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Radicalisation processes in Tunisia after the Arab Spring and the Foreign Terrorist Fighters issue

Abstract

This article analyses the high number of individuals who left Tunisia after the Arab Spring to join a jihadi organisation in Syria or in Iraq and it attempts to provide some explanations for this phenomenon. The analysis begins with an overview of countries in North Africa and, afterwards, it focuses on the Tunisian case. Relative deprivation theory is used to explain the radicalisation of a part of the Tunisian population. But no single explanation can depict the real situation of the Tunisian foreign terrorist fighters. For this reason, we investigated multiple motivations that anyone who left Tunisia to join the jihad was driven by. The increasing presence of a certain number of Salafi organisations, and its different strategy inside or outside the country, has also been analysed and considered as one of the possible causes of the worsening of the situation. Lately, one of the biggest threats in Tunisia is the return of foreign terrorist fighters.

Key words

Terrorism, Foreign Terrorist Fighters, Salafism, Tunisia, Jihadism

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This article is an update of a plenary lecture delivered at the Africa Conference 2019 organized by the NATO Intelligence Fusion Centre in Molesworth-Cambridge, UK. In these pages the situation of Tunisia after the Arab Spring will be analysed in order to understand why so many Tunisians left their countries soon after Ben Ali's resignation. To do so, we first provide a quick overview of North African situation after the anti-government protests of 2011, so as to highlight differences or similarities. This first step will take us to the issue of the Foreign Terrorist Fighters in this area. Then, we will focus on Tunisia, analysing the Salafi organisations expansion in 2011 as a result of the release of their leaders and their legalisation in 2012, after the Tunisian Constituent Assembly was elected in October 2011. We will then provide some justification for the high number of Tunisian Foreign Terrorist Fighters who joined the ranks of jihadi organisations in Syria or Iraq in comparison to the rest of the Northern African countries. Some of them experienced only few protests during the Arab Spring whereas others suffered a spread of violence. Finally, in the last part of the article some points are given for future studies about the problem produced by the returning Foreign Fighters from Syria and Iraq.

North Africa overview

In December 2010, the death of the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi triggered a mass protest in a small town of Tunisia. He had set himself on fire as an extreme way of voicing complaint regarding the confiscation of his merchandise. Demonstrations spread all over the country and many people, fed up with Ben Ali's administration, joined. The president, in charge since 1987, ended up leaving Tunisia in January 2011. In the next months, after some attempts of power conservation by the regime, a "particular model of power resignation was accepted"[1].

That was the first act of the so-called Arab Spring. What initially seemed to be a revolutionary movement, able to change the current social and political situation, turned out to be what the Italian writer Tomasi di Lampedusa expressed in the following terms in his book The Leopard (*Il Gattopardo*): "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" that is the same as saying "let's change everything so that nothing changes". In any case, if in Tunisia the social conditions seemed not to have undergone much change, democracy improved (even though it is "not totally consistent with a developed democracy)[2]. According to the annual report on political rights and civil liberties released by *Freedom*

1 MARTÍNEZ FUENTES, Guadalupe, "La transición democrática post-benalista: procedimiento y alcance del cambio político en Túnez", RJUAM, 23, 2011, pp. 119-134.

2 PÉREZ BELTRÁN, Carmelo and GARCÍA MARÍN, Javier, "Las libertades públicas en Túnez tras las revueltas de 2011", *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, no. 109, 2015, pp. 69-90.

House, since 2015 Tunisia is the only MENA country, along with Israel, considered to be free[3].

Before focusing on the Tunisian case, a quick overview of North African countries is necessary in order to map the different reactions to the Arab Spring. Morocco has been slightly touched by the uprisings, even though the country became one of the main exporters of foreign terrorist fighters (about 1,600 people). The number of Moroccans that joined jihadi ranks in Syria and Iraq increased in the second half of 2013[4], which means before the official creation of the Caliphate. Those who left the country were mostly the marginalized urban youth. The majority were under 24 and lived on the outskirts of large and medium-sized cities, especially in the North. Their radicalisation can either be explained by the chaotic urbanisation process or due to the high rate of youth unemployment (youth unemployment is 10 per cent all over Morocco, but rises to 40 per cent in the cities)[5].

The country has not experienced any form of internal jihadism lately. One explanation for the lack of this phenomenon might be provided, first, by the effort and the efficacy of the Moroccan Security Forces. After the Madrid bombings in 2004 several terrorists belonging to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group were arrested and, notably, its leader, Saad Houssaini, was jailed in 2007[6]. In September 2014, new measures were introduced in order to tighten the anti-terrorism laws. Those upgrades seem to be efficient. Another important element that explains the lack of jihadi groups in Morocco is related to the presence of King Mohamed VI and his politics of social progress. The monarch, on 17 June 2011, quickly announced in a TV speech that a referendum on constitutional reforms would take place on 1 July 2011 in response to the protests across the county. In general, the population is not likely to turn to violence if it perceives that some social improvements are being introduced. But there is another important reason why in Morocco no jihadi organisations emerge. It is due mostly to the religious legitimacy of the Moroccan government. Mohamed VI is not only a monarch but also a religious leader (*Amir al-Mu'minin*). Therefore, movements like Al Qaeda or IS, which are inspired by religion, must receive religious legitimacy to attack the regime in the power. In Morocco, this legitimacy is not possible because of its religious identity.

3 Tunisia was considered a not free country until 2012. Between 2012 and 2014 it was considered a partly free country. Freedom in the world, 2015 map: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/01152015_FIW_2015_final.pdf.

4 MASBAH, Mohammed, "Transnational security challenges in North Africa: Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria 2012-2016", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 55:2, p. 184.

5 LEFEBURE, Anaïs, "Chiffres du HCP: Le chomage en baisse, mais les jeunes toujours touchés", HuffPost Maroc, 6-V- 2015.

6 ALONSO, Rogelio and GARCÍA REY, Marcos, "The Evolution of Jihadist Terrorism in Morocco", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 19 (4), 2007; BOTHA, Anneli, *Terrorism in the Maghreb*, IS Monograph Series, 2008, pp. 91-93.

In Algeria, the multiple social protests had not been able to organize themselves into a solid political protest movement[7]. Some demonstrations were held only for a few days across the country but by the 11 January 2011 the situation had quietened down. We can theorize that there were not many violent protests because the 1990's civil war memories were still present. Algerians were fearful of the possibility of a return to violence. At the beginning of 2019 Algeria faced a great challenge with an internal uprising, which was maintained even after president Bouteflika left power.

