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Beyond Closing Mosques and Shutting Down Facebook Pages
How Tunisia Can Address the Threat of Online and Offline Terrorist Recruitment

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Tunisian nationals make up the largest number of foreign fighters affiliated with ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. As ISIS gains a stronger grip in neighboring Libya, the issue of youth radicalization in Tunisia is more pressing than ever. ISIS is highly effective and organized in using social media platforms to recruit foreign and local fighters across national borders. The paper examines ISIS's use of sophisticated online propaganda strategies to recruit young Tunisians and proposes concrete ways to improve the government's thus far lackluster response. Fighting the online and offline recruitment efforts of terrorist groups should include not only monitoring online content that incites violence but also more constructive measures such as building platforms to connect government with the population, from using social media to encourage civic engagement to crowdsourcing in policy making.

Introduction

Seifeddine Rezgui was a 23-year-old engineering student, clean-shaven and fond of football and break dancing. He had never travelled abroad. He was also the gunman behind the deadliest terrorist attack in Tunisian modern history, which left 39 tourists and himself dead at a seaside resort in Sousse in the summer of 2015. According to his shocked family and friends, Rezugi had previously expressed no interest in politics or religion and never showed signs of religious extremism. According to media reports, however, Rezugi was an avid user of social media. Directly before the attack, he shared a number of posts pledging allegiance to ISIS on his Facebook account.

How did ISIS manage to successfully recruit a person as ordinary as Rezugi and convince him to commit a terrorist attack on such a scale? There are a plethora of reasons why Tunisian men and women flock to join ISIS at home and abroad. Regardless of their diverse motivations, ISIS has shown itself to be highly effective at recruiting foreign and local fighters across borders, using sleek online propaganda and social media platforms.

In Rezugi's case, there is no evidence that he was in fact recruited online by ISIS, though he did make use of social media platforms. Nevertheless the threat of online recruitment and radicalization by Islamist terrorist groups remains very high. ISIS is one of the biggest threats to Tunisia's stability and democratic consolidation as it is getting a stronger hold over parts of neighboring Libya. Following the attack in Sousse, the Tunisian

government called for a "war on terror" and urged the international community to cooperate on a global response to the threat of ISIS. It passed a strong anti-terror law and promised to close in two weeks as many as eighty mosques whose imams were suspected of radicalizing local youths. What the response lacked was a set of robust comprehensive measures to fight the online – and offline – recruitment efforts of ISIS.

Youth Radicalization

Tunisia is the largest exporter of foreign fighters travelling to the conflict zones of Iraq, Libya, and Syria to join such terrorist groups as the Islamic State and Jabhat Al Nusra. According to official figures, there are currently some six thousand Tunisian members of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Unofficial numbers vary between three to seven thousand.[1] When ISIS leaders urged its jihadist fighters to relocate to Libya, such calls have found ears in Tunisia. As they are "next door" and have relatively easily access to Libya, Tunisians constitute the largest number of fighters there.[2]

There is no average profile for the Tunisian fighter serving terrorist forces abroad. They come from all economic, social, and educational backgrounds. Some come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, others from wealthy and highly educated families.[3] The average age is between 18 and 35, their youth being perhaps the only feature they have in common. Seven hundred of these fighters are female.[4]

Why do Tunisian youths turn in large numbers to terrorist groups such as ISIS? The answer is not a straightforward one. Before looking specifically at ISIS recruitment strategies and the shortcomings of the government's response, it is important to examine the more general reasons for youth radicalization in Tunisia.

The motivation behind the radicalization of Tunisian youth must be examined in the larger political and economic context of Tunisia before and after the "Arab Spring" of late 2010 and early 2011. Under the authoritarian, corrupt rule of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, young people in Tunisia had for decades suffered from economic exclusion and high unemployment rates especially among young graduates.[5] The mass protests of 2010–11 testify to their decades-old disenfranchisement. Even five years after after Ben Ali was deposed, however, the picture remains grim. One year after the revolution, rates of unemployment among male graduates increased from 15.8 percent to 23.7 percent, while unemployment among female graduates went up from 32.9 percent to 43.8 percent.[6] Five years on, the euphoria and optimism of the revolution has faded, and the status quo persists: high unemployment and lack of opportunities. Young people today have little faith in the government, and there is still a wide disconnect between state institutions and the population at large. A 2015 survey of Tunisian youth found that about 95 percent do not trust the state or the police.[7]

