Rethinking the Link between Jihadism and Delinquency: The Singular Trajectory of Tunisian Returnees

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Introduction

Since the resurgence of jihadist violence in the wake of the failure of the so-called "Arab Spring," the link between delinquency and this type of violence has been regularly highlighted.

The aim of this article is to revisit this link by reversing the terms. It will highlight an unexpected phenomenon: that of delinquents who have become jihadists and who, on their return from combat zones or on their release from prison, reoffend, not as jihadists, but as delinquents.

Indeed, a study conducted in France by Hakim El Karaouimet and Benjamin Hodaye shows that social and economic conditions—in this case, the marginalization of young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods—are a breeding ground for recruitment to the jihad. Farhad Khosrokhavar's analyses point in the same direction. Thus, according to the latter, 57% of European jihadists who joined or attempted to join Syria and Iraq after 2013, had been incarcerated before their departure. Further, 27% of them had been radicalized during their imprisonment. More than half of the French jihadists had criminal records and were involved in petty crime before taking action. In the same vein, Jean-François Gayraud evokes a "hybridity," if not between the milieu of suburban delinquency and that of terrorism, at least between the prison milieu and that of jihadism. He shows that in the majority of cases, the jihadists who have committed attacks in France are ex-convicts of common law, radicalized in prison and have joined the jihadist movement after being released from prison.

This phenomenon, observed in the West, can also be found south of the Mediterranean, where several studies, in particular those by David Sterman and Nate Rosenblatt, show that, as a general rule, foreign fighters are recruited from regions marked by poverty and marginalization. This is the case in Tunisia, a country that between 2011 and 2014, was considered to be the main supplier of foreign fighters to conflict zones, particularly in Syria. As explained by a member of the Tunisian security forces in charge of this dossier at the time, "the majority of fighters were clearly from the greater Tunis area, a zone marked by marginalization and social and economic vulnerability, which facilitated the radicalization of many individuals as well as the deployment of Ansar Al Sharia networks in this territo-

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ry." For a civil society activist working in these peri-urban areas, "unemployment, idleness and repression played a pivotal role in the mobilization of these young people. Recruiters were thus responding as much to an economic and social need as to a deep-seated malaise."

From 2016, the year that opened the series of defeats of jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq, notably the Islamic State (IS), many foreign fighters began to return to their countries of origin. The North African states, from which almost 7,000 jihadists had reached the Middle East, were no exception.

In Tunisia, several hundred have returned. In 2018, a minimum of 800 young people officially returned to the country, and the main question posed by these "returnees" to the authorities was one of security. Indeed, the experience of North African jihadists returning from Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya in the 1980s–1990s had shown that they tended to set up cells in their home countries and carry out attacks there.

Yet as of 2018, Tunisian returnees have had little or no involvement in new acts of jihadist violence. Nevertheless, failing to integrate socially and professionally, many of them are, in the words of a lawyer specializing in their defense, "reverting to delinquency, even criminality, while falling back into alcohol and drugs." A former member of the Islamic State confirms these remarks, noting that this phenomenon can be observed among many of his counterparts. Although there are no statistics to quantify this phenomenon, our contacts—members of the security services, senior civil servants, lawyers, and psychologists in the field —all confirm its prevalence.

From a sociological point of view, this unexpected recidivism illustrates, on the one hand, the weakness of the religious training of the EI jihadists of the 2010s. On the other, it shows that the actor's theological background is a weak vector of political socialization, far from leaving an indelible mark on his system of representations and practices.

In this paper, we examine the modalities of this form of recidivism. By its very existence, this form of recidivism puts into perspective the direct causal link between the return of jihad and the proclamation of jihad at home that has often been weaved by experts and security institutions since the Afghan precedent of the 1980s. For, in many respects, the classic jihadist theological-political commitment, involving near-total personal military and religious investment, at some point in the personal trajectory does not account for the commitment of Tunisian fighters who joined the IS in Syria in the 2010s.

The possibility of a socio-professional reconversion in such direct contradiction with the precepts of religious dogma would show that the modalities of this reconversion may draw more on the springs of the pre-militant career than on those of the militant career.

In a sense, this return to the world of delinquency and criminality, which radical Islamist movements in the 1970s and 2000s so strongly sidelined, and which jihadists have often, by virtue of their career path, set up as a deterrent, raises questions.

On an academic level, it raises questions about the link between religious rigorism and commitment to the IS of the 2010s. Was the latter a political and identity-based minimum of commitment, as it was within groups linked to Al Qaeda? As we shall see, within the IS, the transition from the delinquent ethos to the rigorist religious and militant ethos, and therefore the accompanying change in the system of representations and practices, is far from having taken place.

