

# OP-ED\_ALTERNATIVE SPEECH

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*IDRC Grant/ Subvention du CRDI: 108479-001-Countering youth radicalization in Tunisia through inclusion*



# TACKLING YOUTH RADICALIZATION THROUGH INCLUSION IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIA



Maghreb Economic Forum

OP-ED

## Alternative messaging towards Violent Extremism in Tunisia

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*This project is carried out with the technical and financial support of  
International Development Research Center of Canada*



International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada

## **Covering up a flawed reality with an exemplary narrative:**

Prior to the revolution of 2011, the story that was being told about Tunisia was quite idealistic. Tunisia was the exception to the rule, the example to be followed by neighbors in the region if they had wanted to attain the glow of modernity and to bask in [the glory of a well-deserved socio-economic growth](#). Tunisians were portrayed, both inside and outside of the country, as educated and liberated. They had access to free education and civil liberties. There were no civil wars. If there was poverty, they need not worry at the time for there was [the Tunisian National Solidarity Fund](#) to balance inequalities and bring electricity and water to the 'shadow regions'.

The old regime made sure the story being told about Tunisia would sell, and nothing sells better than nicely presented, well-crafted lies. By 2011, there was a collective realization that a dissonance existed between the story and the reality. The reality was that freedom was only a façade, that prisoners were subject to unlawful treatment, that poverty went beyond the so-called 'shadow regions' and that unemployment and injustice [drove hardworking Tunisians to set themselves aflame](#). What followed this realization was chaos, the kind of chaos that was primarily about storytelling and narratives, protagonists and plots. Tunisians lost trust in the narratives that were presented to them before 2011, would have to build faith in new ones, lose faith in others and navigate the aftermath of political and social changes.

During the rule of Ben Ali, religion, Islam in particular, was dealt with punitive caution. People who regularly prayed at the mosque were under house arrest, having to sign an agreement on a daily basis in police stations, females were prohibited from wearing the headscarf in public or they faced persecution, mosques were under monitoring with imams obliged to demonstrate alliance to the former president. Religion was deployed by Ben Ali's regime in the way that it deemed right or moderate enough. This meant that while Ramadhan, Eids and any other religious occasions were officially celebrated in Tunisia, showing more than necessary commitment to religion was frowned upon. This also meant that religious education fell into a grey area, where the only version approved was the one written in the books at school or expressed within the speech of the Imam at the mosque. Attempting to go beyond the state's definition of Islam would mean rebellion against it and thus could get one into consequences such as imprisonment or pressure from the police.

## **Disillusionment: confronting reality with a conflicting narrative**

When the revolution occurred, the story no longer made sense and the heroes were no longer heroes. The narrative of the staggeringly developed and perfectly moderate Arab Muslim country that stood tall and proud among its neighboring countries was not one any Tunisian could believe anymore. Soon, narratives that were previously concealed would emerge. While people celebrated their new-found ability to express their ideas unhindered, religious groups had the opportunity to assemble and to preach their ideology as they never had before. Violent extremist narratives came first by filling the gap left by the fracturing of the Tunisian ideal. Online, extremist messages gained traction. Thousands of Tunisian youth could not settle for rebuilding their own state; instead, they found meaning in an even more idealistic vision – the creation of a utopian Caliphate. Eight years after the revolution, [thousands of Tunisians have joined the jihad in Syria and tens of thousands have attempted to do so.](#)

The reality today is far closer to the deterioration of pre-2011 than what Tunisians dreamed on the onset of the revolution. Economic deterioration, insecurity, corruption, and unemployment persist at increasingly high rates. Narratives of stagnation have encouraged hundreds to leave the country and left those who remain feeling powerless and lost. This is fertile ground for a resurgence of violent extremist ideology.

## **Moving from counter narratives toward alternative narratives:**

Simply countering the ideology does not work. Civil society and public authorities in Tunisia have attempted to react by deconstructing and demystifying violent extremist narratives while publicly denouncing groups such as the Islamic State or Ansar al-Sharia. They call their ideology a ‘perversion’ of Islam. Yet this is not sufficient. A strategy built around creating a counter-narrative relies primarily on trying to keep up with ever increasing anti-social beliefs while they proliferate among communities and individuals. A counter-narrative with its reactionary nature may fail to keep up with the fast-paced alterations and evolution of a violent extremist ideology. By the time the counter-narrative reaches its target audience, its story is likely irrelevant and possibly even counter-productive.

Perhaps, the trouble has always been this: Tunisians have not had the opportunity to write or tell their own stories. Perhaps, the problem was that of narratives. The old regime provided false narratives of exaggerated prosperity and progress. Extremist groups provided and continue to provide a violence-inciting narrative that fills the void of a history of religious frustration and illiteracy.

A single counter-narrative cannot respond to the issues and to the grievances of all people and of all the population that violent extremist groups exploit. The narratives forming and emerging are multiple, multilayered and complex. Thus, there needs to be a new story that equips people with hope while also giving them the tools to strive for a decent life in their country, a story where there is palpable proof that

change can occur through peaceful means. Tunisia needs an alternative narrative, one that acknowledges the country's fragile position but inspires Tunisians to return to the country and work towards shared prosperity and justice, regardless of the region. A government-led platform has been in the works since 2016 under the supervision of the Ministry of in charge of relations with constitutional bodies, civil society and human rights. The platform aims to prevent violent extremist behavior through a grassroots approach. Its messaging techniques were based on wide swathes of Tunisian community and carefully tuned to each neighborhood, so as "to have a certain feeling of appropriation since the process engages various actors such as local actors and young people," explains Mr. Moez Ali, President of the Union of Independent Tunisians for Liberty (UTIL), which is working on a project that will be featured on the platform. Only now concluding its research phase, the platform will soon launch and include a mapping of projects that tackle violent extremism in Tunisia, an online accredited counseling service for Imams, and a media stage that will feature all content produced so far to counter violent extremism.

Tunisia needs a new story, where trust is built among Tunisians both between cities and classes. This narrative must bridge the gap the old regime left and far exceed the expectations that post-revolutionary governments have failed to meet. Both before and after the revolution, the reality of things and the narrative provided by the state did not mirror each other, creating frustration and disillusionment among young people leaving them prone to exploitation. Tunisians need a narrative that represents them, that represents their reality and that is aware of its complexity.