Reading through interviews with young Tunisians, one conclusion seems inevitable: there is a strong sense of disappointment, hopelessness, and despair. Toppling the dictator Ben Ali did not change their socioeconomic realities. Into this vacuum of hope, ISIS injects a strong alternative. A young man named Walid, when asked about friends who joined ISIS in Syria, commented: "They live better than us!" ISIS offers its fighters a home, a monthly stipend, and even multiple wives, he claimed. Another young Tunisian, Wissam, reported that his friend is "leading a truly nice, comfortable life" under ISIS.[8] Walid and Wissam's perspectives, although delusional, underline that the motivational factors for joining ISIS can include the desire for financial and material gains as well as power and status.[9]

Other crucial motivations are religious and political ideology and the craving on the part of young people for a sense of purpose and belonging. ISIS has stressed the narrative that its fighters are the "protectors" of Islam – and Muslims – in the face of Western colonialism and collaborating Arab rulers.

After the revolution in Tunisia, the new government tolerated jihadist-Salafist discourse as part of its commitment to freedom of expression and beliefs. Such discourse in fact further strengthened the message that jihad is a duty of Muslims in times of war, for example in the war in Syria.

Hungry for change, young men and women fell victim to such narratives, only to be disappointed later. Friends and family of some of the Tunisian fighters have reported that they have often regretted going to Syria after discovering a different reality. In fact, the number of returnee fighters to Tunisia is also the highest globally, standing at 650 fighters thus far.[10] While this number could signal a threat that terrorism will be reimported home, the returnees are a very valuable source of information for learning more about the motivation behind radicalization and designing pro-active measures accordingly. For this to materialize, however, de-radicalization programs have to be in place to rehabilitate returnees, win their trust, give amnesties in return for their readiness to peacefully engage with society and to cooperate to prevent further radicalization.

How Does ISIS Recruit?

ISIS recruits in Tunisia in two parallel ways. One method is to establish a recruiting point at a local mosque or center and start spreading their ideas through peer-to-peer relations, families, and friends.[11] It is often reported that more than one family member left to join ISIS abroad. In one case, an entire family from the rich middle-class Tunis suburb of La Marsa joined ISIS in Syria.[12] The second, more sophisticated way is through the Internet. The government's clampdown on mosques and other spaces where jihadist recruitment traditionally occurred has made the Internet a safer space to recruit, especially since it remains largely beyond the radar of Tunisian authorities.

As in other countries, online propaganda is core to ISIS's recruitment strategy in Tunisia. The level of sophistication of ISIS's propaganda products, from its polished electronic newsletter *Dapiq* to photos of jihadists and cute kittens to the gruesome, high-quality videos of beheadings, speak volumes about the group's digital communications capacities. ISIS spreads and "socializes" horror through YouTube videos, Facebook groups, and Twitter hashtags. Indeed, its members are avid users of Twitter. In a study done by the Brookings Institution, a minimum of 46,000 Twitter accounts used by ISIS supporters existed in the period between September and December 2014 alone. Interestingly, these accounts had a higher than average number of followers, with about 1,000 followers each.[13]

ISIS digital activity depends heavily on audiovisual campaigns. According to Javier Lesaca, a visiting researcher at George Washington University, ISIS released 845 videos between January 2014 and September 2015.[14] The videos show a high level of production value and pick up on modern cultural themes such as films and video games that resonate with a young global crowd.

An observed strength of ISIS online propaganda is its refined and carefully targeted online messages. To target Tunisians, for example, ISIS uses tailored recruitment videos featuring Tunisian fighters speaking in Tunisian Arabic and displaying Tunisian symbols as they urge more Tunisians to join them in Syria, Iraq, and Libya or to carry out lone-wolf style terrorist attacks at home.[15]

Examining the content more closely, one must not overlook the fact that ISIS portrays itself as a serious government. According to this narrative, it cares for its citizens, protects them, provides good services from healthcare to education, and ensures that social justice prevails in its newly captured lands. In other words: ISIS promises, ISIS delivers. One illustration of this is the "The Islamic State Report" – thus far issued four times – which explains how life runs under the fair and just rule of ISIS, from inspecting restaurants and distributing Zakat among the poor to protecting farmers.

