tunisians expected to receive greater political representation, more protection from the state, wider access to information, improved policing practices, and direct access to elected officials (Macdonald & Waggoner, 2018).

However, as the revolution matured, democratically elected officials struggled to provide an effective plan for Tunisia's democratic transition. In turn, residual grievances festered because high expectations were mismanaged and unsatisfied.

As a result, a climate of persistent socio-economic grievances, unmanaged social expectations and declining institutional capacity generated a "grievance-expectation nexus", which helps explain the gradual rise of disillusionment and mistrust in traditional government officials and mechanisms (Macdonald & Waggoner, 2018).

Regarding the religious sector, long traditions of state-led secularism deprived spiritually inspired Tunisians of religious education, guidance, and tools that would have countered misinformation about Islam.

During the confusion of the Revolution, the state lost control over Tunisia's hollow religious sector. Because Tunisians were starved of religion by decades of top-down secularism, underground radicals were able to surface and claim legitimacy without the discretion of the state.

In 2012, pitted against historically corrupt and autocratic leaders, Tunisians fought for control over a new democratic government, while jihadist groups and affiliates used their newfound legitimacy to strategically and systematically recruit individuals for the Syrian jihad.

Extremists manipulated the historically tense relationship between Tunisia's government and Islamist opposition to frame their extremist efforts as progressive and enhance their recruitment campaigns, which targeted marginalized Tunisians.

In combination with the pushing forces of persistent socio-economic grievances, unmet expectations, and limited institutional capacities, recruiters generated convincing messages for at-risk populations. Of the estimated 27,000 Tunisians who attempted to join violent extremist groups, between 2,900 and 6,000 successfully joined violent extremist groups in combat zones.

Analysis:

In recent years, ISIL and other terrorist organizations active in the MENA region have lost significant territory and membership. Because of diminishing impetus, it is expected that the volume of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) attempting to return to their homeland will increase.

Because Tunisians constitute one of the largest contingents of FTFs in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, Tunisia is expected to face a large influx of returning FTFs. Moreover, due to the Article 25 of Tunisia's constitution, returnees cannot be denied reentrance.

"No citizen shall be deprived of their nationality, exiled, extradited or prevented from returning to their country" - Article 25, Constitution of Tunisia.

Thus, regardless of actions carried out abroad, Tunisian FTFs have the constitutional right to return to Tunisia if they please. Currently, an estimated 970 FTFs have exercised this right (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018). Based on the small amount of data regarding returnees, returnees were most frequently motivated to return because they were either disenchanted with the war, cajoled by distraught family members, or inspired to recruit.

Regarding Tunisian FTFs still abroad, many are eager to return home. However, they are dissuaded from attempting to return by threats of imprisonment, torture, social exclusion, and harassment carried-out by terrorist organizations as well as Tunisian and other national security forces. In addition, there is another group of Tunisian FTFs who have attempted to return home but were intercepted and detained by foreign security forces.

In light of the security-based approach built around the legal framework laid out in the 2015 Counter-terrorism law, Tunisia's decision-makers view returnees as an immediate threat to public safety. The current security-based approach issues criminal charges against returnees, which are described in the 2015 Counter-terrorism Law. Returnees who are charged either receive a prison sentence or are permitted to re-enter society under heavy, judicial surveillance. Charges are determined and sanctioned by a judicial court, where decisions are mostly contingent on the type and degree of involvement the returnee had in extremist activities.

In turn, Tunisia's security-based approach sanctions the most significant sentences against the most influential returnees. Then, the influential FTFs go on to serve their sentences in a prison system operating at over-capacity with limited resources.

So far, the security-based approach has clustered the most influential returning FTFs in a space isolated from the wider society and filled with marginalized Tunisians. If not reformed, the prison system and the security-based approach will lead counterintuitively to the radicalization of inmates and spread of jihadist-Salafism.

The lack of information surrounding the specificities of the Tunisian government's security-based approach, has led national civil society and media outlets to build a speculative - almost fictional narrative - around the question of returnees. Hence, resonant yet scarce narratives promulgated by officials have distracted the public and created an atmosphere driven by fear and anger that strips society from its collective reasoning capacity.

Throughout the revolution, stigmatizing rhetoric illustrated Tunisia as a hotbed for violent extremism. This rhetoric intensified during the string of domestic terrorist attacks committed in 2015. Currently, this rhetoric is fueled by a general lack of reliable information about returnees and an aggressive one-dimensional propaganda campaign led by the Tunisian government. Together, these factors have fostered a social climate driven by fear and hate that has steered the public's response to the phenomena of returning FTFs.

Outside of the prison system, returnees receive frequent harassment from citizens and security forces, which inhibits them from restoring normalcy in their lives. Pushed by intense social pressures and guided by a desire for solidarity and purpose, at-risk returnees may attempt to rekindle their former Jihadi networks; in turn, increasing exponentially their risk for recidivism.

If action is not taken to provide returnees with rehabilitation programs that cultivate positive social networks and bolster existing and build new capacities, then returnees will remain ill-equipped and unable to handle social pressures and address individual needs. The most capable and appropriate sector to implement these programs is civil society.

However, Tunisia's vibrant civil society has begun to suffer from the effects of NGOization. The most salient effects are fragmentation and the development of a donor-agenda adaptation culture. Thus, returnees lack access to alternative social networks and adequate rehabilitation programs.

