Working Paper 6: Online and Offline (De)radicalisation in the MENA region

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1   Introduction

Over the past century, the Middle East and North Africa region has gone through cycles of violence and war, varying from one country to another. In the first half of the 20th century, the region witnessed numerous battles of liberation from direct military colonialism, followed by social and political upheavals, internal revolutions, and then a predominance of authoritarian regimes in the second half of the century. Despite the 'Arab Spring', the paths towards democratic transformation were soon interrupted by coups, chaos, militarisation of revolutions, and conflict of identities such as in Egypt and Libya. Furthermore, the region witnessed the emergence of violent radical Islamic jihadist movements seeking control and power alongside the popular factions and armed sectarian militias in Syria and Iraq among others. This plunged the region once again into a cycle of structural violence, highlighting the failure of the state-building project. In light of these events, the level of tyranny, oppression and poverty rose, and despair and disillusion led to the vanishing of previous ambitions, except in some countries such as Tunisia[1] and Sudan.[2]

While resistance to democracy in some Arab countries can be attributed to the still influential role of the army or tribal dynasties, it would be difficult to attribute these reasons to cases such as Lebanon and Tunisia, which seem to be unaffected by these dynamics. These two countries, having displayed economic prosperity and political and social stability during the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, mainly owing to their human resources, could not, however, escape the turbulence of the world economy and the profound geostrategic changes that followed. These external factors have impacted the internal dynamics in Lebanon and Tunisia.

Due to its geographical location, Lebanon has found itself entangled in uninterrupted regional conflicts, which ended up destabilising the precarious socio-political balance between its religious confessions and drowning society in an infinite spiral of civil war and violence, whereby confessional affiliation is intertwined with partisan adherence and regional alliance to Arab and/or Islamic "sub-imperialisms." Although it has yet to face the risk of civil war, Tunisia has not been spared from religious and political violence. While the "Black Decade" in Algeria did not affect Tunisian stability, the fall of the Libyan regime a few months after the Tunisian revolution and the degeneration of what was supposed to be a revolution into an armed civil war seriously undermined the democratic process that had barely begun in Tunisia. In addition to the porous borders that allow the passage of weapons, which are uncommon in Tunisia, the country has been exposed to Salafist ideas from outside through satellite television channels and social networks that manifested themselves in radicalised attitudes of some population groups.

The emprical study implemented in Tunisia and Lebanon aimed to investigate the nature of community vulnerability and resilience against violent extremism across four field sites, both in their offline and online manfestations, while putting a specific emphasis on cross-cutting gendered dynamics.

The results of the fieldwork conducted in both countries can be outlined in three aspects: 1) violence takes many forms; 2) there are multiple vulnerability factors; and 3) there is a definite willingness

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[1] Sarah Yerkes & Nesrine Mbarek, "After Ten Years of Progress, How Far Has Tunisia Really Come?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2021). https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/01/14/after-ten-years-of-progress-how-far-has-tunisia-really-come-pub-83609.

[2] Aly Verjee, "Political transitions in Sudan and Ethiopia: an early comparative analysis", *Global Change, Peace & Security*, (2021): 33:3, 279-296, DOI: 10.1080/14781158.2021.1961703

and/or potential for resilience, which is particularly evident in El Kef (Tunisia) and Kherbet Rouha (Lebanon).

Admittedly, the form of violence that has prevailed for some time in both Tunisia and Lebanon is that of religious extremism of external origin. This does not alter the fact that its internal causes are manifold: striking regional disparities, corruption, and sexism in Tunisia; and an already precarious internal politico-confessional balance in Lebanon, which is aggravated by major regional and international issues and by a very influential Arab-Israeli conflict.

The socio-economic marginalisation of Kairouan/Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia and the particularity of Majdal Anjar's strategic location as an obligatory passage, for decades, of armies and goods in Lebanon, constitute two distinct and major factors of vulnerability in both countries. However, as distinct as they may be, these two factors have embraced the Salafist ideology in a rather similar way and generated religious cleavages that are unprecedented in the study areas.

That is why, when taking into account their potential for resilience, the two communities fairly immune to Salafism (El Kef in Tunisia and Kherbet Rouha in Lebanon) present the best indications of resilience thanks to a rich cultural heritage and a strong openness towards Europe in one instance, and a capacity for internal social control, in the other, as well as via a moderate and respected religious reputation and an effective municipal power, but also via a clear material prosperity of migratory origin. The communities with less potential in this regard (Kairouan/Sidi Bouzid, Majdal Anjar) show a firm will to assert a moderate religiosity, or rather a "compromise" or "arrangement" of not resorting to violence, supported in Tunisia in particular by a network of associations and, in Lebanon, by notable local religious and municipal figures, approved and endorsed by the central power of the two capitals.

2 Context

Although the Tunisian and Lebanese contexts present certain similarities in terms of the novelty of religious radicalisation and its strong interference with other forms of radicalisation, especially political radicalisation, it would be wise to discuss each country separately, since their regional and international situations and the nature of the social configuration in the two countries are very different. This is at least partly the reason why the winds of the Arab Spring, which have been blowing for eleven years in the MENA region, have generated such different states of affairs in Tunisia and Lebanon.

2.1 Tunisia

The Tunisian context is characterised by some **influence of the country's regional environment on its insecurity and the rise of unprecedented armed violence**. But is this enough to conclude that the origins of violence are exclusively external? Is there not an internal disposition to violence and, therefore, a permeability to radicalised ideas opposed to the economic, social and political status quo prevailing since the independence? These two questions are all the more justified when taking into account that the perception of a total absence of violence throughout the decades following the independence in 1956 should be questioned, at least in part. One can even argue that signs of internal

discontent were evident long before the emergence of the satellite TV channels and social networks responsible for the spread of a radical version of Islam.

The **history of the protest movements** in independent Tunisia shows that the most recent instances of social contention in the large, industrialised cities of the coast date back to 1978. From that date onwards, it was the towns of the interior, which did not receive much support from the Tunisian General Labor Union (TGLU) that took over the scene. The protest movements of Gafsa in 1980 and of the mining basin in 2008, as well as the "bread revolt" in 1984, were clear warnings of the aggravation of regional disparities, exacerbated by the "asynchronous development" model adopted since 1970. While the 1980 movement was tainted by Libyan interference, the fact remains that the frustration of those left behind in the so-called development model is no longer tenable.[3]

After ousting Bourguiba through a 'clean' coup, and relying on the broad support he obtained following his opening speech of November 7, 1987, Ben Ali was able to reach an agreement with Tunisia's General Labour Union (TGLU), which had been weakened by its two confrontations with the government in 1978 and 1985, but also by the repercussions of the global economic crisis, in particular the adoption by Tunisia of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and its corollary, i.e. the flexibilisation of the work contract. This agreement ensured periodic negotiations of wages in exchange for social peace, which restricted the Union's role to that of a simple trade union. The Islamist party, which has been seeking a legal entry into the political scene for years, then filled the political vacuum.

Ben Ali, well informed and aware of the ambitions of the Movement of Islamic Tendency (before changing its name to Ennahda Movement), but also of its readiness to stage a coup, immediately led the Islamists to sign the National Pact in 1988, during the first commemoration of the November 7 coup, staged by none other than Ben Ali himself. Barely two years later he monopolised the scene, reducing the role of political parties and even CSOs to a formality or forcing them to return to clandestine work. In addition to displaying a commitment to peaceful action and integration into civil society organisations and associations, the Islamist party also attempted to resort to violence.[4] However, having realised the heavy cost paid by a significant number of its militants and the narrowing of its room for maneuver in the administrations and the main economic sectors, political Islam took a step back, far from the attention of the central government, and concentrated its efforts in the marginalised regions of the interior and/or the informal sector in the south and west of the country, as well as in the peripheral and/or popular neighborhoods of large coastal cities.

In other words, **the Islamist party owes its broad electoral support, especially in 2011, to the populations of the southern governorates**, which share its conservatism, but from a tribal standpoint. With the culmination of the marginalisation of the interior governorates following the free trade agreement signed in 1995 with the European Union, which forces the government to focus on the most competitive region – that is to say, the best endowed with infrastructure and services – it is by no means surprising that **the feeling of 'Hogra' (denigration) felt by the inhabitants of these governorates converged with the theme of 'victimisation' spread by the Islamists**.

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[3] Fathi Rekik, Migration and Regional Development in Southern Tunisia, Case of the Governorate of Mednine, Ph.D. thesis presented at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Tunis, 1990.

[4] Mounir Hanablia, Ennahdha Party: Terrow and misinformation: "Disclosures by former militants of the Movement of Islamic Tendency confirm the responsibility of their organization for the terrorist acts that occurred in Tunisia in 1987, in Sousse and Monastir, and in 1991, in Bab Souika, in Tunis." Kapitalis.com/Tunisie/2021/03/21. Accessed on January 28, 2022, at 12:40.