Finally, at a more security-oriented level of analysis, this phenomenon is a reminder that recidivism may well be delinquent and criminal before it is ideological and political—especially in a context of limited opportunities for socio-professional reintegration and the military defeat of jihadist groups. It would therefore be wise to avoid considering a returnee's abandonment of rigorist religious practice as the main indicator of his or her rejection of the need to resort to political violence. Indeed, as long as a new jihadist offer is structured, it can be reinforced. Routine recourse to delinquent or even criminal violence would trivialize violence as a practice and allow the actor to be reintegrated into a network whose borders with jihadist networks may be porous. The implementation of socio-professional reintegration programs along the lines of those tried out in Algeria and de-radicalization programs in Morocco would therefore be highly advantageous in Tunisia.

I - The Nexus of Criminality and Jihadism vs. Returnees and the Threat of Relapse

1. The Crime-Jihadism Nexus

Studies on the links between criminal activity and jihadist groups are not new. In 2004, Marc Sageman had already uncovered the relationship between criminal networks (false documents, credit cards, etc.) and jihadist groups: the former helping the latter to act and move fighters from point A to point B. The work of Serge Daniel, Sergei Boeke, Luca Raineri, and Francesco Strazzari, or more recently, Beatriz Mesa, has studied the relationships between various terrorist and jihadist groups in the Sahel, as well as their collusion with local criminal organizations in the region, particularly drug traffickers.

In a similar vein, socio-economic conditions have often been put forward as factors favoring the passage to violent action. This is demonstrated by El Karoui and Hodayé's study, in which they argue that belonging to disadvantaged suburbs, in a context of educational failure and economic marginalization, favors jihadist radicalization, as it generates both material and psychological vulnerabilities

in these young people. For his part, psychologist Sami Kelal explains that "the discourse of Daesh is well crafted and well-practiced, responding to the needs expressed by young people in vulnerable situations: the need for identity, the need to belong, the need for life projects in people who are often at a loss for projects." This is also the view of Danièle Esptein, who believes that young delinquents in socially and economically vulnerable situations "flee into omnipotence and set their lives ablaze, in the hope of giving consistency to a shattered identity."

For their part, studies by Rajan Basra and Peter Neumann in particular, show that the transition to jihadism offers offenders "redemption" from their past, or better still, legitimizes that same past. Prison provides an environment conducive to the radicalization process, as do the networks needed to take up armed action on leaving prison. In a sense, jihadist groups perceive the criminal "skills" of these offenders as assets for their activities. Edwin Becker, in a study of the trajectory of 200 European jihadists, shows that almost a quarter of them already had a criminal record. Olivier Roy also emphasized the link between petty crime in poor suburbs and jihadism. He describes jihadists from these social and territorial backgrounds as "born again," "almost new converts" following an often-chaotic career path, without ignoring the presence among them of people who are well integrated on a socio-professional level.

The risk of recidivism in delinquency and criminality, as well as in the jihadism of returnees, is briefly addressed by Robert Malet and Rachel Hayes. These authors base their analysis on the criminal records of recidivist criminals re-imprisoned shortly after their release. In their view, the risk of this type of returnee relapsing into jihadism is very high, especially during the first year of their return. Mohamed Hafez believes that these returnees represent a threat due to their religious indoctrination, military training, and the transnational networks that they have built up during their stays in conflict zones. This idea is also echoed by Daniel Byman, who emphasizes their violence and brutality. Thomas Heggamer and Peter Nesser, for their part, emphasize that the IS is less likely to send returnees than to attempt to mobilize self-radicalized jihadists on the spot, ready to strike. With a few rare exceptions, such as the Paris and Brussels attacks in January and November 2015, the majority of terrorist acts were committed by people who had been "radicalized on the spot" and had never been to conflict zones, although they often came from underprivileged, criminogenic backgrounds.

2. The Case of Tunisian Returnees and Delinquency/Criminality

While there are no reliable figures for the number of Tunisians who have gone to Syria and Iraq, most experts put the figure at 3,000. To this estimate around 1,500 Tunisians who have gone to Libya should be added. With around 5,000 jihadists, Tunisia is therefore considered one of the main countries of origin of foreign fighters, particularly within the IS. The reasons for this phenomenon are manifold, as

are the scales of analysis and conceptual grids that attempt to shed light on them. We shall retain that a host of factors act in a differentiated way according to the profiles of the actors. These include ideological, socio-cultural, socio-economic, religious, institutional, and "situational" factors.