This propaganda is used to attract potential recruits, which is the starting point of online recruitment. According to J.M. Berger, who has closely analyzed ISIS recruitment tactics, the process happens in five consecutive steps. Following 1) discovery, ISIS recruiters 2) create a micro-community where they flood the potential recruit with attention and more material, 3) isolate the potential recruit through encouraging him to cut ties with other sources of information and input such as family and friends, 4) take the conversation to private communications using encrypted platforms and apps, and 5) probe what the new recruit could do (either traveling to join ISIS or carrying out lone-wolf style attacks at home) and encourage him/her to take this action.[16]

According to the Rescue Association of Tunisians Trapped Abroad (RATTA), the point of no return for the brainwashed recruit is the stage where he is so isolated that he only speaks to ISIS supporters. Radicalization is successful once the conversation with the recruit has gone private.[17]

The Response of the Tunisian Government

After three major terrorist attacks claimed by ISIS in 2015, the Tunisian government's declared "war on terror" included passing the controversial counterterrorism law of July 25, 2015, replacing an older law of 2003, which was used during Ben Ali's rule to quash dissent and suppress freedom of expression, association, and assembly. Even though the new law contains a few improvements, Tunisian civil society and activists decried it, claiming that it puts freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and other civil liberties at risk.[18] The government closed down local mosques that were suspected of spreading extremism. It also opened and closed borders with Libya several times and imposed an occasional ban on citizen movement and travel.

The government also started to pay attention to cyber terrorism after jihadist and extremist groups mushroomed on Twitter and Facebook in the wake of the revolution. After terrorist attacks, many urged the government to block websites and pages that incite violence and terrorism. Noomane Fehri, the minister for communications, technologies, and digital economy, asserted that the government "will not adopt a policy of blocking websites whatever their danger to us because we believe

this solution is technologically useless," and claimed that his ministry would continue to monitor such groups.[19] The ministry of interior and the ministry of communication have coordinated efforts to monitor and intercept jihadist cells that used online accounts to facilitate smuggling of fighters or to plan terrorist attacks. There are no official figures on how many of these operate in Tunisia, but according to local media reports, there have been more than 2,183 coordinated operations between the two ministries and Tunisian security forces to monitor these groups.

The government also announced that it would collaborate with social media companies to remove content that incites violence.[20] Yet there has been no follow-up on this plan. Tunisia apparently made no official requests to Twitter to legally remove inciting content, and only one was made to Facebook.[21] Despite the minister's assurances that there will be no censorship in Tunisia after the revolution, digital activists pointed out legal loopholes and vague definitions that give the government the powers of surveillance, infringing on the rights to privacy and data protection.[22]

In early November 2016, a number of media sources reported that Tunisia's National Security Council, headed by President Beji Caid Essebsi, signed a new national strategy to fight "terrorism and extremism." Little detail has been revealed about the strategy, but according to an official statement, it is built around the four main pillars of "prevention, protection, judicial proceedings and retaliation."[23]

Recommendations

The response of the Tunisian government to the rising threat of youth radicalization by ISIS and other terrorist groups has thus far been inefficient and mostly reactionary. A "whole of government approach" is urgently needed, one that departs from conventional modes of punishment and reaction and moves toward more sustainable forms of prevention and reintegration of radicalized youth. The national strategy to combat terrorism and extremism that President Essebsi signed on November 7, 2016 was, according to the presidential spokesperson, developed through different stages in cooperation with civil society. Aside from the stated purpose of pursuing "prevention, protection, monitoring and retaliation," very little detail has been disclosed about the new strategy.

The strategy should definitely include measures to combat ISIS propaganda online, while ensuring that newly won civil rights will not be compromised or affected. There is indeed a fine line to walk between security issues and human rights, a matter that post-Ben Ali Tunisia must be particularly sensitive to. No government has the capacity or the authority to shut down all extremist online content, especially when ISIS has the agile ability to disappear and reappear quickly. Considering such ethical and technical limitations, one approach that could work would be to use online platforms proactively to help bridge the disconnect between the government and the population. With a high level of Facebook penetration among Tunisian youth, the government should utilize it to the fullest – as much as ISIS does. There are many examples from around the world of governments using social media for civic engagement. Crowdsourcing in policy-making is one option to "take part in brainstorming, discussing, developing, and even implementing decisions that used to be the domain of political and expert elites."[24] Iceland used crowdsourcing for constitutional reform, the US federal government has drawn on it for national dialogues and participatory budgeting, and the UAE has used it for improving public services. Similar measures in Tunisia would lend the youth a voice and increase their sense of belonging to society and of being significant actors in their country.

To be certain, online civic engagement cannot alone wipe out the threat of ISIS. It needs to be complemented by serious social, political, and economic reforms, by rigorous anti-corruption efforts, and by a sustained commitment to transparency and accountability. Only such a comprehensive approach can counter radicalization. But until such a serious strategy is implemented, merely closing down mosques and banning Facebook pages will not suffice.

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Notes

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