It is clear that the bias of the inhabitants of the governorates – who live on the fringes of the economy of seaside tourism and services connected to globalisation – in favour of the Islamists has a firm basis. Even those living in governorates endowed with natural resources (phosphate in Gafsa, oil in Tataouine) recognise that their role is limited to the extraction and transit of raw materials and energy sources to the ports of coastal cities. This observation is shared by large segments of the population of other governorates such as Kairouan and Sfax. The inhabitants of the former, although close to Sousse, feel that their city, which has a rich religious and historical symbolism, is not valued. The reputation earned by the imam who opposed one of the decisions of Bourguiba has exacerbated the region's economic and political isolation.[5] Sfax, nicknamed the Capital of the South, due to its entrepreneurial potential, among other things, and despite its good development indicators, was aligned with the Islamists in the 2011 elections. Here too, the inhabitants blame the central government, not quite for marginalisation, but rather for blocking their development momentum. This partly explains why its economic and intellectual elite has migrated to Tunis in search of better opportunities and entrepreneurial conditions.

During the 2011 elections, **Islamist parties, and, more generally, conservative parties, labeled the modernist parties as 'gendarmes' of France**, making reference to the 'betrayal of Bourguiba,' who would have, according to them, sold Tunisia to France in exchange for a formal independence, further compromising the Arab-Muslim identity of the country. After a period of truce from 2014 to 2019, following the deal made in Paris between the two Sheikhs – Béji Caïd Essebsi and Rached Ghannouchi, the heads of Nida Tunes and Ennahda, respectively – the **controversy around the independence of Tunisia** is once again a heated topic. Thus, Itilaf Al Karama, a conservative political movement, considers the modernist parties, primarily the Free Destourian Party (FDP), 'gendarmes of France' from which Tunisia is not yet liberated, according to them. In other words, the **drivers of violence are both internal and external, and they interfere with one another**, as in the case of Lebanon.

The **suspension of the activities of the Assembly of the People's Representatives (APR) from July 25, 2021**, by the President of the Republic has certainly put an end to the almost daily display of verbal and physical violence within the walls of the Bardo Palace (seat of the APR), but not to the display of violence in the media, social networks, and in the public space.

2.2   Lebanon

The events that took place in the region starting in 2011 had both a direct and indirect impact on the situation in the country. This is not unusual in Lebanon; several examples from the country's recent history demonstrate the direct influence of regional events. For instance, Lebanese politics and the public were divided along the Cairo axis and that of Baghdad in the mid-fifties, which ultimately led to a small-scale civil war in 1958 that only ended after an agreement was reached between Egypt and the United States.[6] Moreover, the dispute over Palestinian resistance launched from south Lebanon against Israel was a gateway to the Lebanese civil war in 1975,[7] while the war between Iraq and Iran

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[5] This refers to Imam Abderrahmane Khlif, who denied entry to the Great Mosque to an American team wishing to perform scenes from an American film in the early nineteen-sixties.

[6] Bruce Riedel, "Beirut 1958: America's origin story in the Middle East", *Brookings* (October 2019). https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/10/29/beirut-1958-americas-origin-story-in-the-middle-east/.

[7] Fawaz Traboulsi, *Silat Bila Wasel* (Beirut: Riyad Al-Rayyis, 1999), 245.

also took the form of an internal war in Lebanon that led to the bombing of embassies and the head-quarters of international forces in the mid-1980s.[8] The divisions between neighbouring countries over the Arab-Israeli conflict between what was called the axis of resistance on the one hand and the axis of peace on the other, took the shape of a sharp vertical **division between the March 8 camp led by the Shiite Iranian-backed Hezbollah and the March 14 camp led by the then Saudi-backed Sunni future movement thereby fuelling the sectarian Sunni-Shiite dispute and the internal Christian divisions,** particularly after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005.[9] The fall of Baghdad in 2003 and the onset of the **Syrian uprising** that followed in 2011 along with other subsequent events contributed to bringing about **a state of local polarisation and the emergence of radical Islamic movements in Lebanon**. This led to large numbers of Sunni youth joining the fight alongside these movements in Iraq and Syria, and to Hezbollah's direct military involvement in support of the Syrian regime.[10]

Therefore, any study of the Lebanese conflicts must take into account two main factors: one is external with its regional and international dimension, while the other is the internal factor with its historical dimension that may explain the identity crisis and lack of proper state-building.[11] **Lebanon's historical subordination to external powers was a double-edged sword: it was positive in terms of the international attention it received, and negative in terms of confiscating the decision-making process and internal stability**. This is what the author of the Lebanese constitution, Michel Chiha, was well aware of from the beginning, when he perceived that "when Lebanon becomes hostage, it flourishes, and when it becomes independent, it becomes unstable."[12] This instability is not due to the plurality per se, but to the **sectarian system and mentality** which linked the Lebanese identity to sectarian rather than national belonging.[13] Consequently, each sect had its own patronage and institutions leading to a clan mentality centred upon a leader.[14] Accordingly, the more a group or constituency finds itself capable of changing reality as a result of its demographic growth, organisational ability or external support, the more it tries to change the status quo or impose its agenda based on its political interests.[15]

As for the Sunnis of Lebanon, despite the fact that they make up about a third of the Lebanese population, a minority mentality emerged in their collective mindset. This is a result of grievances over the lack of economic development in areas where they are mainly concentrated which has ultimately rendered these areas the poorest, including the North and the Beqaa valley. Within the Lebanese political scene, **Sunnis also consider themselves "politically marginalised"** due to what they consider to be the hegemony of the Shiite Hezbollah over Lebanese politics and the latter's establishment of entities to

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[8] Ariel Merari, *Driven to Death: Psychological and Social Aspects of Suicide Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.

[9] Tony Najem, *Lebanon: The Politics of a Penetrated Society* (London: Routledge, 2010) https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505083

[10] Marisa Sullivan, "HEZBOLLAH IN SYRIA*". Institute for the Study of War* (2014). http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07896

[11] Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *An Occasion of War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (California: University of California Press, 1994).

[12] Fawaz Traboulsi, *Silat Bila Wasel* (Beirut: Riyad Al-Rayyis, 1999), 129.

[13] Interview with a Lebanese intellectual specialised in philosophical and pedagogical thinking by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, August 7, 2021

[14] N. Kliot, "The Collapse of the Lebanese State", *Middle Eastern Studies 23*, no. 1 (1987): 54–74. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283154

[15] Interview with an expert in international politics and media affairs by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, August 8, 2021

co-opt the Sunni sect under the name of "The Resistance Brigades".[16] In addition, many **Sunni youth and activists claim to be persecuted by the judicial and security authorities in a discriminatory and targeted manner**, such as those that joined or merely support the Syrian 'revolution'. Many of these are in prison, which is also a major factor behind the high extremism rates among detainees.[17] This is exacerbated by the weakness of the Sunni political and religious leaderships. **The religious leadership in the Sunni community is accused of subordination to the political leadership and of justifying its actions**, as some call them the "jurists of the Sultan",[18] while the political leadership is accused of focusing on their own interests and failing to establish a strong patron that preserves the sect's rights and protects it from the hegemony of Hezbollah. This allowed informal Islamic institutions and parties to fill the void left by the political and religious leaderships, which in turn used the discourse of victimhood and blaming the political and religious leaders.[19] As a result, **disenfranchised Sunni youth have sought alternative discourses on different social media channels or through their connections abroad as means to address their frustration and grievances,** and **connect to a group that makes them feel empowered within a certain imagined community** through which they discover their identity.[20] This led many of to join the radical Islamic extremist organisations in Iraq and Syria between 2003 and 2020.[21]

3   Methodology

Favouring a comprehensive approach free from preconceived determinisms, the Tunisian and Lebanese teams have chosen two sites of investigation with similar socio-economic characteristics and different dispositions to (de)radicalisation. In-depth individual interviews and focus groups on the one hand, and the analysis of websites and webpages of actors directly or indirectly involved in (de)radicalisation on the other hand, have allowed us to collect a wealth of information on the factors that promote violence or, conversely, the potential to contain it and even prevent its extreme manifestations.

The fieldwork in the selected sites of the two countries was not always smooth. The COVID-19 pandemic limited and often prohibited face-to-face interviews. The reluctance of some interviewees, due to the sensitive topic of discussion, but also to the tumultuous regional and internal political environment in both Tunisia and Lebanon, forced the teams to be flexible with regard to the timing of field trips and the priorities of the tasks to be accomplished.

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[16] Chris Zambelis, "Hizb Allah's Lebanese Resistance Brigades." *Combatting Terrorism Centre at West Point Sentinel 11*, no.7 (2014). https://ctc.usma.edu/hizb-allahs-lebanese-resistance-brigades/

[17] Raphael Lefèvre, "The Sociopolitical Undercurrent of Lebanon's Salafi Militancy", *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre* (2018). https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/03/27/sociopolitical-undercurrent-of-lebanon-s-salafi-militancy-pub-75744

[18] Nabil Khalifa (2016), *Targeting Sunnis* (Byblos: Byblos Centre for Studies, 2016), 13, 26, 29, 48, 54, 66, p13, 128, 144, 155.

