PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism through Community Resilience
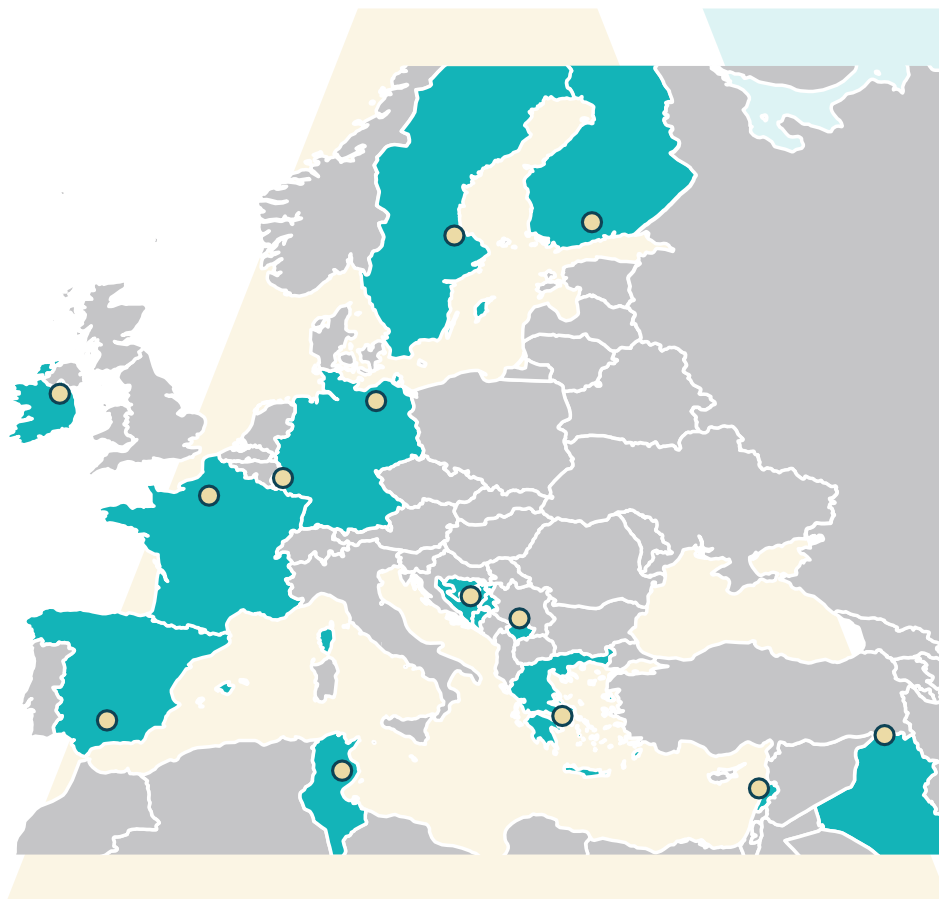
Policy Brief for
Tunisia

Introduction to the PAVE project

The [PAVE](#) research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on three thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; and the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation.

The PAVE project in Tunisia was led by a team at the University of Sfax (USF). It focused on (1) the interactions between states and religious institutions, and (2) online and offline (de)radicalisation.

Favouring a comprehensive approach free from preconceptions, the USF team conducted fieldwork at two sites of investigation, both with similar socio-economic characteristics, but with different dispositions as to (de)radicalisation. In-depth individual interviews and focus groups, on the one hand, and the analysis of websites and web pages of actors directly or indirectly involved in (de)radicalisation, on the other hand, have allowed the USF team to collect information on the factors promoting violence or, conversely, having the potential to contain it and even prevent its extreme manifestations.

Conceived in two parts, the fieldwork was conducted in two phases, the first of which was devoted to individual face-to-face, semi-directed interviews with actors operating at the two sites, namely the North-West (represented by the city of El Kef) and the Central-West (represented by the cities of Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid). The fieldwork was conducted over three periods: first, from 26 to 29 December 2020; second, from 20 to 24 May 2021; and third, from 28 October to 3 November 2021. Forty-four interviews in total were carried out at the two sites with representatives of institutions, associations and other organisations, and independent respondents.

The second phase, carried out online, consisted of observation and analysis of websites and Facebook pages. The USF team chose websites and official Facebook pages of actors from the political, religious and civil society fields. The team opted for Facebook because it is used by 73% of Tunisian social media users.[1]

The analysis found that there are three levels or degrees of resilience, ranging from the strongest, in the city of Kef (North-West site), to less significant, in the city of Kairouan, then to the weakest, in Sidi Bouzid (Central-West site).[2]

From the field research and consultations with various institutional and association-based actors carried out by the Sfax University team, key recommendations have emerged. Most are concerned with the education sector, on account of the fact that the USF's inquiry has revealed an obvious lack of coordination among the various governmental departments. This flaw has to be addressed immediately because it involves Tunisian young people at different stages of their development.

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[1] Mohamed Djaziri (2021), Les chiffres clés des réseaux sociaux en Tunisie. www.digital-discovery.tn/chiffres-reseaux-sociaux-tunisie-2022/

[2] For further information about the findings, see the USF team's Working Papers by Al-Baalbaky et al. (2022) and Ayed et al. (2022), both of them PAVE Project Publications.

1. Recommendations for national and local state institutions

Public authorities, such as regional directorates of ministries and municipalities, should:

- **Revise the education programmes** in such a way as to encourage socialisation to the universal values of individual freedom and respect for others; this could be done, for instance, by replacing religious education with moral education, since the issue at stake is education in tolerance and acceptance of others, whatever their differences.