Libya, a non-unitary State, was created artificially through Italian colonisation at the beginning of the 20th century and it ensued from the connection of three big areas: Fezzan, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Among these there are significant differences regarding economic development, Islamic solidity and tribal presence[8]. Gaddafi ruled the country with a strong hand from 1969 to 2011 and, after his death, and, consequently, the end of the Jamahiriyya[9], the whole political system broke down[10]. The lengthy 42 years of dictatorship had created a society with no democratic aspiration, essentially based on tribal identity. Thus, Islam has become one of the main unification elements. To sum up, after the Gaddafi regime: i) the state lost the monopoly of the use of strength; ii) militias appeared in some areas; iii) an anarchy period began; iv) two different governments were formed.

On the one hand, Haftar heads the Tobruk (Cyrenaica) authority; on the other hand, in Tripoli, Sarraj imposed his own authority. Haftar and his troops have fought jihadi groups who tried to enter Libya taking advantage of the instability of the post-Gaddafi environment. Even though, he acknowledged in an interview for *France 24* in May 10 this year (2019) that he often "released Tunisian ISIS fighters after his forces captured them".

Radicalisation was intense in Cyrenaica[11], the region more severely hit by the Gaddafi regime and where most militias have been created. Unlike the rest of the Maghreb countries, Libya has become a foreign terrorist fighter recipient and not only an exporter[12]. Today, the danger for Libya is posed also by the porosity of its southern border. Their southern neighbours and non-state actors are often on the verge of a

7 THIEUX, Laurence, "El papel de la Sociedad civil argelina en las perspectivas de cambio político en Argelia", *Revista General de Derecho Público Comparado*, 11, 2012.

8 VARVELLI, Arturo, "The Libyan Trilemma: Islam, democracy and rentier state", *Caucasus International*, vol. 3, n.1, Spring-Summer, 2013.

9 RÓZSA, Erzsébet, "The Libyan Revolution: Outcome and Perspectives-The Social Context", *Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean Policies*, 68 (11), 2011.

10 OMAR, Manal, "Libya: Rebuilding from Scratch", *The Islamist*, Winston Center, 2015.

11 RODRÍGUEZ MAYORGA, Bernardo, "La caída de Sirte y la verdadera naturaleza del Daesh", *Revista Ensayos Militares*, 3 (1), 2017, pp. 61-76.

12 FUENTE COBO, Ignacio, "Libia, la Guerra de todos contra todos", *IEEE*, 46, 2014.

resurgence of insurrectionary activity. Tubu forces of the north tribes between Chad, Niger in Libya are a clear example of this slippery stability[13].

In Egypt, on 11 February 2011, the Mubarak regime fell. One of the members of the Muslim Brotherhood Party, Mohamed Morsi, was named as his successor once the first elections after the Arab Spring in Egypt had been won. Presidents Naguib, Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, Al Sisi were all military officers. Mohamed Morsi was the only one not considered linked to the army. In 2013 he was ousted from power by a coup led by his Defence Minister, Al Sisi. Once in power, the new government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood based on the accusation that they were a terrorist organisation.

The Tahrir square revolution is just a distant memory, as well as the demand for more democracy. In 2019, Egyptian Parliament approved measures that allow the president to stay in power until 2030[14]. As reported by the NYT: "stability has come at a high price in terms of civil liberties and human rights. The country has jailed tens of thousands of opponents, banned hundreds of websites and exerted tight control over the courts. The news media is almost entirely under government control and torture is common in Egyptian prisons, rights groups say"[15].

Nevertheless, international actors support Al Sisi, welcoming his policies against Islamist radicalisation. Thus, Egypt Military Forces and intelligence are carrying out a hard task fighting insurgency in Sinai close to the border with Israel[16].

Hence regional instability in North Africa has increased i) terrorist attacks throughout this area, ii) individual radicalisation iii) growth in foreign terrorist fighters.

A brief analysis of the tendency of regional terrorist attacks in North Africa, reveals that the vast majority of deaths occurs in the MENA region[17]. Between 2002 and 2017 almost 90,000 persons have been killed there. Focusing on North Africa, between 2003 and 2007, the majority of terrorist attacks were carried out in the north of Algeria and southeast of Chad. Then, between 2008 and 2012 the number of terrorist attacks decreased (from 1,020 to 789) and the weakness of Libya increased terrorist

13 TUBIANA, Jérôme and GRAMIZZI, Claudio, *Lost in Trans-Nation. Tubu and other Armed Groups and Smugglers along Libya's Southern Border, Small Army Survey*, Geneva, Report 2018, p. 43

14 "Egypt constitutional referendum approved, cementing Sisi's power to 2030", *Middle East Eye*, 23-IV-2019.

15 WALSH, Declan, "El-Sisi May Rule Egypt Until 2034 Under Parliamentary Plan", *The New York Times*, 14-II-2014; SZMOLKA VIDA, Inmaculada, *Political changes in the Middle East and North Africa*, Edinburgh University, 2017; ÁLVAREZ-OSSORIO, Ignacio (ed.), *La primavera árabe revisitada*, Cizur Menor, Thomson Reuters Aranzadi, 2015; ÁLVAREZ-OSSORIO, Ignacio (ed.), "Sociedad civil y contestación en Oriente Medio y Norte de África", *CIDOB*, 2013.

16 DENTICE, Giuseppe, *The Geopolitics of Violent Extremism: The Case of Sinai*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2018, pp. 30-35.

17 INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE, *Global Terrorism Index 2018*, p. 53.

presence inside the country. Between 2013 and 2018 violence grew (3,159 attacks according to the Global Terrorism Index of 2018). More recently, according to the analysis made by Marta Summers for the Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo, the jihadi violence in Maghreb decreased and soared in the Sahel. In any case, in Tunisia, in March and April 2021 Tunisia was the only Maghreb country hit by terrorist attacks[18].

Foreign terrorist fighters overview

The presence of foreign terrorist fighters in battlefields is not new, especially in civil wars. Many examples could be cited and some of them are likely to be considered, broadly speaking, as negative armed interventions. In the past, and just to remain within jihadism, we should highlight the presence of foreign fighters in Afghanistan during the Soviet Union invasion since 1979. From 1984-1985 the presence of foreign Salafi jihadists increased. They were called freedom fighters and their shelter was in Peshawar (Pakistan), a border area close to Afghanistan[19]. Once the war was over, the freedom fighters went back to their hometowns or other places to continue with the jihad; others preferred to remain in Peshawar or Afghanistan[20]. Those who returned to their countries, often, faced a long period of imprisonment. In jail, they took advantage of their reputation as freedom fighters and radicalized other inmates.

Now, the former freedom fighters are called foreign fighters, but their identity is quite similar. The vast majority are Salafi jihadists who left their countries in order to fight the jihad especially in Syria and Iraq.

As indicated in a 2017 analysis by Richard Barret for the *Soufan Center*, it is rather difficult to calculate the exact number of the foreign terrorist fighters[21]. According to the United Nation more than 40,000 foreign fighters travelled to Syria and Iraq to join IS from more than 100 countries[22].