[19] Youssef Salloum, "Pedagogical and doctrinal factors in the creation of an extremist personality", (PhD diss., Lebanese University, 2020, 23.

[20] Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, "ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-Depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors and Prisoners." *Journal of Strategic Security 13, no. 1* (2020): 82–127. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907414.

[21] Ibid

Nevertheless, the mission was accomplished, and sufficient data has been collected to support the analysis, findings, and recommendations.

Although the regional environment and the various challenges it poses are very influential on both Tunisian and Lebanese societies, (de)radicalisation is manifested differently in each country. In order to grasp this difference, we have introduced, in each of the following sections, a map locating the studied sites by country and their specific geostrategic environment.

3.1 Tunisia

The field study relating to WP5, conducted by the Sfax University/Tunisia team, was based on an interview guide that is structured around the shared research questions, broken down into several components.

3.1.1 Sources of data

Conceived in two parts, the fieldwork was conducted in two phases, the first of which was devoted to individual face-to-face interviews with actors operating in the two sites, namely the Northwest (represented by the city of El Kef) and the Centre-West (represented by the cities of Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid). Executed between the end of November and the beginning of December 2021, this work allowed the collection of data from 17 interviews (the focus groups having been postponed once again due to the new restrictions related to the spread of the COVID-19 Omicron variant) distributed as shown in the table below:

Table of interviews conducted for WP5		
Status	**Institution/Association/Organisation**	**Site**
Henda Tlijène (KA)	Association Femmes et Progrès (Women and Progress Association)	El Kef
Facebook page admin/Teacher (KB)	*El Kefbook*	El Kef
Supporter of President Said/Merchant/Facebook page admin (KC)	*Contre les Imbéciles (Against Imbeciles)*, Tunisia Events Forum	El Kef
Member of a CSO/Physical education teacher (KD)	*Association Femme et citoyenneté* (Women and Citizenship Association)	El Kef
Member of Parliament (KE)	Independent Member of Parliament	El Kef

Cultural Centre (KF)	Director	El Kef
Supporter of President Said/Farmer (RA)	Free activist	Kairouan
Retired religious education teacher/Host at Radio Sabra (RB)	*Association 'Éducation à la santé reproductive'* (Reproductive Health Education Association)	Kairouan
THRL and Civic Education teacher (RC)	Member	Kairouan
Imam (RD)	The Great Mosque	Kairouan
Facebook page admin (RE)	Facebook	Kairouan
Childhood inspector (SA)	Ministry of Women's Affairs	Sidi Bouzid
Imam (SB)	Ministry of Religious Affairs	Sidi Bouzid
Founder (SC)	Association Salima	Sidi Bouzid
Active member of a CSO (SD)	THRL and Workers' Party (leftist)	Sidi Bouzid
Regional Representative (SE)	Ministry of Women's Affairs	Sidi Bouzid
Young Salafist (SF)	Young Salafist	Sidi Bouzid

The second phase, carried out online, consisted of an observation and analysis of websites and Facebook pages. We chose websites and official Facebook pages of actors belonging to the political, religious and civil society fields. We chose Facebook because it is used by 73% of Tunisian social media users[22].

The sites and pages that we have observed and analysed are the following:

- The page of the *Presidency of the Republic* (this choice imposed itself, especially after July 25, 2021, when strong language, bordering on aggression, started being used, requiring closer observation).

- The Facebook page of *Itilaf Al Karama* (Coalition of Dignity), a conservative party, fourth in Parliament when it comes to the number of seats, with 21 seats in total. The party has in various instances resorted to physical violence in the Parliament itself.

- The website of the *Free Destourian Party* (FDP), modestly represented in the APR (it is fifth in the number of seats (17), but third in number of votes – 189,356, or 6.63%, compared to 19.63% for Ennahdha, ranked first) and led by a woman, who is often accused of radicalised verbal violence against all Islamist parties.

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[22] Mohamed Djaziri, Les chiffres clés des réseaux sociaux en Tunisie 2021, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwilievJ9-D2AhXUOuwKH-bhIDzMQFnoECAwQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.digital-discovery.tn%2Fchiffres-reseaux-sociaux-tunisie-2021%2F&usg=AOvVaw1LqlgXz-eOy3VZN698VPBS

The page of the *Tunisian Human Rights League* (THRL) on Facebook, an association that has been fighting human rights violations since 1977 and that plays, through its 28 regional branches, a key role in the promotion and dissemination of the culture of human rights across Tunisia. Being the oldest human rights league in Africa and in the Arab world, the THRL is one of the members of the quartet of national dialogue that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

- The Facebook page of the *Tunisian Association of Democratic Women* (TADW), a feminist association founded in 1989 that works for the promotion of women and the fight against gender discrimination. This association is the first to have declared as an objective, since its creation, the transformation of patriarchal mentalities and has not ceased to lead battles in the public space to denounce patriarchy and demand gender equality. Over the years, TADW's presence on the political scene, and especially on social networks, has become very remarkable.

3.1.2 Context of the fieldwork

It is in a climate of political tension and uncertainty due to the policy shift of July 25, 2021, that this fieldwork for WP5 was conducted. On that date, the President of the Tunisian Republic, Kais Saied, dismissed the Prime Minister, froze the activities of the APR (Parliament) and revoked the immunity of MPs. This put an end to the political domination of the Islamists, albeit temporarily, and lifted the spirits of the President's supporters, nearly all of whom are not affiliated with any particular political party.

In the wake of these developments, the country entered a period of political uncertainty, anticipation, and doubt. This situation coincided with a large vaccination campaign against COVID-19 carried out by the presidency with much fanfare, which had the effect of calming the public and seemed to have revived economic activity by allowing once again the free movement of people between regions.

As a result, the fieldwork was conducted amid calm and optimistic circumstances (end of November/beginning of December 2021), despite some concerns about the uncertainty of the situation. The focus groups planned for January could not be carried out because the pandemic situation worsened. Although it is true that the new Omicron variant is not as dangerous as the previous ones, the resulting restrictions have forced us to postpone these tasks to March 2022.

3.1.3 Identification and description of field sites

In Tunisia, the fieldwork was conducted in two regions: the Northwest region (the city of El Kef) and the Centre-West region (the cities of Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan). It should be noted that in both sites, the interviews targeted people acting at the local level.

Why did we choose these two sites in particular? Because it is commonly believed that radicalisation tends to provide a kind of refuge for the destitute, the marginalised, or the disadvantaged, as a way of satisfying ideological or spiritual needs, or even subjective needs for recognition. The map provided in Annex 1 gives an idea of the sharp imbalance in economic and social development between the coastal region (in blue) and the other regions, including the two fieldsites. It also anticipates the degree –

marked in three shades of green – of resilience in the three surveyed cities, despite their similar levels of economic and social "underdevelopment."

Despite the fact that both regions suffer from the same **socio-economic characteristics of marginalisation compared to the country's coastline**, each has a **distinct cultural and historical heritage**. The Northwest region, represented by the city of El Kef, has been shaped by various historical and cultural influences: Roman, Carthaginian, Andalusian, French, but also Berber and Arab-Islamic. The Centre-West region, meanwhile, features the city of Kairouan, a stronghold of Islamic heritage in the country, and that of Sidi Bouzid, the cradle of the Tunisian Revolution (Arab Spring), and later home to radicalised groups, which have fully manifested themselves after the Revolution.

The socio-economic marginalisation suffered by people living in the so-called interior governorates, which is believed to be the cause of the violent extremism affecting Tunisia since 2011, has certainly driven our choice to select two representative sites from these governorates. The city of El Kef on the one hand, and the two cities of Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid on the other hand, meet this criterion. A second criterion was also taken into account: The characteristic cultural profile of each of the two sites is no less important and supports our analysis. This criterion refers to natural as well as the historical and religious specificities that would fuel the inclination to violence or the potential immunity against violence.

Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid share a weak industrial structure and an agricultural sector that is largely at the mercy of scarce rainfall. Both cities also share low scores in national school examinations and some of the highest rates of poverty, school dropouts, and unemployment. Kairouan, the first Islamic capital in the Maghreb and the cradle of the Islamic Caliphate of the Fatimids, which was later moved to Cairo, has a unique religious heritage, including the mosque of Uqba ibn Nafi, which could have been the nucleus of a cultural (religious) tourism sector. However, with the exception of the event of the Mawlid (Birthday of the Prophet), the city and its hinterland lag behind the country's coastal cities, which have benefited from seaside tourism and a substantial infrastructure. The city of Sidi Bouzid, capital of a larger governorate encompassing many small villages located at the heart of the Central West, owes a certain level of prosperity and empowerment to the mining governorate of Gafsa, in the mid-seventies, thanks to the exploitation of the groundwater in market gardening at that time. However, the depletion of the water and the restrictions on digging wells, on the one hand, and the increase in the number of university graduates over the decades, on the other, triggered the revolution of December 17, 2010, which erupted at the very centre of the city. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi has given the city the dual status of being the city of the marginalised and the cradle of the revolution.