Incidentally, since 2015, 800 of these foreign fighters are thought to have returned to Tunisia. Many have been released after serving 5 years in prison. The authorities tend to perceive them as a threat. However, this threat may be overestimated since at the time of writing, none of them have re-offended. On the other hand, lawyers, magistrates, members of the security forces, community activists and psychologists in the field are unanimous in noting a high number of relapses into delinquency and, more marginally, crime, given that the majority of fighters indulged in these practices before leaving for conflict zones.

A senior security official explains that this phenomenon mainly concerns the large wave of Tunisian returnees of 2014–2015. The latter, disappointed by their experiences in Syria and Iraq, were not initially motivated by ideological considerations. A significant number are said to have "plunged into alcohol, theft and delinquency," unlike their predecessors, who were active in the Syrian Liberation Army (SLA) and returned in 2013.

A lawyer who has defended several of them, notes that "some drink and steal, but are into taqiya (precautionary dissimulation), while others indulge in these practices naturally." For one lawyer, their return to delinquency can be explained by their chaotic pre-jihad personal and professional path, by the reality in Syria, far from what they had imagined, by imprisonment on their return, accompanied by ill-treatment, and by the society that rejects them (they returned militarily defeated, and the regime tends to feed its legitimacy through anti-terrorist rhetoric). In her view, the number of returnees in this case is particularly significant and, without question, far greater than that of ex-combatants who continue to maintain a radical political discourse and rigorist religious practice, pointing to jihadist recidivism.

II – The Quality of Islamic State Fighters: Recruitment Version "Generation Z"

In Tunisia, one of the primary causes of this phenomenon may lie in the socio-demographic characteristics of these IS fighters and the way they are recruited. As early as 2011, there were calls for Jihad in Syria from militants of the Islamist party Ennahda, a pillar of the ruling coalition, from members of the Salafist-jihadist organization Ansar Al Sharia Tunisie (AST), notably through preaching in mosques, discussions in preaching tents, as well as the dissemination on the internet of visual content showing exactions committed by the troops of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, played in concert. This recruitment drive was primarily aimed at people

living in working-class suburban neighborhoods, as they were more accessible and vulnerable.

According to one psychologist, 64% of returnees have a history of drug addiction. Similarly, a study carried out by a research team led by Emna Ben Arab shows that, out of 58 returnees (including those arrested before they could reach a conflict zone), over 40% dropped out of school in secondary school and 25% in their first year of high school. 74% of these returnees said they had experienced serious financial difficulties, and 60% said they had experienced these difficulties on a recurring basis. While half had experienced unemployment, the majority were working in precarious, low-income jobs. Finally, while 39% were totally dependent on their families, the majority had incomes ranging from 300 Tunisian dinars a month (120 euros) for the lowest to over 3,000 dinars a month (280 euros) for the highest. Finally, while more than 60% confirmed having used drugs and alcohol, only 7 of the 58 respondents confirmed having encountered legal problems, the others refusing to comment on this question.

The study shows that these players generally come from very disadvantaged backgrounds. "In such environments, a return to religion is often socially valued." A psychologist who has worked with Tunisian prisoners of the IS, adds that "the discourse of Daesh is well 'insidiously fictionalized' and honed to meet the needs that young people in vulnerable situations express as, respectively, needs for identity, belonging and a life project, while they are often at a loss for any future prospects." Thus, "in a way, the passage from criminal to jihadist status erases the past and psychologically allows one to pass from the feeling of being a zero to that of being a hero."

This phenomenon is not unique to Tunisia. It is part of the type of recruitment chosen by the IS in Syria and Iraq. A former member of this organization explains that one of IS's weaknesses was to have favored "the number of its recruits to the detriment of their quality." The IS welcomed its new recruits without guarantors or sponsors, unlike Al-Qaeda, which required several. IS even offered to recruit them without any restrictions. The paradox being, as explained by an IS member, that "while Al-Qaeda was looking for quality (editor's note: religious) recruits, IS, by taking on everyone, was going for quantity."

Among these recruits, there were as many people who were "truly religious" and convinced of their commitment as those who were not. The Internet played a role. It significantly reduces the amount of training required of a candidate for jihad. It facilitates the dissemination of ideology, radical preaching, and combat videos. As one former IS member explains, many of these jihad candidates were connected and watched IS propaganda videos, without maintaining a political understanding of them. And, indeed, he explains that this method of recruitment attracted a large number of recruits at the expense of their quality. In his own words, "There were a lot of deviants."