North Africa is one of the major exporters of foreign terrorist fighters to Syria and Iraq:

18 See Marta Summers reports on Maghreb and Sahel for OIET: https://observatorioterrorismo.com/yihadismo-en-el-magreb-y-el-sahel/

19 KEPEL, Gilles, *Jihad, ascesa e declino*, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2016, p. 156 y ss.

20 MARRERO ROCHA, Inmaculada, "Foreign Fighters and Jihadist: Challenges for International and European Security," *Paix et securité international*, n, 3, 2015, pp. 83-108.

21 BARRET, Richard, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees", *The Soufan Center*, October 2017, p. 9.

22 "Greater Cooperation Needed to Tackle Danger Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters, Head of Counter-Terrorism Office Tells Security Council", *Security Council*, 28 November 2017: https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13097.doc.htm.

FTF to Syria and Iraq	Tunisia	Morocco	Algeria	Libya	Egypt
	3,000	1,600	260	600	600
Number of inhabitants	11 million	34 million	42 million	6 million	98 million

Sources: Soufan Group and Renard[23].

As can be seen in the table above, the vast majority of Northern African foreign terrorist fighters who travelled to Syria and Iraq originate from the two more stable countries, Morocco and Tunisia. The former experienced few Arab Spring troubles; the latter, carried out a quick and successful transition process. To provide an explanation for this, we cite scholar Tore Bjorgo. According to him, strong democracies and strong authoritarian regimes are less susceptible to terrorism than weak regimes[24] (whether they be democratic or authoritarian). He states that: "Lack of democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law is a precondition to many forms of domestic terrorism. The relationship between government coercion and political violence is shaped like an inverted U; the most democratic and the most totalitarian societies have the lowest levels of oppositional violence"[25]. Of course, it is not possible to explain radicalisation in Tunisia and Morocco only through Bjorgo's theory, but we think it is crucial to understand that some kinds of radicalisation are more common in the weak regimes[26].

Tunisia overview

After the Arab Spring, Tunisia led a transition that is considered an example of how to recover stability after a time of troubles. As we saw above, the Arab Spring was triggered off in Tunisia. Despite originating from the lower classes, the middle class there were crucial to the process of political change. A high level of corruption and increasing inequality in a country where young educated individuals could not find a job suited to their qualifications, were just some of the reasons that sparked the anger all over Tunisia. To this, the repression carried out by the government must be added as a grievance.

23 WATANABE, Lisa, "The Next Steps of North Africa's Foreign Fighters", *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, n. 222, March 2018, p. 3; RENARD, Thomas, "Returnees in the Maghreb: comparing policies on returning foreign terrorist fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia", *Egmont Paper*, 107, 2019.

24 WEINBERG, Leonard, *Democracy and Terrorism. Friend or Foe?*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 7.

25 BJORGO, Tore, *Root Causes of Terrorism*, *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*, Oslo, 2003, p. 234.

26 LINZ, Juan, "Transiciones a la democracia", *REIS*, 51, 1990, pp. 7-33; LEVITSKY, Steven and WAY, Lucan, "The rise of competitive authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2), 2002, pp. 51-65; HONIG, Or, Arthur, "Coercing Weak Regimes to Stop Supporting Terrorism: How and When it can be Done", *Comparative Strategy*, 32 (3), 2013; STORM, Lise, "The Persistence of Authoritarianism as a Source of Radicalization in North Africa", *International Affairs*, 85 (5), 2009.

Even if Tunisia attained unimaginable political achievements (it ended up, for example, being ruled by a coalition of secular and Islamist parties), the economic and social situations have not improved. The unemployment rate is higher than under Ben Ali's regime (16 per cent in 2019, after the COVID-19, 13 per cent before the ouster of Ben Ali, but reached 18 per cent in 2011), and youth unemployment is even worse. The unemployment rate for university graduates was about 30 per cent after the Arab Spring[27]. The conclusion we may reach is that the Tunisian system is not prepared to absorb highly specialised workers, especially in a country that underwent a fast urbanisation process[28].

In order to understand the radicalisation process and the high number of foreign fighters within the middle class who left Tunisia to reach Syria and Iraq, we can briefly discuss the so-called relative deprivation[29]. It is important to reject the predominant idea that jihadism is only a poverty issue[30]. Of course, impoverishment can heighten the radicalisation of some individuals, but there is no evidence to link poverty to jihadism. In order to understand the radicalisation process, it is essential to highlight the importance of frustrated expectations.

Ted Gurr explains relative deprivation as the feeling experienced when one perceives a lack of something. According to Gurr, an individual could feel disappointed when he attains less than he was expecting[31].

Probably, we could say that rebellions ensued from the frustrations of expectations of more educated young students[32]. Hertog and Gambetta applied relative deprivation to jihadists who studied engineering but cannot find a job suited to their high educational level[33]. When the expectation is high, particularly after a social improvement period, the frustration of this great expectation may trigger a rebellion hot-

27 THE WORLD BANK DATA (2013), https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.ADVN.ZS?locations=TN.

28 "Youth unemployment in Egypt is concentrated among those with a university education: 34% of graduates are now without work and many more are stuck in insecure, low-status and low-paid work", Harry Pettit, "Selling hope without reward: youth unemployment in Egypt", The Forum ERF Policy Portal, 29-V-2018.

29 BRENNAN, Daniel and DE CORRAL, Miguel, "The Fight Against Terror Needs Better Data", *Foreign Policy*, 2-X-2018.

30 BHATIA, Kartika and GHANEM, Hafez, "How do education and unemployment affect support for violent extremism?", *Brookings*, 22-III-2017.

31 GURR, Ted, *Why men rebel*, London, Routledge, 1970.

32 See the relatively high number of educated foreign fighters in DODWELL, Brian, MILTON, Daniel and RASSLER, Don, The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Paper Trail, *USMA*, 2016.

33 GAMBETTA, Diego and HERTOG, Steffan, *Ingegneri della jihad*, Milano, Università Bocconi Editore, 2016.

bed[34]. Runciman added that if the deprivation is not individual but collective, the political radicalisation is usually quicker[35]. They provide a description of what they call a "fraternalistic deprivation", which appears when members of the same social group consider that their own group is suffering from a collective deprivation. It is important to underline that, in general, in the North of Africa the perception of an unfair inequality condition does not create a conflict between different groups. Instead, the local Government and the West are often considered to be responsible for this unjust situation[36].

In the case we are analysing here, the relative deprivation increased when young people who participated actively in the Arab Spring realized that nothing had changed and their expectations regarding a better life were frustrated.