In light of this brief description, we can presume that the **conservatism of Kairouan, drawn from its status as an Islamic city**, which continues to be asserted by some families of Kairouanese origin, as well as the conservatism of tribal origin that is still vibrant in the **recent and uncontrolled urbanisation of Sidi Bouzid**,[23] combined with the near absence of public investment in non-agricultural sectors, all seem to pave the way for socio-economic vulnerability. All factors suggest that the predisposition of young people without prospects to revolt, inhibited until 2011, has been unleashed in multiple forms, including, most prominently, the religious form, as witnessed in Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid. The first well-recorded instance was the 2012 massive show of force by the members of Ansar Al Sharia (Salafist

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[23] Omar Zaafouri, "Dialectics of the Manifest and the Latent at the Local Level: Case of the irrigated peripheral areas of Sidi Bouzid," in (s.dir) Mounir Saidani, Local Community and Development: Strategies and challenges (in Arabic), 2012.

Jihadists). The second was the regrettable shooting of Tunisian army soldiers (Ben Aoun attack) and the slitting of citizens' throats (the Soltani brothers, shepherds who were accused by the terrorists of cooperating with the Army) by armed Islamist groups (such as Jond Al Khilafa, Ansar Al Sharia, Uqba ibn Nafi Cell, etc.).

Although the school dropout rates, poor educational performance, unemployment, poverty, and even the absence of the State are similar to those identified in the North-West, the situation in El Kef seems different. Located on the Algerian border, the governorate of El Kef is not immune to threats from armed terrorist groups. Entrenched in the mountainous border region and dense forests, these groups of "foreign" origin to El Kef, as we are told, found refuge and have established a secure base there from which they plan and carry out their attacks.

Nevertheless, the terrain of El Kef has its virtues: In addition to a climate close to that of Europe, rainfall is much better than in the rest of the country and is favourable to grain farming. This ancestral agricultural tradition has earned the entire Northwest region the symbolic title that dates back to antiquity: "the Granary of Rome." Remains of the ancient Roman, medieval Turkish, and Andalusian Muslim or French colonial periods are abundant in El Kef and explain to a large extent the richness of its heritage, especially its musical and theatrical heritage, which defines the cultural scene in the capital Tunis itself.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the rainy Northwest has thousands of households with no access to drinking water, and thousands of working age people remain unemployed. It is seemingly the migration to Tunis or especially to France that has both alleviated poverty and provided the people of El Kef with a buffer against the violent tendencies associated with vulnerability.

3.2 Lebanon

The field study in Lebanon was guided by three main methods: an analytical descriptive approach through which it is possible to describe the general condition of the two towns on the historical, religious, political and social levels, and to analyse their impact partly through interviews; a comparative approach which allows to explore the constant and the variable in both towns, the common and different factors, and their repercussions on violent extremism; and a critical analysis approach through which the impact on the vulnerability and resilience factors in interacting with and reacting to internal and external violence can be deducted.

For analysis and deduction, the study relies on 45 field interviews in both towns that were conducted individually, in pairs or in groups, two focus group discussions, one in each town, in addition to 12 interviews conducted with experts from outside the two towns. The aim of the latter interviews was to identify neutral positions and compare them with the townspeople's responses.

The difficulties were represented in the abstention of some people from attending interviews and only communicating by phone or WhatsApp due to **COVID-19**-related concerns. Moreover, the researchers faced **obstacles in some instances to reach the field sites because of road blocks and demonstrations against the background of a severe political and economic crisis** throughout the entire period of the fieldwork. There were also severe gasoline shortages that impacted on the movement of the researchers and interviewees at times. The researchers also faced difficulties in the town of Majdal Anjar, as some of its people were **suspicious about the "ulterior motives" of the research** because they are

conducted by "Western institutes, for the benefit of international intelligence agencies and ex-colonial powers".[24] Some people also refrained from taking part in any interview, such as those with high security and religious positions. On the other hand, many of those who were interviewed and those who heard about the study were responsive and requested the inclusion of their statements in the study that reflected the perceived injustice towards Majdal Anjar. In Kherbet Rouha, however, people were much more responsive and welcoming.

3.2.1 Questions raised by the study

The period between 2003 and 2010 - between the American occupation of Iraq, the fall of Baghdad and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and then his successors Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajir - and then between 2011 and 2020 – the period of the so-called Arab Spring and the rise of violent radical Islamic movements, the most prominent of which were the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra organisations – witnessed a severe rise in violent extremism in both Iraq and Syria based on Islamic ideology. Those events had a direct and strong impact on the situation in Lebanon that initially manifested in many Sunni youth joining – either as organised or unorganised members – armed groups in Iraq and Syria.[25] In 2003, their aim was to fight 'The international Coalition Forces' led by the United States of America as occupiers. In 2011, large numbers of Lebanese Sunni youth joined the ranks of militant groups fighting the Syrian regime in Syria, while the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah joined the fight alongside the Syrian regime against the groups seeking to overthrow it.[26]

Nevertheless, while some regions and towns had many of their youth joining the combat in Syria or Iraq, such as the town of Majdal Anjar in the Beqaa (and the city of Tripoli in the North), the reaction in other towns was limited to positive sympathy, such as the town of Kherbet Rouha, which did not register any recruitment of its youth in any organisation in Iraq or Syria. This is despite the many similarities between the two towns, the most important of which are the following:

- Both towns are located in the Beqaa Governorate. Majdal Anjar is located in the central Beqaa district on the Lebanese-Syrian border, and Kherbet Rouha is located in the Rashaya district, which is also relatively close to the Syrian border. They are approximately 18 km apart.

- All residents of both towns, without any exception, belong to the Sunni sect.

- Religious activities are prevalent in both towns throughout the year such as religious seminars, celebrations in mosques or homes and halaqas[27] teaching the Holy Quran.

- Religious visibility is prevalent amongst the residents of both towns, whether in terms of the dress code and physical appearance, especially in the town of Kherbet Rouha, or in terms of the high number of mosques, especially in the town of Majdal Anjar.

- Both towns recorded the largest number of those who received official religious education among all the Sunni Beqaa towns (almost 60 people in Kherbet Rouha, and about 50 people in Majdal

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[24] Several interviewees and others that refused to be interviewed mentioned this theory.
[25] Mona Alami, "The Rise of ISIS in Lebanon", *Atlantic Council*, (2015).https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/menasource/the-rise-of-isis-in-lebanon/
[26] Sahar Atrache, "How Hezbollah Is Changing the War in Syria – and Vice Versa", *Huffington Post*, August 6, 2014. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hezbollah-war-syria_b_5455850
[27] A halaqa is Islamic terminology that denotes religious gathering or meeting for the study of the Quran.

Anjar between 1960 and 2021). This is in addition to the other residents who are active followers of the religious culture and have general religious knowledge and interest.

- People who received religious education in both towns are graduates of the same religious institutes whether in Lebanon -particularly in Azhar Beirut and Azhar Beqaa[28] (the numbers are almost equal in both towns)-, in Syria -particularly the Islamic Conquest Institute (the majority are from the town of Kherbet Rouha)-, in Egypt's "Al-Azhar Al-Sharif" (the majority from the town of Kherbet Rouha), or in Saudi Arabia particularly from al-Madinah al-Munawwarah University (the majority are from the town of Majdal Anjar).

- The town of Kherbet Rouha has been historically home to a number of senior Islamic intellectuals, such as Burhan al-Din al-Beqa'i who is considered one of the most important figures in the interpretation of the Qur'an. Many individuals from this town have held official religious positions in Shariaa Studies, judiciary (three senior judges), in Dar al- Fatwa, and Islamic endowments, or in the traditional Azhar Beqaa Institute.

- The two towns are considered religious hubs for the region. Majdal Anjar is home to the largest religious institute in Lebanon, Azhar al-Beqaa; and Kherbet Rouha houses the official centre of the Dar al-Fatwa of Rashaya District.

- The majority of the society in both towns ranks in the socio-economic hierarchy from the middle class to the wealthy, while the poor group is scarcely noticeable in Kherbet Rouha, and is present in small numbers in Majdal Anjar.

Despite these similarities, the variation in violent extremism raises many questions: **Why did so many of Majdal Anjar's youth join extremist organisations in Iraq and Syria and committed violent acts against Lebanese security forces, while none joined from Kherbet Rouha?** What are the **vulnerability and resilience factors** to violent extremism in both towns? How have **online and offline radicalisation processes** impacted both towns driving or preventing them from joining violent extremist groups?

This study will attempt to answer these questions through the analysis of interviews and focus group discussions with local and regional figures and stakeholders from both towns and beyond, ranging from religious to political, civil society and intellectual figures.

