

MARKET FOR JIHAD: RADICALIZATION IN TUNISIA

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While Tunisia is the only Arab country undergoing a successful democratic transition as of 2015, it has also been home to a growing Salafi-jihadi movement since the fall of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. Ben Ali's monopolization of the religious sphere and neglect of socioeconomic issues opened the door to radicalization, and these factors, combined with the disillusionment of the youth and the mishandling of Salafists after the revolution, have resulted in escalating violence in Tunisia and the export of jihadists to Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

The Roots of Salafi Jihadism

- Ben Ali's tight control of the religious sphere meant that there were few religious actors to step in after the revolution. The fall of the regime created a vacuum that allowed radical groups to preach their ideas and recruit new members among the disenfranchised youth.
- Ennahdha, a major Islamist religious movement as well as a political party, has focused on constitution building and political struggles and has not struck a healthy balance between politics and religion.
- Ennahdha has acted pragmatically to consolidate its political standing. But its failure to break with the former political system has further opened up space for social and political contestation.
- The socioeconomic situation in Tunisia has worsened since the revolution, which has led to the disenchantment of the lower and middle classes and the youth in particular.

Recommendations for the State and Ennahdha

Address socioeconomic grievances. Tunisian youth are drawn to Salafi jihadism because of feelings of disillusionment and stagnation, so improving social mobility and stemming frustration among the younger generation should be high priorities.

Strengthen political inclusion of the Salafi movement. Those who would like to work within formal politics and civil society should be allowed to operate freely as long as they respect laws.

Balance state control over the religious sphere. The state should allow all nonviolent religious actors a voice, while also encouraging official imams to compete with Salafi preachers to create a diverse marketplace of religious ideas.

Separate religious and political activities. Two distinct organizational structures within Ennahdha will allow the political party to operate without any interference from the religious movement and the religious movement to operate without being manipulated by the party for political gains.

Form de-radicalization coalitions. Religious and secular actors should coordinate to formulate and implement policies aimed at de-radicalizing, disengaging, and reintegrating members of radical groups into society.

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