The presence of needy areas in Tunisia is also important to understand radicalisation. The country seems to be divided into two different parts: an urban part (more modern), in the eastern regions, and a rural part, more disadvantaged, in the west and south. Here, more than poverty it is social inequality that is perceived as a real grievance. Close to the borders (both Algerian and Libyan) the situation is even worse. Some large areas developed informal economy based on smuggling and every kind of illegal trafficking back and forth[37]. However, when Libya closed its border, in 2015, fed up with Tunisians entering its territory to join militias, the population of that area ended up losing their only means of livelihood. For that reason, the spread of Salafi civil organisations after Ben Ali's regime fall was welcomed throughout those needy areas. Salafi groups filled the vacuum generated by a weak political presence. Hence, they have taken over some government tasks, and are consequently being perceived as charitable organisations helping the needy sector of the population[38].

Salafism has also grown among young people[39]. Some university students have radicalized their interpretation of the Quran. Under Ben Ali's regime, universities were considered to be free places where it was possible to express disagreement against the power, but after the Arab Spring they experienced confrontation between reli-

34 *Ibidem*, p. 41 and on.

35 RUNCIMAN, Walter Garrison, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, London, Routledge, 1966.

36 SAYYID, Salman, *A Fundamental Fear. Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, Zed Books, 2004; LEÓN, Cristobal et al. "El radicalismo islamista en las sociedades occidentales: prejuicio, identidad social y legitimación del terrorismo", *Psicología conductual*, n. 2, 2005, pp. 311-330; MUELAS LOBATO, Roberto, *El camino de la radicalización: rutas psicosociales hacia el prejuicio y el extremismo violento en conflictos religiosos y culturales*, doctoral dissertation, Universidad de Granada, 2019.

37 TORELLI, Stefano, "Mainstream Institutionalization *vs* Disenfranchised Radicalization in Tunisia", in *The arc of Crisis in the Mena Region*, Milano, ISPI, 2018, p. 121.

38 FAHMI, Georges and MADDEB, Hamza, *Market for Jihad. Radicalization in Tunisia*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015, p. 5.

39 MARKS, Monica, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current", *Mediterranian Politics*, 18:1, pp. 104-111.

gious and secularist students. Some of them requested separate classrooms (some for women, others for men), sought the liberty to wear hijab and applied for a space for prayer[40].

A Spanish teacher at Manouba University I interviewed [41] said that, after the 2011 uprisings, some of her students changed their behaviour, dressing in an Islamist way and expressing rage against the West. What happened could be understood as a generational crisis based on an ideological contrast and, also, as a confrontation against politics. Indeed, despite the supposed enthusiasm for the democratic process, there was a very low turnout in the 2011 elections when only 17 per cent of young people between 18 and 35 voted.

In 2011 the Islamist party Ennahda obtained the majority. Since then, it has shared power with the secular party Nidaa Tounes. The support for Ennahda has been described more as a protest vote than a real and conscious Islamist vote[42]. Political Islam was harshly repressed during Ben Ali's regime, which pushed it out from the social-economic system. Now, once legalised (as we will analyse soon), it has become a symbol of political freedom. Anyway, Ennahda is not an anti-system party and its founder, Rashid Gannushi, kept the party in a moderate position and its ideology, if compared to other Islamist forces all over North Africa, is quite liberal, even if has a small Salafi core too[43].

On 6 October 2019, Tunisia faced new elections. Ennahda Party won again, but it lost 17 seats. For Nidaa Tounes the collapse was even worse, losing up to 83 seats. Heart of Tunisia, a new political party defined as a centre-left group, secularist and populist, obtained 38 seats and it consolidated as the second most voted party.

One week later, on 13 October, the second round of voting of presidential elections was held. Kaïs Saïed (Independent party) was elected president, after winning against Nabil Karoui (Heart of Tunisia). In this election campaign, terrorism issue has not been mentioned as a major problem of Tunisia. Karoui and Saïed preferred not to name a problem that would have be thorn in the flesh for Ennahda Party, accused of permissiveness towards jihadi movements, but not for their own parties. Terrorism appeared as a sensitive issue to deal with and nothing useful to use against each other. Instead, social matters like low salaries, unemployment (above all among young people) and the deterioration of public services had been the es-

40 DALEY, Suzanne, "Tensions on a Campus Mirror Turbulence in a New Tunisia", *The New York Times,* 11-VI-2012.

41 The interviews took place in March 2019. The interviewees prefer not to reveal their identity.

42 McCARTY, Rory, "When Islamists Lose: The Politicization of Tunisia's Ennahda", *The Middle East Journal*, 72 (3), 2018, pp. 365-384.

43 PRIEGO, Alberto, "El populismo islámico: una respuesta no occidental a la globalización", *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, n. 119, 2018, pp. 161-184.

sence of this campaign[44]. Tackling the social and constitutional issue that emerged during the revolution, Karoui received massive support from the young people. About 90 per cent of 18 to 25 year olds voted for him, according to the Sigma Polling Institute[45].

The general social disappointment in Tunisia is high. According to Afrobarometer 2018[46], 79 per cent of Tunisians says the country is heading in the wrong direction; about 72 per cent of the population perceive the economic situation as "fairly bad" or "very bad"; almost six in ten Tunisian think that Tunisia is "not a democracy" or is a "democracy with major problems"; only 46 per cent of Tunisians believe that democracy is the most preferable form of government, down from 70 per cent in 2013[47]. The current situation of the COVID-19 increased the population's concern about the economic woes and has activated some protests against the new Prime Minister, Hichem Mechichi, since 2020. Protests, once again, were ignited by a small event: a shepherd was beaten by the police in the town of Siliana. This was what triggered clashes in cities and towns across Tunisia from mid-January 2021 which were heavily repressed by the security forces. Therefore, ten years after the Jasmine Revolution, tension is rising in Tunisia due, mostly, to the pandemic crisis, which has had a heavy impact on the economy, creating long-term economic grievances, worsening the unemployment rate and contracting GDP[48]. This "difficult economic situation has been further complicated by severe political infighting", as Yasmina Abouzzohour underlines[49].

Salafi organisations in Tunisia

The Arab Spring was led by a multi-faceted group of people that did not belong to any clear organisation, nor were they of a specific political orientation. At the time, the Islamists were not yet to be found in the streets. Nevertheless, after the revolutionary process, Salafi groups emerged. They took advantage of their social reinsertion,

44 "Presidentielle Tunisienne: le thème du terrorism relégué au second plan", *Le Monde*, 12-IX-2019.

45 SAFI, Michael, "Tunisia election: Robocop Kais Saied wins presidential runoff", *The Guardian*, 14-X-2019.

46 MEDDEB, Youssef, "Support for democracy dwindles in Tunisia amid negative perceptions of economic conditions", *Afrobarometer*, dispatch n. 232, 3-IX-2018.