3.2.2 The General context of Majdal Anjar and Kherbet Rouha

- *Majdal Anjar*

The town of Majdal Anjar is located in the Beqaa Governorate on the international highway linking Beirut with Damascus on an area of 2,533 hectares, 59 km from Beirut and 57 km from Damascus. The number of its registered residents according to the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities who are eligible to vote at the age of twenty-one years and over reached 7,446 people in 2016.[28] It is considered the second largest Sunni town in the Beqaa Governorate. The town relies economically on agriculture, livestock and commercial stores. Many of its families also rely on civil and military state jobs. However, what sets Majdal Anjar apart is its unique strategic location; it is considered the main eastern route of

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[28] Azhar Beirut and Azhar Beqaa follow the Egyptian Azhari school of thought in general, widely perceived as the 'moderate' bastion.

the Rashaya region towards Hasbaya, the south, and Shebaa borders, the main land crossing between Beirut and Damascus and Lebanon's land gateway to the Arab world. This constitutes the length of the international highway reaching the end of the town with the Syrian border that is called "Al-Masnaa", an important commercial point that provided many job opportunities to the townspeople in terms of trade, customs, clearance offices, monetary exchange and other businesses, which engendered a relative financial prosperity in the town.[29]

In addition, the strategic location of the town at the border made it a hub for smuggling of all kinds on one hand, and an opportunity for many of the townspeople to get to know foreigners, merchants, politicians and security personnel, especially during the Syrian tutelage in Lebanon (1976-2005) on the other hand. This created communication channels between people from the town and local and Arab surroundings, which made it more economically developed than other Beqaa villages. The same can be said about the security sector as many of its residents took up senior posts in the military, where the proportion of those enrolled in military-affiliated institutions is almost 25% of the town's residents.[30] Similarly, many of its youth took up senior posts in the civil state institutions, be it the judiciary or other civil facilities.

- *Kherbet Rouha*

It is also located in the Beqaa Governorate, Rashaya District, with an estimated area of 1,437 hectares. It is 72 km away from Beirut and the number of its registered residents who are eligible to vote at the age of twenty-one reached 3,623 in 2016.[31] It is considered the second largest town in terms of population in the Rashaya District. Kherbet Rouha depends on many types of economic resources, including agriculture, livestock, and private businesses. Some families also depend on state jobs in the education sector (1%), the engineering and medical sectors (1%), and the military (2%).[32] Yet, the most striking factor about Kherbet Rouha is the high rate of expatriation, especially to Canada and Brazil, whereby the proportion of expatriates reaches two-thirds of its population, the highest rates in the Beqaa Governorate.[33] This provided an economic resource for the town on which many residents depend on through donations to the Zakat and Charity Funds on a regular basis.[34] Also, this high rate of expatriation has an immaterial impact on the social, psychological and economic make-up of the town's residents.[35]

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[29] A focus group meeting with, held by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.
[30] Interview with the Mokhtar (Mayor) of Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 21, 2021.
[31] "Majdal Anjar", Liban Data, accessed September 25, 2021, https://www.libandata.org/fr/divisions/mohafazah-de-la-beqaa
[32] Interview with the Mokhtar of Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 21, 2021.
[33] According to the interview with the mayor on 5 September, the number of voters in the municipality elections for 2016 was around 1250, while the people registered on records and are eligible to vote were 3623, and that's how the number of expatriates can be estimated at two thirds.
[34] Interview with the Head of the municipality by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, September 5,2021.
[35] According to the interview with the head of Ishraq al-Nur Association on September 5, he chose Kherbet Rouha to establish the charitable complex since a resident provided land for free, in addition to the townspeople's embrace of their association, as they offer the biggest donors.

4 Vulnerability Factors

The concept of radicalisation may well refer to "a process by which people adopt extremist opinions, views and ideas," but which do not necessarily lead to acts of violence. When it does not lead to physical violence, radicalisation simply becomes a behaviour in which individuals or groups display a resentful mindset, sometimes with the hope of undermining existing systems, ideals, or doctrines. Such behavior does not lead to physical violence, but remains confined to the limits of extreme doctrinal stances and beliefs. However, it does allow adherents of this form of radicalisation to express extreme views, thoughts, and aspirations, usually rejecting the dominant political, social, or religious order, but without going beyond the virulence of public verbal proclamations. This applies well to the situation in Tunisia and Lebanon. Theories explaining radicalisation vary from case to case. Generally-speaking, they attribute the origin of the phenomenon to several equally deep-rooted causes, up to and including environmental, socio-economic or political factors, and call in particular for an understanding of the "*structural conditions that lead to the emergence of violent political actors*."[36]

Similarly, explanations based on grievances are among the most common theories used to evaluate extremist narratives.[37] Most often, these theories view poor economic opportunities as conducive to the emergence of extremist groups seeking to remedy with infrastructural wrongs.[38]

Other theories attribute radicalisation to political frustrations. They generally focus on the lack of political freedom and how it leads actors to engage in bitter rhetoric, as well as on potential extreme acts of violence in their various forms, in order to oppose what these actors see as State repression.[39]

4.1 Tunisia

The first part of the interview guide for WP5 targets the general factors of vulnerability. However, it also focuses particularly on female vulnerability. Thus, in our description of the vulnerability factors in the two sites, we will present two components: the first one is of a general nature, and the second one of a gendered nature.

The first relates to the **impotence of the State and public authorities in the interior regions**. This situation has certainly been inherited from the colonial era, but it has been greatly amplified by the development model adopted over the past half-century. This translates into **unequal opportunities** in terms of schooling, access to wealth, social services, and healthcare; hence the **lack of confidence in political leaders and the resulting tendency to refrain from political participation**. In the eyes of the interviewees, this position is justified by the **spread of nepotism and favouritism** - sometimes synonymous with 'racism' – as well as by **corruption**, the presence of **a biased judiciary**, etc.

The resulting **feeling of *Hogra* (denigration),** which was strongly felt and clearly expressed during the revolution, has **transformed into different forms of extreme violence, including ideological and religious violence**, through harsh discourse, rejecting all sides, all differences, and all Others. In addition, without seeking to justify and legitimise the informal economy, largely based on the smuggling of

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[36] Maskaliunaité 2015, 15-20.
[37] Schmid 2013, 26.
[38] Dandurant 2015, 25-26; Hamdi 2016, 151.
[39] Engjellushe et al. 2019, 3.

goods as a means of subsistence, we can see how chances of creating more jobs through regular means are undermined.

These forms of protest and apathy towards the State are no longer surprising in Tunisia, which not long ago boasted its educational system. According to many of our interviewees from both sites, the drop in the level of schooling, increasing illiteracy and early dropouts, amid the **absence of serious reforms of educational programmes that can guarantee employment**, can only trigger the inclination towards violent radicalisation of all kinds, including identity-based radicalisation, often mixing tribal conservatism and extreme religiosity.

As for the second component of vulnerability, i.e. **female vulnerability**, we will see that while it varies from one site to another and between urban and rural areas, it has common characteristics. These are due to moral factors that make women in particular vulnerable. **Emanating from a conservative traditionalist mentality that targets and excludes women**, these factors manifest themselves in different ways. First, there is a lack of parity in the labor market; women receive less pay for the same work. Second, social roles did not evolve towards a sharing of tasks within the household. In politics, when women's participation is not merely "formal," their presence, in both sites, seems to almost be imposed on men. What is worse is that **when women assert their presence on the political scene, they become victims of a twofold verbal and physical violence directed at their female bodies.**

However, as the general factors of women's vulnerability, as well as those specific to them, are articulated differently in each site, we will proceed in the following sections with a two-step analytical description: First, we will deal with the Centre-West region consisting of the cities of Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid, and, second, with the North-West region consisting of the city of El Kef.

4.1.1 The cities of Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid

- *Socio-economic Marginalisation*

"*The original violence is not religious: it is due to the socio-economic marginalisation of Kairouan*." To clearly portray the glaring contrast in the development indicators,[40] our interlocutor is forthright and critical of the State and Bourguiba. The latter's policy was, in his opinion, "*overly regionalist: Monastir, Bourguiba's hometown, was only a modest delegation within Sousse. And thanks to the exceptional efforts of the State, it has experienced a level of development that is comparable to the country's major cities: containing an international airport, a metro, tourist facilities, three faculties of medicine and pharmacy, one of the two current regional public radio chains, etc.*"[41]

In both Kairouan to Sidi Bouzid, the diagnosis of the origin of women's vulnerability is almost the same. When asked about the situation of women in her city, S.A. reiterates the same idea and dwells on the familial and social repercussions: "*From the outset, the economic vulnerability of women is of the same nature, whether in Sidi Bouzid, Tunis, or elsewhere in Tunisia. What is accentuated in Sidi Bouzid is the number of female workers who are victims of road accidents, and that number is not decreasing over the years. Do we have a solution for the child who had to leave school following the death of their*

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[40] See map in Annex 1.
[41] Interview with S.A., Child Care Inspector, Sidi Bouzid.

mother when the van overloaded with women going to the fields at dawn overturned? Or one to a child who is deprived of the right to an education because their parents cannot afford a school bag?"[42]

If the **vulnerability of women in Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid stems from the negative impacts of economic marginalisation**, from which all Tunisian women suffer, why is their reaction in these two cities distinguished by an inclination towards religious radicalisation? Our interlocutor mentions cultural factors that seem, at first glance, different from one city to another.

