



## Tunisia's Experience in Confronting Extremism

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Since the outbreak of 2011 uprising, Tunisia had faced and still faces successive and unprecedented attacks of varied nature in terms of their numbers and types. In fact, the country has had experienced many bloody attacks. Despite the concerted efforts of the Tunisian government in confronting these efforts in the past nine years, and the ability of the central government to get the security situation under control, decrease the number of terrorist attacks and limit their spread, yet the threats are still occurring and the radical sleeper cells are still active in attracting and recruiting around 3000 young Tunisians who are engaged in wars in various conflict zones, and it is very likely that some of these militants will return back home with their warped and radical ideology.

### Countering Extremism:

The Tunisian government took a set of measures in the past five years at the legislative and regulatory levels in response to the dangers of terrorism facing Tunisia. These measures included passing a set of counterterrorism and anti-money laundering laws in 2015 and establishing a national counterterrorism commission, setting up its organizational structure and specifying its tasks. Further, the government laid out a strategy to counter terrorism and extremism in 2016, by setting up security and judicial counterterrorism components, hence setting in motion the parameters of the Tunisian experience in confronting extremism. The strategy comprise the following elements:

### The legal component:

In 2015, Tunisia's government passed the statute 26, on counterterrorism and anti-money laundering, set forth the establishment of the national counterterrorism commission to become the legal vehicle that supports the national and international

efforts in countering extremism and terrorism. The Tunisian National Security Council approved the strategic national counter extremism and terrorism plan. The plan sets out a clear joint vision for all stakeholders to counter violent extremism through a comprehensive approach comprising four key elements: prevention, protection, tracking and response.

It is a carefully crafted and multipronged strategy that does not deal with extremism and terrorism through security and military means only, but also takes care of the various other aspects, including the cultural, political and religious aspects. The strategy affirms that the problem can be confronted through seriously engaging in creating a culture of dialogue, peace, justice, fairness, tolerance, acceptance and respect of the other. It further call for legally prohibiting the incitement for terrorism, irrespective of its nature, method or tools, as well as the call for reforming school textbooks, promotion of dialogue to counter extremist ideology. The plan also addresses radicalization in prisons and calls for the rehabilitation of prisoners and reintegrating them back into community after serving their prison sentences.

### **Prevention Policy:**

The Tunisian National Counterterrorism Commission sought to create a task force comprising all relevant ministries concerned with extremism prevention. The relevant agencies are required to cooperate to set up a well-crafted plan in order to enforce the counterterrorism strategy as it relates to reach agency's mission and expertise. A plan of action was devised to adopt a unified approach. The national commission's task at that point was limited to coordination among the various ministries, local agencies, international organizations, and supporting nations to ensure efforts coordination, get briefings on the overall violent extremism prevention programs, follow up their implementation milestones, progress made and measure the realization of desired goals by adopting cultural programs that focus on respect of human rights, along with active engagement of civil society organizations, local agencies and the private sector.

The high level of coordination and cooperation has attracted the attention of the youth segments and encouraged them to participate. Thus, many societies, jointly funded by the Tunisian government UN agencies, joined extremism prevention programs, including the UNDP and the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund (GCERF).

## **The National Unity:**

The deterioration of the relationship between the State and society is one of the causes that led to the rise of extremism in Tunisia, due to the policies that neglected education and religious teaching by giving more attention and resources to cities at the expense of villages and rural areas. As a result, these policies fueled rage sentiments among certain segments of society, lack of sense of belonging to the State and weakened the national unity. Hence, the youth became vulnerable to terrorist groups that look out for such social vulnerabilities, frustrations and exploit them in attracting the young people, recruit them, lure them into their ranks and persuade them of their ideology and terrorist operations.

So, the National Counterterrorism Commission, early on its mission, convened monthly meetings at the provincial headquarters with the attendance of all of its members representing the relevant ministries and regional competent authorities, and held gatherings with the local civil society organizations in order to explain the objectives of the national strategic plan, commission's tasks, and stakeholders' responsibilities participating in the domestic preventive counter extremism programs. These efforts bore fruit by creating a sense of community awareness that community members shall engage in volunteering, social cohesion, caring for the youth and the most vulnerable segments, such as students at schools, colleges, universities, unemployed young people, rural women, out of wedlock children, all of which can easily be lured into extremism. Meanwhile, the ministries of education, social affairs, women, childhood and elderly organized awareness seminars based on each ministry's areas of focus and the target audience in order to set up a network of field influential activists who can implement the strategic plan and accomplish its objectives.