47 EDROOS, Faisal, "Four things to know about Tunisia's parliamentary election", *Middle East Eye*, 5-X-2019.

48 MANSOUR, Nadia, "Socio-Economic Impacts of Covid-19 on the Tunisian Economy", *Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies*, 26 (4), 2020: https://www.abacademies.org/articles/socioeconomic-impacts-of-covid19-on-the-tunisian-economy-9481.html.

49 ABOUZZOHOUR, Yasmina, "Caught in transition: Tunisia's protests and the threat of repression", *European Council on Foreign Relations*: https://ecfr.eu/article/caught-in-transition-tunisias-protests-and-the-threat-of-repression/.

because they were illegal under the Ben Ali administration. Most of their members were put in jail as a result of the application of the new antiterrorism law number 75 of 2003, which led to about 2,000 detentions within the Salafi community of individuals suspected of being terrorists[50].

According to Ennahda policy of pluralism and respect for minority rights, many jailed individuals accused of jihadism were amnestied and released from jail. At the same time, a large number of clandestine mosques appeared. They were not under government control. Many were closed after Sousse attacks, in June 2015, accused of spreading a radicalisation message.

Salafi organisations sought the implementation of sharia law and led protests (frequently violent) against, for example, a television channel in October 2011, which broadcasted the movie Persepolis in which the prophet was represented as a human being, or against bars and restaurants open during the Ramadan.

Ennahda's double ramification, one more liberal and the other close to Salafism, brought both sides together to avoid marginalisation. Four Salafi political parties (Jabath al-Islah, al-Rahma, Al-Asala and Hizb ut-Tahrir) were legalized in 2012.

Anyway, Salafi groups were not a new presence in Tunisia. In actual fact, this phenomenon surfaced in the early 1980s. Tunisian Islamic Front, for instance, emerged in 1986. But its influence was very short-lived because of government repression. Some of their militants joined the jihad in Bosnia or Afghanistan. After Ben Ali was ousted, many of those individuals who had left Tunisia to fight abroad and never returned because they were afraid to be arrested, went back home and joined other jihadists released from prison to form Jabath al-Islah. This Salafi political party was eventually legalized in 2012 and its president was a former leader of the Tunisian Islamic Front.

Hizb ut-Tahrir (Ettahrir) is another Salafi organisation that has been active since 1980s but only clandestinely. Ettahrir was legalised after Ben Ali's regime fell. During the 1990s many of its members were put in jail charged with recruitment of people to send abroad to fight for the jihad. In order to depict the real feature of Ettahrir it is interesting to quote what its leader said on October 24, 2011, the day after the constituent assembly election: "It is well-known and obvious that Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects democracy, considers the system *kufr*, and it contradicts Islam altogether, but it [Ettahrir] works to rid the Muslims of evil and falsehood"[51]. Currently, Ettharir is a very challenging Salafi movement for the Tunisian Government. It is a transnational Salafi organisation made up of young people who admire the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamism.

50 MAGRO CHECA, Paula, "Evolución del fenómeno salafista en Túnez", *IEEE*, 9-VII-2018, p. 5.

51 Hizb ut-Tahrir Tunisia, "In Response to the News in the Palestinian Ma'an News Agency," 24 October 2011, http://www.ht-tunisie.info/info/index.php/contents/entry_72.

The biggest Salafi organisation so far is Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia (AST)[52]. Its leader, Abu Ayyad, was released from prison in March 2011 and, one month later, he created Ansar al Sharia. He and other founding members of this organisation were sentenced to prison in the 1980s because they had created the terrorist group Tunisian Combatant Group, which used to send fighters to Afghanistan for the jihad. Once in prison, Abu Ayyad fraternized with other inmates who were in jail because of their hostility towards Ben Ali. As can be seen, all of them were Tunisians who had rejected Tunisian conditions[53]. Ansar al Sharia has a double core. It is carrying out a policy of promoting missionary activities within Tunisia (especially in the needier areas where the lack of the State is evident and where it is trying to be likened to Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine by promoting social aid), whereas it is calling for the jihad abroad[54].

In Tunisia, what Mohamed Masbah depicted for Morocco might be happening. He stated that "authorities in Rabat overlooked the phenomenon of volunteers heading toward Syria, which explains why so many Moroccans were able to join radical groups in Syria in 2013. This policy was based on a desire to get them out of the country, by allowing the domestic Salafi jihadis to have a space to fight outside the country's boundaries"[55]. Obviously, there is no evidence regarding this, so we must be careful before affirming that Ennahda, or more in general the government, reached an agreement with Salafi groups, but this option cannot be rejected a priori. Over time, AST behaviour became more and more aggressive and some of their members were accused of terrorism. As a matter of fact, the Tunisian government illegalized it in August 2013 after two political assassinations and after finding links with Al Qaeda[56]. Ennhada, in order to send a message of an attempt to bring Tunisia to complete democratisation had to distance itself from radical Islam.

Anyway, the strategy of pushing Salafi organisations out of the political system might pose some problems. Often, marginalisation is a direct cause of radicalisation,

52 GARTENSTEIN-ROSS, Daveed, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisias' Long Game: Dawa, Hisba and Jihad", *ICCT Research Paper*, May 2013, p. 8.

53 TORELLI, Stefano, MERONE, Fabio and CAVATORTA, Francesco, "Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. XIX, n. 4, 2017.

54 ZELIN, Aaron, "Hizb ut-Tahrir and Ansar al-Shari'ah: New Forms of Islamist Activism in Tunisia", *Middle East History and Theory Conference*; TORELLI, Stefano, *La Tunisia contemporanea*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015, pp. 164-165.

55 MASBAH, Mohamed, "Transnacional security challenges in North, Africa: Moroccan foreign fighters in Syria 2012-2016", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 55:2, p. 184.

56 JONES, Seths et al., "The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist…, p. 24; CLARKE, Colin and MOGHADAM, Assaf, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat", *FPRI*, 2018, p. 350; MARTÍNEZ FUENTES, Guadalupe, "Ennahda ante el cambio politico en Túnez: 2011-2013", *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, n. 15, 2013, pp. 31-53.

and it is known that it is complicated to monitor a clandestine group[57]. Outlawing, especially if it is followed by repression (between 2013 and 2014 more than 1,000 people have been put in jail under terrorist law) is unlikely to succeed[58]. For this reason, the ruling party Ennahda has been working very hard to include Salafist parties in the Tunisian political environment. By doing this, it not only aims at achieving long-lasting social stability, but also wants to express a sort of political Islam far from the Salafi galaxy. Right now, in Tunisia, the vast majority of Salafi groups do not call for jihad, they do not agree with the current government, but neither consider it a foe[59]. Ennahda leaders know that any type of illegalisation could bring most radical Salafi groups not disappearing but simply going underground.