A. specifies that in Sidi Bouzid, "*the space for women's mobility is circumscribed: either she is married and stays at her home taking care of the household and children, or she is single and under the gaze and control of her parents at home. If she is assaulted by her husband or by one of her brothers, she has no alternative but to remain silent. That is why, if she ever be recruited by a radicalised group, it can only happen through this restricted environment which is that of her husband, her parents and brothers. Moreover, I think the fact that most women wear the niqab is a direct consequence of this environment.*"[43] In other words, **the woman's surrender to domestic violence or even to her conversion, if radicalised religious conversion occurs, is the product of her economic dependence**. In case this conversion ever takes place, it probably occurs *"with girls who went to one of the university cities. Girls who wear the niqab were indoctrinated while far away from their parents and without their knowledge. They are, like their male peers, easy prey because religious discourse paves the path to happiness while exempting them from the worry of employment and money: no need for a job or a car, a simple life without consumption is within reach. It works well with minimal financial support and a lot of symbolic recognition and heroism for the great cause of Islam!*"

This is how cultural emphasis, which is already present in people's upbringing, resonates with the overall religious component. Is it at this stage that tribal conservatism is grafted onto religious conservatism from the East.

The same continuum seems to be present in Kairouan, with one subtle difference: the city's religious background as the first Islamic capital in Africa. The **city of Kairouan proclaims a sort of characteristic religiosity of resistance**, which unfolded in the sixties and seventies at the time of the imam of the Great Mosque of Uqba ibn Nafi Abderrahmane Khlif. At that time, his opposition to Bourguiba[44] did not prevent him from recognising the State and being elected to Parliament. But **radicalised Islam, which emerged in recent years, including that of Ansar Al Sharia, is alien to this land**: "*It has other origins: the internal migration of the populations of the city's hinterland characterised by low levels of education; and the opening of the country to the winds of Wahabi influence since the eighties.*"[45]

It is clear how radicalised Islam is rejected because it is not 'ours': it is either that of the illiterate people of Kairouan's rural hinterland or of the migrants of Sidi Bouzid, which are analogous based on the tone used by our interlocutor, given that the entire governorate of Sidi Bouzid, which was established recently as an administrative unit, has no urban tradition. In addition, as in the continuum of radicalisation in Sidi Bouzid, this leads to none other than Wahabism. The only difference is that in Kairouan 'our Islam' is mentioned, which refers to a social differentiation within the city: the "Beldi"[46] and the "migrants" which we will come back to later.

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[42] Interview with S.E., Regional Delegate for Women, Sidi Bouzid.
[43] Interview with S.A., Child Care Inspector, Sidi Bouzid.
[44] Interview with R.C, member of LTDH and teacher, Kairouan.
[45] See also Khaled Troudi, Director of the Centre for Islamic Studies in Kairouan, Interview conducted as part of the WP4 study.
[46] See also Khaled Troudi, Director of the Centre for Islamic Studies in Kairouan, Interview conducted as part of the WP4 study.

Though in the modern history of Kairouan, it is difficult to discern the authentic "Maliki" and moderate Islam claimed by the elite of Kairouan's "Great Families" from that held by the "migrants", not only because of their horizontal and vertical mobility between the city and its hinterland and the other neighboring governorates, but also because of their relationship to the State, to the political Islam that had emerged since the reign of Bourguiba, and especially to Wahabism, intimately linked to the rise of a radicalised and violent Islam.

- ***Unrecognised Religious Figures***

The link between vulnerability and radicalisation could be established based on two excerpts from an interview conducted in Kairouan with an activist from within the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH[47]). The first excerpt makes a description of the small village *of Lâala*, in the delegation of Al Weslatia and part of the governorate of Kairouan. The second provides a brief history of the mosaic of Islamism.

Al Weslatia is characterised by high poverty, but also a very high suicide rate, especially in Lâala. After 2011, young people dreamed and believed that Libya would be prosperous. They hoped that by going there, they would change their socio-economic situation. Instead, they were recruited by jihadist groups in Libya, and some of them were sent to Syria.

This movement is not unrelated to what happened in Tunisia in the same year: *"during the elections of the NCA (National Constituent Assembly) in Tunisia in October 2011, all Islamist currents voted for Ennahda. In 2014, disappointed with Ennahda, some of them withdrew from both political and public life because, they sensed a political will to restrict and control extremist religious activities. With the advent of Nida Tunes in power, State institutions began to take religious radicalisation seriously. The figures deemed "radicalised" within Ennahda and that were placed in latency have rallied with the radicalised young people of Al Weslatia. They voted in the 2019 legislative elections for the new radicalised political party Itilaf Al Karama, which obtained 21 seats in Parliament*.

The second excerpt takes us back to an earlier historical phase where it would be difficult to separate the "authentic" Islam of the moderate Beldi of Kairouan from the Islamist tendencies (Ennahda later), which appeared in the seventies, and also from the Islam of radicalised young people influenced by Wahabism. Without going back very far in the history of the city, as a starting point for understanding this interaction between the three sensibilities, we can consider the incident that occurred in 1961, which pitted Bourguiba against the Imam of the Great Mosque, Abderrahmane Khlif, as the starting point for all this.[48] R.C. says "*The Great Mosque was not only a religious institution, but also the birthplace of a political movement. There were two religious currents: The first was the current that represented moderate Islam and the scholars of the ancient Kairouan "Beldi," of which of course Imam Khlif was a member. The second was that of **political Islam**, which would then lead to Ennahda. The latter kept evolving and did not hide its ambitions to access power. It reached its peak at the end of the 1980s and even took part in the legislative elections of 1989. This movement exploited the so-called "mellas," i.e. meetings between the Maghreb prayer (sunset) and that of Al Icha (dinner time), devoted to the recitation of the Quran. These evolved into political encounters and meetings. Widespread in all mosques, these meetings attracted many people and became a cause of concern for the central power. Ben Ali, then president, banned them and tightened control of the Grand Mosque. The **outright Salafist***

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[47] Interview with R.C, member of LTDH and teacher, Kairouan.
[48] Interview with R.C, LTDH member and teacher, Kairouan.

discourse of this movement was **based on the denunciation of the economic and social marginalisation and transgression of the Islamic identity** *that began with Bourguiba and continued with Ben Ali.*

*The **repression of this Islamist movement, starting in the 1990s, generated another Salafist movement supported by young people in the 2000s**, which was distinct from its predecessor but not necessarily opposed to it. In my opinion, this new sensitivity is due to three factors: **the repression of the Islamist current (Ennahda), the role of satellite TV channels financed by Gulf states, and the waves of Umrah[49] and Hajj in the holy sites of Saudi Arabia**. In addition to the institutionally organised Umrah, massive waves were organised by non-State parties, especially excursions in caravans of cars traveling by land. In Kairouan, visiting Mecca several times is a mark of social distinction. There are people who have done this duty or Sunna a dozen times.*"[50]

If we believe the chronological sequencing of our interlocutor, it would appear that the birth of the groups of Ansar Al Sharia and their subsequent influence in Kairouan dates back to 2011. Already since the 2000s, there were religious charity associations and a **travel agency close to Ennahda specialised in the organisation of Umrah and Hajj trips**, in addition to the annual quota offered by Saudi Arabia. KSA, which grants each Arab country a right of 200 additional places per year, has favoured Tunisia by granting it 1,500 places in 2016. **KSA also granted the city of Kairouan and the mosque of Uqba ibn Nafi a donation of 45 million U.S. dollars for renovation and maintenance**.

In the same vein, we can understand how after 2011, Ansar Al Sharia were able to benefit from generous funds, thanks to which they were able to finance their activities and "*afford the possibility of broadcasting a programme on the only local radio station, Sabra FM, according to the president of another civil society organisation in Kairouan.*"[51]

4.1.2 El Kef

The governorate of El Kef was also affected by the economic and social marginalisation linked to religious radicalisation, which has repeatedly manifested itself in the city's public spaces.

In fact, the agricultural governorate of El Kef has arable lands at an area of about 483,300 hectares, irrigated by the highest rainfall rate in the country. It also contains 31 sites full of useful natural resources and significant reserves of phosphate. Paradoxically, it has the second highest poverty rate in the country (33.1%) and a negative population growth rate (2004-2014) estimated at -0.62. This explains the propensity of its working population to migrate to richer governorates and to Europe, mainly to France.[52]

According to our many interviewees at El Kef, it is also true, as in the case of Kairouan, that the **perpetrators of religious violence, even described as terrorists, hide in the mountains and forests and have 'come from afar.'** We even found several hectares of trees cut down by the Army in its search for armed groups.

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[49] It is the lesser pilgrimage, which is optional, unlike the Hajj, or the grand pilgrimage to Mecca, which constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam.
[50] Interview with R.C, Interview with R.C, member of LTDH and teacher, Kairouan.
[51] Interview with RB, retired religious education teacher, Radio Host Sabra FM, Kairouan.
[52] General population and housing census (R.G.P.H), I.NS, 2014.