- Rehabilitate the tradition of **training courses for inspectors and teachers on human rights and cultural diversity** by updating knowledge, strengthening participatory teaching skills and eliminating the asymmetrical and paternalistic methods of the past.

- In joint efforts by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture and CSOs, provide more space for **arts and cultural activities** that promote and encourage citizenship (e.g. devote afternoons to school club activities).

- Improve the programme of **sports activities in schools** by revising timetables (e.g. avoid juxtaposing these activities with language and science sessions and try to schedule them at the end of the day), ensuring that girls are not excluded from these activities, and providing all schools with the same sports equipment so as not to deprive some children of this important aspect of education under the pretext of lacking equipment. This applies especially to working-class neighbourhoods and inland regions.

- **Improve coordination among the different ministries involved in the education process** (Social Affairs, Women and the Family, Youth and Sports, National Education, Religious Affairs), in order to avoid the blurring of responsibilities and diverging approaches to the education of future citizens.

- **Reallocate the supervision of private schools** (often called Koranic schools) to the Ministry of Family and Children and the Ministry of Education – instead of the Ministry of Religious Affairs under which they are currently placed. This will help to harmonise the curricula for all children educated in public and public schools, to ensure oversight of the curricula, and to protect children from the abuses of private schools which evade institutional control over their education programmes.

- Ensure that only educational institutions under the dual supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Ministry of Higher Education are entitled to **train imams** and to formulate the official discourse on religion and faith.

- Adapt higher education to the needs of the labour market, and rehabilitate vocational education from secondary school onwards, in order to **improve the professional integration of school drop-outs**, whose numbers are close to 100,000 per year.

- Revisit the **development model** that has been in place for decades: equal distribution of public and private investments between regions and inclusion of marginalised and impoverished social groups.

2. Recommendations for the international community

International institutions such as UN and EU actors with a field presence in Tunisia should:

- Provide financial and institutional **support programmes for the employment of young people in precarious situations**, which would facilitate their inclusion in the job market.

- Within the framework of a solidarity-based economy, provide financial and logistical assistance for **mini-projects to support vulnerable women**. Their financial autonomy would reduce the risks of vulnerability to radicalisation.

- Pay particular attention to the city of Kairouan as a major repository of historical and religious heritage. The **promotion and profiling of Kairouan as a hub for religious tourism** can support its economic development and counter the risks of vulnerability and religious radicalisation.

- Pay specific attention to Le Kef as a city with strong archaeological and natural potential. **International funds invested in the field of cultural and/or winter tourism** could ensure the transformation of the Tunisian tourism sector, which has so far been concentrated on the country's coastline with low added value.

- Strengthen cooperation programmes to **enhance free movement between the countries of the North and the South**, in order to relieve the bad memories of the colonial era across the Tunisian South (including Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid). This would translate into the promotion of inter-country relations based on mutual respect, the recognition of human rights without double standards and, above all, the establishment of win-win exchanges.

3. Recommendations for civil society

- Given the modest powers granted to municipalities, civil society organisations (CSOs) benefiting from greater freedom and flexibility are called upon to compensate for these limitations. Thus, CSOs should mobilise and advocate for **greater implementation of the principle of positive discrimination in favour of disadvantaged regions** of central and southern Tunisia – especially since this principle was not only included in the 2014 constitution but is also part of the new Tunisian constitution that has just been ratified after the referendum on 25 July 2022.

- Associations and media outlets are called upon to play a key role i**n supporting women's empowerment**, particularly with regard to equal pay and mobility and parity in inheritance rights.

- **Networking between CSOs working for human rights, migrants and women and cultural associations** strengthens the potential for resilience.

- **Charities and media outlets involved in the propagation of violent extremist discourse should be better controlled** and, if necessary, banned.

- Citizens' associations, media and academic institutions (such as the Institute of Sport and Physical Education in Kef and the Institute of Islamic Studies in Kairouan) are best placed to **build bridges for dialogue with radicalised groups**. They can be an additional source of information on how to better combat violent extremism.

- Civil society, because of its proximity to vulnerable communities, can **draw the attention of public authorities to forms of vulnerability and injustice and to proposals for social reform**, especially from those who suffer injustice on a daily basis.

- CSOs should undertake **outreach programmes, such as sports or artistic activities**, that are dedicated to protecting against – or addressing – risks of violence.

- Civil society leaders and academics should **urge radical political parties and their media outlets** to recognise the harmful impact of their discourse on young people.

References

These recommendations are derived from comparative reports compiled by PAVE country teams and published on the PAVE website: www.pave-project.eu/publications. See especially:

- Rudayna Al-Baalbaky, Faiza Ayed, Juline Beaujouan, Zouheir Ben Jannet, Sadok Damak, Hmida Ennaifer, Josep García Coll, Samiha Hamdi, Marie Kortam, Hassan Laaguir, Amjed Rasheed, Fethi Rekik, Javier Ruipérez Canales, Mohammed Sharqawi, Maher Zoghlami (2022). Interactions between States and Religious Institutions in the MENA Region. Working Paper 4. PAVE Project Publications. www.pave-project.eu/publications/PAVE_870769_D4.2_publication_layout.pdf

- Faiza Ayed, Lara Azzam, Zouheir Ben Jannet, Sadok Damak, Maria El-Sammak, Samiha Hamdi, Fethi Rekik, Youssef Salloum (2022). Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the MENA Region. Working Paper 6. PAVE Project Publications. www.pave-project.eu/publications/PAVE_870769_D5.2_publication_layout.pdf

- Faiza Ayed, Zouheir Ben Jannet, Sadok Damak, Samiha Hamdi, Fethi Rekik (2022). Interactions between States and Religious Institutions in Tunisia. Working Paper: Report on Field Work. PAVE Project.