



## “The pandemic brought challenges AND opportunities to combat extremism”



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### **1- How has the pandemic impacted your research on the link between gender and violent extremism?**

I am conducting research for my second book on the question of women returnees from areas previously held by extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Due to the pandemic, I can not conduct field research and collect data anymore. I had planned to do interviews with women and families who returned to Tunisia, but this has become harder now. Instead, I am gathering secondary information from books and articles, and doing much more reading than writing. Despite this, I keep working and participating in many online international conferences in the meantime and until the COVID-19 situation enables me to conduct research on the ground and to talk directly to women returnees.

### **2- What are the challenges and opportunities that working online has brought to your work?**

It is difficult to work online with returnees. For example, Tunisian women and men who have returned from areas previously held by ISIS are often under scrutiny from their families and relatives. Women returnees often feel that they are unable to speak freely or trust the police and other state actors. For the rehabilitation of returnees, it is important that they feel that they are in a safe space to build trust and share information and knowledge, however, it is harder to build a relationship of trust online because we cannot interact face-to-face.

On the other hand, sometimes, being behind a screen helps some women to be less shy and more forthcoming about their experience with violent extremist groups. One of the advantages of interacting online is that the women do not have to show their faces, so they can interact with us without being visible. Often, these women cannot speak freely without their family's approval, as talking to a researcher can be frowned upon by society and a male family member is usually present during such talks. However, now they can connect online, at home, and feel less exposed.

### **3- How do you think the pandemic has impacted violent extremism in Tunisia?**

Unfortunately, there is very little research being done on this issue, and it is not really discussed in the Tunisian media. I have collected some information in rural areas affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and some groups appear to be targeting youth for recruitment, using previous unresolved grievances as a driver. Some extremist groups are trying to take advantage of the new social movements in Tunisia to recruit. They also try to appeal to some families and women and youth by providing them with some basic needs, such as food. By showing empathy to some of the marginalized groups, extremist groups have been able to exploit this current context. We should keep in mind that in pandemic time people spend more time online, so this creates opportunities for extremist groups to scale up their recruitment.

### **4- How do you think marginalized groups, and women can be more vulnerable to extremist agenda?**

In Tunisia, there is a link between violence against women and violent extremism. Extremist groups target women who are vulnerable and having a hard time. During the pandemic, many women have also lost their jobs, and are in need of help to survive, and rates of domestic and gender-based violence have increased dramatically. All these factors have pushed some women to seek protection from extremist groups, especially because the government is not taking this kind of violence seriously. Moreover, few associations in Tunisia are working on the issue of gender-based violence, and their work is limited and mostly conducted in urban areas. In rural areas, particularly by the Algerian and Libyan borders, there are no services for women survivors of violence. For some, the only way to survive is to be protected by extremist groups.

### **5- What are the long-term impacts of the pandemic on violent extremism and how do you think we can combat it during and after the pandemic?**

As the pandemic grinds on, we expect more people to lose their jobs and education. Marginalized people will become even more vulnerable to violence and extremism. Some violent extremist groups are taking advantage of this. We need to do more to immunize marginalized and vulnerable people against violent groups and ideologies.

For example, Tunisian women returnees were already marginalized, but COVID-19 has made it even harder for women to find someone to talk to due to social distancing and lockdown measures. Many women cannot access services that are meant to help their reintegration into society and instead, they feel isolated. This might lead some of them to think that it would be better to go back to Libya or other hotspots.

Civil society should adapt their services to vulnerable groups, including women returnees. There are many things we can still do remotely. We can deliver psychosocial services by phone. We can establish mechanisms to report hate speech on social media.

We also need to ensure that efforts to prevent violent extremism continue during and post COVID-19. The government needs to build partnerships and strategies with civil society and other actors to face the new challenges that the pandemic has brought, and help the most marginalized and vulnerable among us, including women. Unfortunately, social aid is not always gender sensitive. For example, the Tunisian government has been distributing aid to some families to alleviate their hardships during the pandemic, but in many cases only men receive the monetary support as they are considered the head of family, leaving many women behind. The government should rethink their laws and policies to prioritize vulnerable women and ensure that they do not fall victims to poverty or to the extremist agenda.

*Over the past few years, UN Women and CTED have partnered to establish an Expert Platform on Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in North Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted research, and civil society and governments' action aiming to prevent violent extremism. To shed light on the consequences of COVID-19 on violent extremism in North Africa, UN Women and CTED give a voice to members of the Platform, in order to better understand how the pandemic has changed their work.*

[Find out about the Expert Platform on Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in North Africa, and read other experts' interviews.](#)