However, it must be noted that economic and social marginalisation does not manifest itself in the same way and that vulnerability to violent extremism is much more observed in the cultural and political fields.[53]

- ***Economic and Social Vulnerability***

The interviews conducted at El Kef reveal an ambivalence: as much as people are open and respect the modernist character of Bourguiba, they are critical of him due to the economic marginalisation of El Kef. This is why the enormous agricultural resources of fertile land and rainfall do not seem to have radically changed the living conditions of the region's inhabitants. And that is why, despite a significant degree of freedom and tolerance, the sight of active and exploited rural women is as widespread as in Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan.

The fact that men are seduced either by internal or external migration testifies to the ambivalence mentioned above: the region's inhabitants are urban dwellers open to the good way of life, influenced by internal migration to Tunisian cities and to France. Still, this predisposition to openness is due to an **ancestral culture of intercultural diversity**: Roman, Carthaginian, Berber, Andalusian, Turkish, French, etc. It can therefore be inferred that the **material and cultural gains of migration have somehow alleviated the bitter feeling of economic marginalisation**.

One of our interviewees[54] confirmed this peculiarity of the "El Kef" character. Without denying the participation of young people from El Kef in incidents of violence or even their religious radicalisation, especially in the temporary interval between 2011 and 2013, he kept his observations in check. *"It was a general wave that swept through the country, where the factors of the international context favourable to political Islam, manipulation, and money from foreign associations played a key role. But it is necessary to combine these factors with the ignorance and unemployment of some young people in the working-class districts of the city.*"[55]

The secretary-general of a student organisation that has close ties to Ennahda gave an almost analogous description of the El Kef temperament. "*I am in charge of the UGTE (General Tunisian Union of Students) without being affiliated with Ennahda. I also cooperate closely with my UGET (General Union of Tunisian Students) counterparts. To be honest, there have been no incidents of bloody violence within our institution of the type that took place between the two organisations in other university cities.*"[56]

In the small village of Touiref, known for its poor living conditions, the absence of the simplest public facilities, and its bad reputation as a 'hotbed of terrorism,' it turned out that the latter accusation was mostly based on prejudice rather than being a reality. The geography of the village certainly favours the passage or entrenchment of armed groups, but not to the point of justifying such stigmatisation. Could this be due to the residual impact of the phobias generated by the first years of the revolution or an amplification effect more or less maintained by new political quarrels, from which the El Kef was

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[53] Interview with K.A. Chairwoman of *Association femme et progrès* (Women and Progress Association) (A.F.P), El Kef.
[54] Interview with K.D, *Association Femme et citoyenneté* (Women and Citizenship Association) and Professor of higher education in El Kef.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Interview with H.H, Secretary-General of the Pro-Islamist section: General Union of Tunisian Students (UGTE), interview held as part of the WP4 investigation.

not spared? Especially **since women in the city are active in the CSO and political fields, their performance arouses animosities because of their gender, which is found quite provocative in the eyes of the conservative parliamentary majority**.

- *Political radicalisation*

Beyond her service at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the sister of the martyred first lieutenant Socrates Cherni,[57] Majdouline, with practically no political background other than her participation in this cabinet, embodied the perseverance of Tunisians and their fight against the terrorism of Ansar Al Sharia, and at the same time the temperament of a region that values art, tolerance, and the joy of life.

Like Majdouline and many other women occupying positions of responsibility in associations and institutions in El Kef and displaying this appearance of modern and independent woman on the public scene, K.E had to undergo strenuous tests of physical and verbal violence because of her status as a woman and her political positions with respect to the ARP.

If we consider the content of the comments collected from the interview conducted with her at El Kef, we will immediately realise that the **physical and verbal violence** she has endured in recent years is **due as much to her political and ideological positions as to her status as a woman.**

Because of her status as a woman, she recounts an incident from the first meeting of the regional council of the governorate of El Kef, in which she was to take part as a deputy: "*while raising my hand to volunteer for the "facilities and infrastructure" commission, one of the participants spontaneously opposed this by saying: 'no! It's too much to ask of a woman.' I must add that this gentleman ended up believing in my competence on the ground, but he could not help himself; it is only an unconscious reaction of the male mentality.*" She does not hold it against him, since she had experienced a more serious scene: one of her female comrades was abused by a male colleague in charge of WATAD, who is, according to her, "supposed to be progressive and set an example"!

This is, in short, her detailed version explaining the sentence with which she began the answer to our question on the existence of violent extremism in El Kef: "*In **El Kef and in Tunisia more generally, violent extremism is first and foremost political, even if it is hidden behind religiosity or masculinity**.*"[58]

4.2 Lebanon

Studying and understanding societies and identifying the reasons behind violence and extremism should be approached from several historical, sociological, psychological, political, economic, cultural and religious angles, and the same applies to the factors behind the prevalence of peace and security. Therefore, the matter is complex to the extent that limiting the factors leading to violent extremism to one approach fundamentally limits the understanding and compromises the conclusions. The methodology for understanding the phenomenon of violent extremism and the vulnerability and resilience factors in both towns does not depend only on understanding the relationships between means and

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[57] Socrates is one of the seven national guard members who were killed during a confrontation with a group of twenty terrorists in Sidi Ali Ben Aoun on October 23rd, 2013. Leaving two of its members dead, the Jihadist group found refuge in Jebel Sidi Aisha between Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine.
[58] Ibid.

ends; it requires sound analysis that distinguishes between direct and situational causes and those that are indirect or underlying that influence them, and reaching a conclusion based on the structure of influence and vulnerability between the situational and the underlying causes. Against this background, it becomes important to examine the towns' historical path to violence in general and to violent extremism in specific, or lack thereof.

4.2.1 The historical paths to violence in the towns of Kherbet Rouha and Majdal Anjar

- *Kherbet Rouha*

The town of Kherbet Rouha proudly remembers how it **embraced the Palestinian resistance forces** in the 1980s during the Israeli occupation of their lands and how it hosted the "Palestinian Crescent Hospital," where the front fighters were receiving treatment. The town was also a major gateway for resistance fronts against Israel on the Rashaya axis. Yasser Arafat and Abu Iyad of the Fatah Movement would often spend nights there.[59] The townspeople also take pride in the martyr "Muhammad al-Ladan", who was killed while confronting the Israeli occupation of the town between 1982 and 1984.[60] They also recall how the people of the town were heavily involved in the fight against the occupiers albeit without officially joining the membership of military resistance fronts. It is important to note, however, that none of the people from Kherbet Rouha were killed outside the town, nor have the townspeople had any official party affiliation, as their main objective was to defend their town. Those who were known for party affiliation were also not allowed to spread their ideology – political or religious. The interviewees describe the town as the graveyard of parties of all kinds including religious ones, hence they consider that the religiosity prevalent in their town is of spiritual nature disconnected from organisational affiliation.[61] Furthermore, the town did not record any severe violent incident or any case of individuals joining the ranks of violent Islamic groups in Iraq or Syria. Furthermore, none were arrested for reasons related to violent extremist activities.

- *Majdal Anjar*

Involvement in major conflicts in recent history:

In his book "The History of Majdal Anjar", Dr Ahmed al-Ajami of Majdal Anjar talks about the divisions that were a general distinction of the town, particularly during the municipal and parliamentary elections.[62] Furthermore, academics of the town and residents alike note that in every single war or major round of tension that has taken place in Lebanon or the region in recent history, individuals hailing from Majdal Anjar were among the fighters. This is also documented in scholar Muhammad Jamil Yassin of Majdal Anjar's book "The Men of Majdal Anjar", from the 1958 mini-civil war, to the 15-year civil-war in its different stages, and even in the second Gulf War in 1991.[63]

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[59] An interview with some of the town's activists in the town hall by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.
[60] Sheila Ryan, "Israel's Invasion of Lebanon: Background to the Crisis", *Journal of Palestine Studies 11/12* (1982): 23–37. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538330.
[61] An interview with the mayor of Khirbet Rouha, the mayors and imam of the town and its effectiveness from the sheikhs, professors and dignitaries of the town in the focus group by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.
[62] Ahmad Al Ajami, *The History of Majdal Anjar* (Beirut: Al Gherbe Publishing House, 1992), 205.
[63] Mohammad Jamil Yassine, *The Men of Majdal Anjar,* unpublished book, 2019), 27.