This same member of the IS reports having met many of these recruits, who consumed large quantities of alcohol and drugs, and who, after watching propaganda videos, said to themselves: "The IS is not only the good life," but "it also pays its recruits substantial salaries"—salaries of up to US$3,000 per month, well above what these young people from disadvantaged suburbs are usually paid when they enter the workforce.

The organization's strategy has meant that a number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have preferred to join the jihad rather than continue to evolve in their criminogenic world. They are not forced by religious rigorism to break with the codes of their home environment, which is marked by a delinquent and prison culture. On their return from Syria and/or Iraq, they are often disappointed by what they had experienced there, they had become more violent without having abandoned their pre-jihadist ethos. Their system of representations and practices—or, if you prefer, their normative and cultural/cognitive symbolic frameworks—had basically remained unchanged, despite a militant behavior apparently based on religious rigor and devotion to armed jihad.

III – The Weakness of Religious Indoctrination in IS Camps

The fact that IS training camps were essentially geared towards military rather than religious training contributed to downplaying the importance of rigorous religious practice in jihadist commitment. For example, according to a Tunisian security official, the young people who joined the Al Nosra group, affiliated to Al Qaeda, in the early 2010s received high-quality military as well as theological-political training. This is confirmed by interviews with fighters involved with al-Qaeda in Syria, who claimed to have received a compulsory, in-depth religious education.

By contrast, according to a member of the Tunisian security forces, who confirms the type of recruitment described above, nothing similar is observed at IS. Selection was rapid on arrival, and young people were quickly sent into combat. As soon as they returned to Tunisia, "we quickly realized that religion (i.e., ideology) had not penetrated them well," and they quickly reverted to their former practices, namely alcohol, drugs, and delinquency. Data found in IS camps tend to confirm this assertion. 70% of foreign fighters arriving in Syria had only a "very inadequate knowledge of Islam," even though almost all of them claimed to "find strong inspiration in it."

According to a former IS member, this religious training in the camps was provided mainly by Saudis and Egyptians, or sometimes simply by people who had studied in Saudi Arabia. In reality, very few of them had received advanced religious training, which was mostly only basic. The time allocated to religious training was itself very limited. The description of "a typical day" includes, after dawn prayer and breakfast, a session of Koranic and religious instruction until 7

a.m., followed by military training all morning. A religious training session was given after breakfast, followed by a brief Islamic education course, before military training which lasted the rest of the day. It ended only in the late evening with a religious course.

The emphasis was clearly on the military aspect, to the detriment of the religious aspect. The former IS member explains that "there was a reverence for death and combat, with the religious aspect being less important." The duration of training varied from two weeks to 45 days, or even more depending on the case. Unlike Al-Qaeda, where religious indoctrination was just as important as military, this focus on the military aspect and the short duration devoted to religious education meant that these recruits were unable to "imbibe the values of Islam." Worse still, he confirms, at IS, the religious content was, itself, basic and superficial, summed up in three words: "Allah, the Prophet and jihad, i.e., the *béaba* without more." More specifically, he explains that the teaching centered on the concepts of *hakkimya* (the power of God), *wala oua bara* (loyalty and disloyalty), *hijra* (exile) and *El taefa el moutania* (the community that rejects Islam), which our interviewee describes as basic.

Consultation of the documents used in the camps tends to validate these findings. For example, the manual on the jurisprudence of jihad, *Fiqh Al Jihad* by Abu Abdellah Al Muhajir, one of Abu Mussab Zarqawi's closest friends, was compulsory. This manual, commonly referred to as "the jurisprudence of blood," legalizes large-scale suicide bombing, the killing of civilians, as well as women and children. Also, the elementary textbook on "the oneness of God" *Muqarrar fi al-Tawhid*, written by Turki Bin Ali, the IS's mufti between 2014–2016, deals, for the most part, with "nullifiers" in Islam, Abdel Wahab's *Nawakid Al Islam*, which exclude an individual from membership of the Muslim community, which, in this context, induces the IS's automatic authorization to murder him.

As a result, instructed in fundamental concepts by poorly qualified religious educators, and in a context where the overwhelming majority of training is focused on the military aspect, the theological aspect was more of a political veneer. In the IS, these young people had no time to immerse themselves deeply in a theological-political corpus, unlike those of Al-Qaeda. As a result, there was no noticeable change in either their worldview or their social behavior. On this point, a former IS official is categorical: "The organization's camps having been what they were, it was less a question of formatting and changing their new adherents religiously than of preparing them for combat and violence." Moreover, "in these camps, there was a great deal of abuse, theft, etc., as much on the part of the leaders as on that of the fighters themselves." As a result, the IS milieu was not much different, if any more violent, than the one they had fled and rejected.