To sum up, indicated below are the mainly Salafi organisations in Tunisia:

Name	Created in	Legalized in	Political Salafism
Jabhat al Islah	2011	2012	Yes
Hizb ut Tahrir (Ettahrir)	Early 1980s	2012 (banned in 2016)	Yes
Al Asala	2011	2012	Yes
Al Rahma		2012	Yes
Al Jamiyya al-Wasatiyya li-l-Tawiyyawa wa-l-islah	2011	2011	No
Ansar al Sharia	2011	2011 (banned in 2013)	No
Katibat Uqbah ibn Nafi		Salafi jihadist group member of AQIM	No
Jund al-Khilafah		Salafi Jihadist group member of IS	No

Tunisian foreign terrorist fighters

According to a 2015 Soufan Group research, about 6,000 Tunisian left their country to reach the IS ranks[60]. The same Soufan Group, two years later, lowered that number to 2,921. The scholar Aaron Zelin reduced it even further to 2,900 individuals[61]. Zelin also declares that, on the one hand, the Tunisian Security Services prevented another 27,000 from going; on the other hand, foreign terrorist fighters were recruited from all over Tunisia and not only in some specific areas, such as those near Algeria and Libya borders, as some scholars stated[62]. Indeed, even if there

57 SADIKI, Larbi, "Regional development in Tunisia: the consequences of multiple marginalization", *Brookings*, 14-I-2019.

58 TORELLI, Stefano, *La Tunisia contemporanea…*, p. 169.

59 TORELLI, Stefano, MERONE, Fabio and CAVATORTA, Francesco, "Salafism in Tunisia…

60 *Foreign Fighters. An updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Groups, December 2015, p. 5; BUENO FERNÁNDEZ, Alberto, "De El Bardo a Ben Gardane, un año de terror", *Revista UNISCI*, n. 41, 2016, pp, 163-180.

61 ZELIN, Aaron, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria", *Policy Notes*, 2018, p. 5.

62 *Foreign Fighters. An updated Assessment of the Flow…*, p. 11; TSG IntelBrief, "The International Hotbeds of the Islamic State", The Soufan Group, 22 July 2015, http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-

are examples of slums or areas which are more radicalized than others, it is also important to highlight that not everybody who lives in the same place ends up acting the same way.

The recruitments for the Syrian Civil War began in 2012, but it intensified between spring 2013 and summer 2014. It must be borne in mind that the Tunisian government crackdown on Ansar al Sharia (AST) started in early 2013 and, as we analysed above, the organisation was declared a terrorist group in August of that year[63]. Since the creation of another jihadi front in 2014 in Libya[64], many Tunisian individuals have crossed the border to start their militancy there.

Anyone who left Tunisia and joined the jihad was driven by multiple motivations: mostly local grievances and individual problems. Therefore, no sole cause serves to explain radicalisation[65]. We should divide the ecosystem into three levels (macro, meso and micro), providing explanations for the radicalisation of an apparently normal person who chooses to become a foreign terrorist fighter.

Even if scholars are more strongly convinced that the *macro* system is not crucial to explain the radicalisation, Cavatorta and Merone stated that "although the theory of radicalisation for social and economic reasons cannot be verified in all cases, there is often a correlation between these two factors"[66]. The community or institutions represent the meso system, which, in our opinion, is not crucial to define a process of radicalisation. Nevertheless, the *micro* level depicts the environment some people grew up in: their family or their group of friends. Sageman explains the importance of friends and family networks[67]. The small group of comrades is usually very attractive for young people who have grown up in the same neighbourhood. Scott Atran underlines the importance of playing in the same football team, studying in the same school or living in the same milieu. He found out that nearly two-thirds of those samples he studied joined the Jihad through friends and about a quarter through family links[68]. Family is another favourable environment for radicalisation. But, the link between

the-international-hot- beds-of-the-islamic-state/. The town is best known as a major Tunisian smuggling hub for weapons and other contraband.

63 DURÁN CENIT, Marién y BADOS NIETO, Víctor Mario, "The Political and Security Repercussions of the Islamic State in the MENA Region", in SZMOLKA VIDA, Inmaculada, *Political changes in the Middle East and North Africa*, Edinburgh University, 2017, pp. 281-300.

64 SOTO REYES, Javiera et al., "La distribución del poder en la Libia post Gadafi: un análisis desde la Sociología del poder", *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, 23, 2017, pp. 47-75.

65 About jihadi radicalization and terrorist profile see DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, LUIS and JORDÁN, Javier, *La yihad terrorista*, Madrid, Síntesis, 2007.

66 CAVATORTA Francesco and MERONE, Fabio, *Salafism after the Arab Awakening*, London, Hurst & Company, 2016, p. 159.

67 SAGEMAN, Marc, *Understanding Terror Networks*, University of Pennsylvania, 2004.

68 ATRAN, Scott, "Who becomes a terrorist today?", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 2:(5), 2008, p. 6.

brothers or cousins is closer than the link between fathers and sons. Actually, this generally happens in every sort of radicalisation group. Young people are more likely to be critical of their parents (especially of their father) than of their brothers. There is a huge generational gap between father and son[69].

To this, we should add all those events that have marked the individual's life such as violence, sexual abuse, divorce, imprisonment, etc. But, even if all we have discussed so far can obviously provide an important explanation in order to understand the radicalisation of people who become foreign fighters, one of the most important radicalisation factors is the individual's will to belong to a terrorist group and the free will to attack people. Individuals who join a terrorist organisation create a narration based on violence legitimisation[70].

According to a survey published by the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies[71] in which 82 convicted because of terrorism were interviewed (50 of them foreign fighters returned from Syria) Tunisian jihadists are aged mostly between 25 and 29. So, they are not as young as terrorists in the past. For instance, the Red Brigades or ETA militants were much younger. Almost 85 per cent of them had a job. Actually, the rate of unemployment among jihadists is lower than the national one. Namely: the percentage of national unemployment is 15%, but just 9.8 per cent of the respondents was unemployed. Their financial situation is superficially decent. Either they are working or are supported by their families. About half of the interviewed stated that they had taken drugs in the past or usually drunk alcohol.

To briefly summarise the explanations for the high number of Tunisian foreign fighters, we can underline these principal driving forces: i) altruism. Some Tunisians joined the opposition to Al Assad to fight against a dictator considered a leader of a brutal regime[72], which was killing Sunni Muslims (Tunisia is nearly 99 per cent Sunni). They feel part of a transnational *umma* (Muslim community) and feel that their Muslim brothers have been slaughtered. Muslims are victims either of an oppressive regime (the Al Assad regime) or of the western imperialism. The sense of victimisation is very important to understand the process of legitimisation of fighting for the jihad. ii) disappointment in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. After the riots, which heightened the feeling of better life opportunities, nothing seemed to have

69 VÁZQUEZ, Alexandra, "Why die for my sibling? The positive association between identity fusion and imagines loss with endorsement of self-sacrifice", *International Journal of Social Psychology*, 3 (34), 2019, pp. 413-438. About the contrasts between fathers and sons it is very interesting this autobiographical book: HUSAIN, Ed, *The Islamist*, Penguin, 2009, pp. 36-47.