Recommendations:

Recent advancements in the literature on returnees have illuminated how the experiences of former combatants become entrenched in their identities, especially regarding loyalty and devotion to fellow fighters (United States Institute of Peace, 2017).

For returnees to assimilate successfully, their identities must be transformed and reoriented to express loyalty and devotion for a nonviolent cause or towards a peaceful group of community. To do so, three essential measures must be taken:

I.   A general understanding among Tunisian population:

From a social perspective, media outlets, Tunisian influencers and intellectuals, have to shed light on the phenomenon of returnees, objectively study the issue and create a neutral rhetoric around it, in order to clarify to the public, the importance of treating the controversy factually and not emotionally. This rhetoric should be around the question of what approaches Tunisia needs to implement to rehabilitate returnees instead the question of should we receive them.

On a governmental level, Regional Development Forums must be held where local government officials from each of Tunisia's 326 municipalities within each region meet to establish a list of priorities regarding the quandary of returnees.

Then, integration programs must be aligned with regional development strategies in order to prepare returnees for a smooth transition into society and the labor force.

II.   Develop a National Strategy for Addressing Violent Extremism (AVE): An AVEnue for a Better Tunisia

Addressing Violent Extremism (AVE) is a new direction for handling violent extremism being introduced by this recommendation. AVE represents a comprehensive and holistic approach for addressing the various drivers and manifestations of violent extremism.

The AVE approach stipulates that programs must be contextualized to regional and local conditions, community-oriented, modified by evaluative data, and guided by a national strategy. AVE emphasizes the importance of forming and maintaining strong synergies between the myriad stakeholders addressing the various drivers and manifestations of violent extremism.

The aim of the National Strategy for AVE should be at generating procedures, guidelines, and goals for each of the methods adopted to address the drivers and manifestations of violent extremism.

In contrast with the National Commission to Counter Terrorism (CNLCT) which is mainly created to elaborate a national strategy to "counter" violent extremism, the National Strategy for AVE must call for the creation of a provisional, inter-ministry committee tasked with monitoring the implementation of the National Strategy

for AVE and enhancing coordination and communication within the government and between public and private stakeholders.

Two of the components, if not the main ones, of the National Strategy for Addressing Violent Extremism are Rehabilitation and Reintegration & aftercare:

I.   Rehabilitation
     A. This section of the National Strategy for AVE will outline the procedures, guidelines, and goals for rehabilitation, which includes disengagement, deradicalization, and restorative measures and programs.
        1. Rehabilitation programs must aim to first focus on disengagement, which refers to separating a radicalized individual from engaging or supporting violent behaviors. Meanwhile, the secondary aim of rehabilitation programs must be at deradicalization, which represents the process where a violent extremist decides to renounce violent extremism.
        2. Rehabilitation programs should seek to stabilize the psychological condition of each returnee, repair the relationship between the returnee and society, and foster social and economic normalcy in each returnee's life.
        3. Rehabilitation programs must be partnered with local religious and state actors to help returnees reorient their understanding of Islam and repair their relationship with the state.
        4. Rehabilitation programs must incorporate a series of trust-building exercises, which first strengthens the relationship between the program operators and the returnee. And, then in later stages, facilitates the creation of a stable and positive relationship between the returnee and the community.
        5. Returnees in prison must have access to these services.

II. Reintegration & Aftercare
     A. This section of the National Strategy for AVE will discuss the procedures, guidelines, and goals for reintegration and aftercare measures and programs, which aim at bringing an individual back into mainstream society by providing emotional, social, and economic support.
        1. Establishing local support systems that satisfy the basic social, economic, and psychological needs of returnees is essential to eliminating the chances of recidivism. To do so, it is vital to incorporate community-based approaches that emphasize local contexts into every component of the National Strategy for AVE.
        2. Aftercare programs must have bi-monthly, semi-structured, and informal meetings between the returnee and a rehabilitation program specialist. The purpose of each meeting is to monitor the reintegration process and identify any complications in the process using evaluation techniques derived from the initial risk assessment.

3. To further aid the reintegration process, returnees should reserve the right to request meetings with a rehabilitation program specialist whenever they feel insecure about something going on in their life.

III. Invest in Civil Society

Once the National Strategy for AVE is established, Tunisia must invest in its robust civil society by developing funding programs for civil society organizations with operations tailored to local contexts and aligned with the National Strategy for AVE.

State funding will incentivize and motivate civil society organizations to partner with a variety of different religious, political and community actors in order to develop contextualized and community-based programs that reflect the aims and expectations set by the National Strategy for AVE.

In addition, by investing in civil society, Tunisia can address NGOization, which has begun to splinter the efforts of organizations and force organizations to tailor their programs to the agendas of international donors.

Investing in civil society would empower Tunisia's role in the struggle against violent extremism. It will allow Tunisia to develop contextualized programs, which will have an enduring and positive impact on the struggle against violent extremism.

IV. Reduce Chances of Recidivism

Reducing chances of recidivism essentially is addressing the most pronounced push-pull factors felt by returnees. The state must officially identify and recognize the push-pull factors noted during the regional forums.

In the meantime, to begin reducing the chances of recidivism, the state must begin to reform policy suspected of generating or incubating the push-pull factors identified by the literature. Once the results of the regional forums are finalized, the state must incorporate the push-pull factors noted during the regional forums but not recognized by the literature into future reforms.

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