IV – The Absence of a Policy for Dealing with Returnees

As one Tunisian security official noted, "the returnees were disenchanted, disillusioned, disgusted and deeply depressed by the violence of the IS. Their appallingly dramatic experience in this terrorist organization revealed itself to themselves, in that it had led them and trapped them at the antipodes of the epic and heroic ideal they attached to the dreamed advent of their Islamic State." A lawyer, who had represented some of these returnees, reports that "they had, in fact, gone to live this dream of the culmination of an Islamic state. However, all they found was violence, purges, and fighting, and they found themselves unwillingly committing acts of extreme violence."

Despite the large number of Tunisian returnees and the hardening of some of them, the Tunisian authorities have not set up programs to deradicalize and/or reintegrate their returnees or those who are repenting, like Algeria with its "National Reconciliation" policy, or Morocco with its *IS Moussalaha* (Reconciliation) program, and Mauritania with its *Mounassaha* (Counseling and Discussion) program.

Once back in Tunisia, hundreds of young people who had belonged to terrorist organizations were sentenced, on average, to 5 years' imprisonment, or even up to 20 years, depending on the seriousness of the charges. Once imprisoned, they were rarely isolated from other inmates, except in rare cases, where they were classified according to their dangerousness, particularly emirs (leaders) and preachers. As a psychologist in contact with several of them points out, "it would have been necessary to have been able to identify them with certainty, which was not always possible."

Admittedly, a deradicalization and reintegration program called *Tawassul* was designed, but it never came to fruition. As one expert who worked on its conceptualization explains, "*Tawassul* was never provided with the budgetary or human resources that would have enabled it to get off the ground." More specifically, due to the public finance crisis, few financial resources were generally allocated to reintegration programs. Added to this was the common-sense perception that these schemes offered ex-jihadists a new chance in life when they didn't deserve it. Moreover, when credits were dispensed less sparingly, it was customary for the corresponding budgets to be credited to "soft profiles," i.e., profiles that could be reintegrated into society. Often, this funding went to petty criminals rather than ex-jihadists.

What's more, from 2015 onwards, faced with an increase in terrorist actions in the country, the reluctance of civil society was strongly expressed by the refusal and rejection of the return of these Tunisian returnees. Finally, there was institutional resistance, which was to lead the Tunisian authorities to abandon this type of initiative.

As a result, "departure" to the Syrian-Iraqi zones of tension was dealt with

exclusively from a security point of view. According to one lawyer, rather than tackling the roots of the evil, once in prison "these returnees were classified as criminals, and treated as such, which ended up turning some of them into real criminals."

Once out of prison, many continued to be subject to close police control. According to the lawyer, "For them, finding a job becomes almost impossible because employers are aware of their past." The same applies to finding accommodation. Faced with this situation, "some resist and try to rebuild their lives, but the most disadvantaged fall back into delinquency and crime."

A psychologist explains that informal solidarity networks existed in marginalized neighborhoods, within which they maintained a neighborhood identity, attesting to the strength of this type of network. However, when they were released from prison and returned to their neighborhoods, they were excluded from these networks, suffering constant stigmatization. As this psychologist puts it, they are now "marginalized in environments that are themselves marginal, which is worrying".

So, it's hardly surprising that many of these socially isolated returnees try to rejoin the delinquent networks, reviving the codes of this milieu, which they have basically never abandoned.

Conclusion

On the one hand, while few of Tunisia's released returnees have rejoined jihadist groups or committed terrorist acts to date, the absence of a socio-professional reintegration policy and strategy increases the risk of recidivism in delinquency or even criminality. On the other hand, if jihadist groups, now in decline in North Africa and the Middle East, manage to reconstitute themselves, the risk of recidivism in political violence will increase accordingly, given the trivialization of the use of violence among these returnees and their reintegration into a network whose borders with jihadist networks may be porous.

To meet this security challenge, the reintegration programs set up in Morocco and Algeria in particular would benefit from being tried out in Tunisia. In Algeria, "National Reconciliation" has reintegrated some 15,000 Islamist fighters. In Morocco, under the aegis of the *Moussalaha* program, several hundred people convicted of terrorism have been released and successfully reintegrated into society and the workplace. In both countries, recidivism rates in terrorism and crime have been extremely low, partly thanks to this.