## **Community Resilience:**

The National Counterterrorism Commission made huge efforts in carrying out extremism prevention programs through engaging civil society, private sector, youth and women segments in an engaging and effective manner and with multiple programs. These programs help spark a set of initiatives by charitable societies, developed public-private sector partnership, restored the youth trust in the State and political leaders, as well as paying attention to civic education, cultural activities, enhanced the sense of belonging to community and the State, strengthened the national bond, reaffirmed the

role of family in caring for children, and spread awareness to detect extremism signs, early on, among the youth.

Consequently, civil society organizations in Tunisia started to set up “Civil Activists against Violent Extremism” network comprising around 50 academic societies that focus on countering extremism and terrorism. The network aims at engaging civil society celebrities and influencers, media personalities, youth houses, scouts and experts in various disciplines to better understand violent extremism in its political, social, psychological and cultural contexts and then identify the activities and segments to be targeted by the prevention and subsequently create community resilience network.

Along the same lines, the ministry of higher education and scientific research played a significant role in identifying the causes of extremism in the Tunisian society and took the initiative in conducting a research program that produced a collection of research papers from several universities that helped in offering a deeper understanding of the issue and pursuing methods of treatment. In fact, as stated above, the ministry of higher education did a very significant job in this respect, where it conducted its research part diligently and professionally and came up with good findings. The program is still ongoing and will go on for some time in the future.

### **Religious Discourse:**

The poor quality of the education system and the fact that most parents are distracted from looking after their children and caring for them, coupled with social upheaval due to 2011 Tunisian uprising, all these factors have had contributed in the spread of a violent rhetoric in some Quranic madrasas and mosques in different parts of the country. Meanwhile, from the early days of the Tunisian uprising, the extremists engaged in propagating the radical ideology that calls for community *takfir* (declaring other Muslims disbelievers). As a result, Tunisia’s ministry of religious affairs was tasked to guard the community against extremism and maintain the moderate and tolerant religious approach. Therefore, imams and preachers have to be properly trained and prepared in order to enable them to promote the values of tolerance and confront ideological rigidity, insularity, radicalism, exclusion and curb calls for violence with an alternative balanced and moderate alternative religious discourse. And so for attaining this purpose, the Tunisian government created an alternative discourse

platform tasked with disseminating tolerance, respect of differences at the national level via multiple media outlets, and in particular social media outlets.

### **Communications Domain:**

Social media platforms and modern communications technology have become a vital and active field for social, cultural, intellectual, religious, social and political interaction. These digital outlets are accessible to all segments of society, provide quick access to information and make it much easier to communicate with individuals and groups. Such ease of communication has lured extremist groups to take advantage of this technology to attract and recruit new members to their organizations. In fact, the extremist groups were adept in mastering this technology in the field, forcing the ministry of communications technology and digital economy to figure out how to deal with this challenge at the State and community level. Hence, the government began to use monitoring and blocking websites that call for violence, propagate the culture of death and killing. At the same time, the government began to produce public education and awareness applications and broadcast them on various platforms targeting the general public, family, kindergartens, school and institutes in particular.

### **Conclusion:**

Although the government of Tunisia achieved some successes on counterterrorism on the ground, thanks to the advances in information technology and pre-emptive military, security operations, citizen vigilance and the community resilience over the past years, yet such successes should not diminish the ideological efforts in countering terrorism. The government should also take the necessary measures to change the youth feeling of injustice, lack of social justice, develop marginalized regions, create job opportunities and give the youth hope for a better future. Meanwhile, much work is needed to deepen understanding of extremism through research in order to find effective national solutions that take into account the peculiarities of the Tunisian society. Moreover, parents should be made aware of monitoring their children carefully, encourage familial interaction and strengthen the role of family in community through women and youth societies to help understanding extremism and how best to counter it.