70 TORRES SORIANO, Manuel, "La tiranía de los pequeños números: el factor individual en la propaganda yihadista", *UNISCI*, n. 44, 2017.

71 *Assessing the Threat posed by Foreign Fighters*, Institut Tunisien des estudes Stratégiques ITES, January 2018.

72 ALTUNA, Sergio, "El terrorismo yihadista en la encrucijada", *Cuadernos del Centro Memorial de las Víctimas del Terrorismo*, n. 8, july 2019, p. 32.

changed. Despite some improvement in the political environment, economic progress was far from being attained. Even the first Tunisian president elected after the Arab Spring was a bit pessimistic about the situation. On one occasion, in reference to young people, he stated that: "We had a dream – our dream was called the Arab Spring –and our dream is now turning into a nightmare. But the young people need a dream, and the only dream available to them now is the caliphate"[73]. iii) Economic motivations. Even if economic improvement drove just a few individuals to the radicalisation, seldom was it the main stimulus for some of them. iv) Sense of impunity. Tunisia, after Arab Spring, became a country where – as seen above –many parties were legalised. The sensation of freedom was intense and the perception that, when one joined the IS, it was possible to come back –at least at the beginning –was wide-spread. There was also an extended sense of impunity. v) Prison radicalisation. People who were detained during Ben Ali's regime might harbour great anger that became an important stimulus to fight on behalf of Islam, upon release from prison. vi) Generational conflict. After the Arab Spring, a certain sense of general radicalisation spread throughout Tunisia. This radicalisation did not just come from the impoverished areas, but was particularly intense among young people, especially among students. vii) Offline radicalisation. Individuals are also motivated to travel to Iraq and Syria by friends, family or influential members of their communities or by the imam of the mosque. After Arab Spring, especially in the South of Tunisia, a new imam arrived from the Gulf and claimed a more radical interpretation of the Quran. viii) Online radicalisation. It happened mostly to younger people who use internet and social media. Digital migration in Tunisia was driven by the high proportion of young demographic. According to Arab Media Outlook, the broadband penetration in 2011 "was estimated at 5 per cent, significantly higher than many of the North African and Levant markets" and the mobile penetration on population was 114 per cent. In that country there also was "a large number of active users of *Twitter* and *Facebook*", actually, *Facebook* penetration in Tunisia was 12 per cent[74]. It is known that jihadi groups often use the web "as a battle field, where they encourage, justify, glorify, direct […] terrorists and terrorism"[75]. Nevertheless, a single online radicalisation is quite unlikely. There is more often a mix of online and offline radicalisation[76].

73 TROFIMOV, Yaroslav, "How Tunisia Became a Top Source of ISIS Recruits," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 25, 2016.

74 *Arab Media Outlook 2011-2015*, 4th Edition, p. 213.

75 NAVARRETE PANIAGUA, Manuel, "La actuación policial", in JORDÁN, Javier (ed.), *Estrategias para derrotar al Dáesh y la reestabilización regional*, Cuadernos de Estrategia 180, IEEE, 2016, pp. 106-108.

76 VON BEHR, Ines et al., *Radicalisation in the digital era*, RAND Europe, 2013; SZMANIA, Susan and FINCHER, Phelix, "Countering Violent Extremism Online and Offline", *Criminology and Public Policy*, 2017, doi: 10.1111/1745-9133.12267; VALENTINI, Daniele, LORUSSO Anna Maria and STEPHAN, Achim, "Online Extremism: Dynamic Integration of Digital and Physical Spaces", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:524, 2020, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00524.

To sum up, Tunisians joined jihadi organisations abroad mainly because of "secular" reasons[77], motivated by a sense of group belonging or in search of adventures, rather than their being driven by a deep religious impulse[78]. Of course, the religious factor is important, otherwise liberal Tunisians would also join those organisations against Al Assad, but maybe, as underlined by Marc Sageman[79], "religion has a role, but it is a role of justification". Actually, he says: "jihadists use Islam as their justification. It is not about religion, it is about identity". Olivier Roy adds that the current situation is not showing us a process of a radicalisation of Islam, as many people are likely to think, but an Islamisation of the radicalisation[80]. Gilles Kepel, in contrast to Olivier Roy, states that it is Islamism that is radicalizing and not vice versa[81].

The returnees issue

At least 7,000 foreign terrorist fighters have travelled back to their countries and many of them are trying to escape from Syria in a desperate effort to avoid death or jail. According to data, by June 2018, almost 4,000 had returned to the MENA countries[82].

Before IS was defeated, reasons for returning included having completed their specified missions, feelings of disillusionment with ISIS, desire to espouse extremism elsewhere or simply feeling they have been defeated. Once the Caliphate has collapsed foreign terrorist fighters are trying to get back to their own countries or to reach other places to hide and, maybe, to start their jihadi activity again. Returning home could be difficult, and they could face a long imprisonment. Going somewhere else could provide them with an aim to their lives and avoid the feeling of being defeated. Now that Syria is no longer a land of jihad for the ex IS members, jihadists must find other places to go. Yemen, Libya or Sahel are likely to be appealing destinations. Or maybe some areas of Asia.

Between 2013 and 2018, 18 per cent of terror attacks staged in Europe were carried out by foreign terrorist fighter returnees. The vast majority of returnees come from Europe and MENA countries[83].

77 SAGEMAN, Marc, *Understanding Terror Network*….

78 SHADI Hamid, "Radicalization after the Arab Spring: Lessons from Tunisia and Egypt", *Brookings*, 1-dec. 2015; VARVELLI, Arturo, *Jihadist Hotbeds. Understanding Local Radicalization Processes*, Milano, ISPI, 2016, p. 20.

79 QUILLEN, Stephen, ""What drives Tunisian foreign fighters?", *The Arab Weekly*, 27-V-2018.

80 ROY, Olivier, *Le Djihad et la Mort*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2016.

81 KEPEL, Gilles, *Terreur dans l'Hexagone, Genèse du djihad français*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015.

82 "How many IS foreign fighters are left in Iraq and Syria?", *BBC*, 20-II-2019.

83 GLOBAL TERRORISM INDEX 2018, p. 62.

North Africa's countries have adopted the 2014 UN Resolution 2178 in order to prosecute people who joined jihad and now want to return. There are variations in the way countries manage the foreign terrorist fighter issue[84]. In some places prison is adopted as the sole solution, somewhere else reintegration is preferred. In many cases, foreign terrorist fighters will face arrest. Nevertheless, once in jail, they are not likely to be brought to trial due to the difficulty in proving their crimes. In Tunisia, for example, only 35 per cent of returnees are sentenced to prison and "those returning foreign terrorist fighters not being tried judicially are being held under house arrest and monitored"[85]. Even though, the new 2015 counterterrorism law reintroduced the death penalty for certain terrorist acts and criminalized planning and carrying out terror activities[86], but it is not about activities abroad.

The number of Tunisian returnees is nearly 800 individuals who could pose a severe threat to the authorities and to the population. Evidence of what we are talking about is the double terrorist attack at Bardo National Museum and on a beach in Sousse in 2015. Both attacks were led by individuals trained in Libyan camps. Moreover, returned foreign fighters can become recruiters or simply incite radicalisation. They take advantage of the prestige bestowed upon them within their community, after having fought for the Caliphate, to recruit possible future fighters. This process seems to be very similar to the Afghan freedom fighters, who came back from fighting against the Soviet Union in the 80s.

There are also associations of foreign terrorist fighter families that request reinsertion of their relatives who regret what they had done. Authorities must deal with this issue in an extremely delicate way because focusing exclusively on detention could create more problems. Prisons, packed with inmates in Tunisia, often provide the perfect environment for more radicalisation[87]. Besides, after being released, former foreign terrorist fighters might never reintegrate themselves into a normal group life and they will probably suffer marginalisation, so that would increase the possibility of a second radicalisation. In a country like Tunisia, where the youth unemployment rate is high, foreign fighters will be considered a non-priority concern for the government. According to Emna Ben Mustapha Ben Arab's analysis "the preparation for post-prison life, which is to start in prisons, is not taking place"[88].

84 GEORGEAULT, Léna, "Perspectiva comparada de las políticas sobre combatientes terroristas extranjeros. Retos y modalidades", *RIED*, n. 2, 2021, pp. 43-57.

85 WATANABE, Lisa, "The Next Steps of North Africa's…, p. 3.

86 MERSCH, Sarah, "Tunisia's Ineffective Counterterrorism Law", *Carnegie*, 6-VIII-2015: https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/60958.

87 ALTUNA, Sergio, "Evolución reciente del yihadismo en Túnez, una larga condena por los errores del pasado", *Real Instituto Elcano*, 28-III-2018.

88 BEN MUSTAPHA BEN ARAB, Emna, "Returning Foreign Fighters: Understanding the new threat landscape in Tunisia", in *Returnees in the Maghreb: Comparing policies on returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia*, RENARD, Thomas (Ed.), Egmont, April 2019, p. 45.

A community approach seems to be the most viable solution of returnee foreign fighters. So, not only prosecution, nor government intervention, but also civil society participation could contribute to the assimilation of foreign terrorist fighters. Tunisians returnees are a threat not only for their own country, but also for Europe. This is a matter which has already been studied by scholars though still deserves to be thoroughly investigated in the future[89].

Conclusions

After having analysed the situation in Tunisia after the Arab Spring and having focused on the high number of foreign fighters who left Tunisia and reached Syria or Iraq, we should provide some conclusion. In all Northern Africa countries Islamist organisations were harshly repressed under totalitarian regimes. In Tunisia, it occurred under Ben Ali's regime but, after the Arab Spring, many Salafi organisations were legalized and a large portion of Salafi individuals, who were in jail, were released. Only few Salafi organisations call for jihad abroad, but within Tunisia they are replacing the government in those needy areas where institutions are absent. This presence is rather well accepted by the population who feel abandoned by the State.

Even if the Arab Spring just succeeded in Tunisia, the great expectation of a better life has been frustrated. Disappointment in the aftermath of the Arab Spring was decidedly high, above all, among those people who were more active in the uprising. Once Ben Ali's regime collapsed, they realised that nothing had changed, that their lives were the same as before. And this frustration of expectations was evident in the entire society, not only within the needier population. In the rest of the countries which experienced uprising in 2011 the situation now is worse than before. Some states are facing civil wars and others were subjected to putsches. Whilst in Tunisia, an Islamist party reached power and shared it with a secular party, which is not usual in the Arab world.

To understand radicalisation and the motivations that drove individuals to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq we must analyse the three different social levels (Macro, Meso and Micro), but we emphasise mainly the last one. Family (above all brothers and cousins) and small groups of friends could generate radical connections between individuals who want to follow the same steps towards the jihad. Individual will is also crucial to understand motivations regarding why a person and not the other decides to join a jihadi organisation. Radicalisation of people who become foreign fighters is also

89 POKALOVA, Elena, *Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters: Threats and Challenges to the West*, Palgrave, 2020; MALET, David and HAYES, Rachel, "Foreign Fighters Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32 (8), 2020; BURES, Oldrich, "EU's Response to Foreign Fighters: New Threat, Old Challenges?, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32 (4), 2020; CRAGIN, Kim, "Preventing the Next Wave of Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Lessons Learned from the Experiences of Algeria and Tunisia", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 44 (7), 2021.

a matter of generational conflict within the Salafi environment. Thus, often, the more radical fraction is also the youngest one, and young people are frequently in contrast against elder people.

The Tunisian government was adopting the strategy of pushing Salafi organisations out of the political system, but this behaviour might pose some problems. Often, marginalisation generates more conflict and push individuals to create clandestine organisations. In this environment, the presence of foreigner Imams and the creations of private mosques spread throughout the countries.

The Ennahda party has a crucial position to face Islamist radicalisation. On the one hand, a likely "unspoken pact" between the ruling party and some Salafi organisation might boost the binomial "in Tunisia the prayer, abroad the jihad". But Ennahda has also shown a strong hand against radical Islam, outlawing those Salafi organisations that head toward the path of violence. This crackdown, weather carried out by a secular party, could have had more traumatic consequences, while Tunisia experienced little violence in comparison with countries where the presence of Salafi jihadists is higher. To make jihadism less appealing, not only the Tunisian government, but also the rest of the ruling parties of the region, should draw up a long-term strategy. The adoption of only security measures is likely to be ineffective and create more social instability and breakups. There is a need for a comprehensive and long-term approach that mixes soft and hard-line measures. Having said this, now, probably the biggest issue governments all around the world must face is how to act with returnees. In Tunisia, the solution is far from easy. This Northern Africa country has experienced one of the biggest phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters. Prosecution and imprisonment might not seem to be the right solution or, at least, the only possible solution. Tunisian prisons are so crowded that it could be difficult to host many inmates. Inside prisons, radicalisation could spread throughout quickly and, after serving their sentence, it appears social reinsertion might be really difficult in a country with a strong presence of needy areas and with an unemployment rate on the rise.

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