Following the assassination of PM Hariri in 2005,[64] many Majdalines actively participated in the demonstrations that demanded the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon. Moreover, the Sunnis in Lebanon in general and of Majdal Anjar in specific sympathised with the Future Movement party headed by Saad Hariri-particularly amid **rising Sunni-Shia tensions** at the time – but very few of them officially joined the party. Some Majdalines also participated in the violent events of May 7, 2008, **when Hezbollah and its allies took over the city of Beirut militarily and took control of the airport road.[65] In response, they closed the road to al-Masnaa border demanding the opening of the airport road in return for reopening the al-Masnaa road**.[66] No other Sunni town in the Beqaa was involved in these events. Following these Sunni-Shia fights, some Majdalines fought alongside fighters of neighbouring Saadnayel and Taalbaya towns against Hezbollah and Amal movement.[67]

Involvement in violent extremism in the 2003-2010 period:

After the fall of Baghdad in 2003, many of the youth of Majdal Anjar joined the fight in Iraq, where two of them were killed during an American air-raid on Rawa camp.[68] As a result, the Lebanese security services arrested "Ismail al-Khatib" in 2004 because of his active role in recruiting young people to go to Iraq and his operational links with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of the Organisation of Tawhid and Jihad in Mesopotamia.[69] Ismail al-Khatib was killed under torture during interrogation by the security forces. This had a significant impact on altering the general mood of Majdalines and their perception of the Lebanese security services, as if confirming their suspicions on the role of the Lebanese security services in "targeting the religious Sunni Muslim youth**".[70]** Those events transformed the popular tension among Majdalines into upheaval, where they destroyed the General Security headquarters on al-Masnaa as a result.[71] This represented **a turning point that increased the appeal of 'jihad', and led to hard security measures in the town**. Consequently, accusations were levied against the Lebanese security services of fabricating cases, taking aim at the town's reputation, terrorism in the service of America and of attempting to gain American support through the alleged fabricated announcement that a network affiliated with al-Qaeda in Majdal Anjar was planning terrorist acts, including planning to blow up the Italian embassy in Beirut.[72] According to the Majdaline popular belief,

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[64] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Rafic al-Hariri." *Encyclopedia Britannica,* (October 28, 2021). https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rafiq-al-Hariri.

[65] Tom Perry, "Lebanon political conflict turns violent", *Reuters*, May 7, 2008, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-strike-idUSL0761005520080507

[66] "Youth from Majdal Anjar block the Masnaa Road to protest the blocking of the airport road", *Al Joumhouria,* August 15, 2012. https://www.aljoumhouria.com/ar/news/24415/%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1

[67] "The Majdal Anjar incidents raise the question of terrorist networks at work", *Lebanon Files,* February 15, 2010. https://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/22350/

[68] "Fighters from Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria and Chechnya join Saddam's remnants in the attacks on US forces", *Asharq Al-Awsat,* July 23 2003.

[69] "Lebanon: The Issue of Majdal Anjar Prisoners", *Elaph,* July 24, 2005. https://elaph.com/Web/NewsPapers/2005/7/78273.html

[70] An interview with a local writer from the town of Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 19, 2021

[71] *Al-Diyar newspaper, Judiciaries,* September 30 2004.

[72] "Lebanon reveals the first Qaeda network on its lands", *Al Jazeera Net,* October 5, 2004. https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2004/10/5/%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-

this role was played by then Lebanese Minister of Interior, Elias Al-Murr, who "promoted himself to the Americans by killing the leader of the network, Ismail al-Khatib".[73] This was seen as a main driver prompting **many young people to adopt a hard-line Salafist ideology**, particularly as promoted by al-Khatib **as a way to emphasise the injustice that befell him and the people of the town following the campaign of arrests that, according to the people of Majdal, only target the Sunni community with terrorism charges**.[74]

This perception intensified with time as the **Sunni youth's sense of victimhood increased**, particularly after the assassination of Hariri in 2005. Collective grievances, anger and victimisation were shared among many Majdalines despite not agreeing with Hariri fully politically and religiously. The **campaign of raids and summons carried out by the Lebanese army and security services against the Sunni youth of Majdal Anjar** as well as the defeat they suffered both on the battlefield and in terms of morale after the events of May 7, 2008 led to an increase in the number of those affiliated with the hard-line Salafi movement (Salafist Jihadism). It also created the impression that the Lebanese army receives orders from the Shiite Hezbollah who would "arrest young men through the army after infiltrating it and seizing control of its decision-making".[75] [76] The Majdaline youth also clashed with the army and security forces during intermittent periods of time starting in 2007, in which some soldiers and many of the townspeople were killed.[77]

Involvement in violent extremism in the 2010-2020 period:

With the beginning of the Syria uprising in 2011, **many Majdalines came to view the killing and displacement of Syrians as a campaign targeting the Sunnis and their demographic make-up**.[78] This **pushed some of the youth to join the Islamic groups fighting against the Syrian regime**, such as Tahrir al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar Al-Sham, and the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.[79] Some of them were killed in Syria, such as Omar Ibrahim Saleh, others became fugitives for committing violence in Lebanon during the security raids or clashes,[80] many were arrested, while some fled to unknown destinations.[81] In total, **43 cases related to violent extremism are accounted for in Majdal Anjar from 2003 to 2021**. These violent events raise the following questions: Why was the town of Majdal Anjar different from other surrounding villages? Not only that, but the number of incidents that

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%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B4%D8%A8%D9%83%D8%A9-
%D9%84%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89

[73] One of the townspeople during the focus group discussion about the history of Majdal Anjar, October 6, 2021.

[74] This is according to many of those who were interviewed from the town and outside it

[75] This is according to many Mjadaline interviewees.

[76] Bilal Saab, "Al-Qa`ida's Presence and Influence in Lebanon." *Combatting Terrorism Centre at West Point Sentinel 12*, no.1 (2008). https://ctc.usma.edu/hizb-allahs-lebanese-resistance-brigades/

[77] "Wanted Men Killed in Exchange of Fire with Lebanese Troops", *Lebanese Forces Website,* September 9, 2009. https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2009/09/30/62278/

[78] Many of those interviewed considered that what is happening in Syria is targeting the Sunnis, an attempt to convert its people, and a change in the demographic reality in it

[79] Mona Alami, "The Impact of the Syria Conflict on Salafis and Jihadis in Lebanon", *Middle East Institute*, 2014. https://www.mei.edu/publications/impact-syria-conflict-salafis-and-jihadis-lebanon

[80] Information obtained through general field interviews

[81] Such as the targeting of a Hezbollah convoy with an explosive device on 7-16-2013, or residents of the town going to Masnaa to welcome the fighters of the Syrian city of Zabadani following the agreement to evacuate them through Beirut International Airport on 28-1-2015.

were recorded in this town equals that of major cities such as Tripoli.[82] This question was the focal point of the field interviews in the towns of Majdal Anjar and Kherbet Rouha and those from outside the town in order to identify the resilience factors in Kherbet Rouha and the vulnerability factors in Majdal Anjar to violent extremism.

4.2.2   The factors of vulnerability that led to violent extremism in Majdal Anjar

- *Geographic Location*

The strategic geographic location of Majdal Anjar influenced its history, the character of the people, and policy-making for it, which made it an exceptional town among its surroundings. The location has direct impact on the town due to two main factors:

First, the **location at the Lebanese-Syrian border**: This strategic location links the Lebanese Beqaa region, Mount Lebanon and the Lebanese capital Beirut with the city of Damascus.[83] Majdal Anjar was also a strategic target for the Israeli army during the 1982 invasion, which sought to control the border crossing leading to the Syrian capital.[84] Herein, **the geographic dimensions should be analysed together with the political events** taking place in Lebanon and the region whereby the town is among the first to be affected due to its geographic location. The interplay between these dimensions is consequential for its political and religious orientation, and gives the Majdalines a feeling of power and motive for interacting with conflicts with the aim of extending influence or fighting aggression. During conflicts, ideologies became the convenient justification with legitimate tools that they adopt depending on political events, ranging from nationalist to communist and, recently, religious. While the former was used to justify violent involvement against Syrian security forces during the tutelage, the latter was used as a moral and rational excuse for legitimising combat and justifying the external intervention of the townspeople in Syria and Iraq, and the attacks against Lebanese security forces.

Secondly, the **main crossing point between Lebanon and Syria is called "al-Masnaa"** or "the factory" because it is considered the most important crossing point. This strategic location **had a clear influence on the social, cultural and economic situation in Majdal Anjar**. After the independence of Lebanon in 1943 and the customs' separation between Lebanon and Syria in 1950, and following the expansion of transit and land freight to the Arab countries, new businesses and jobs were created in the town, such as customs clearance offices and banking and exchange centres. Commercial activity then began to expand as the international highway extending from Chtaura to the Masnaa point became the most important commercial line in Lebanon.[85] Due to the majority of Arab tourists entering Lebanon through this route, the Beqaa region in general and Majdal Anjar in particular was **revived economically**. The issuance of Decree No. 150 in 1978, which authorised the municipality of Majdal Anjar to collect a fee for each ton that crosses the border enhanced the economic situation of the town and the al-Masnaa point became a source of prosperity for the town.[86] Al-Masnaa rapidly transformed the town of Majdal

[82] Bilal Saab, "Al-Qa`ida's Presence and Influence in Lebanon." *Combatting Terrorism Centre at West Point Sentinel 12*, no.1 (2008).

[83] Ahmad Al Ajami, *The History of Majdal Anjar*, (Beirut: Al Gherbe Publishing House, 1992).

[84] "Lebanon's Legacy of Political Violence: A Mapping of Serious Violations of International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Lebanon, 1975-2008", *International Centre for Transitional Justice*, (2018). https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Lebanon-Mapping-2013-EN_0.pdf

[85] A focus group meeting, held by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[86] Ahmad Al Ajami, *The History of Majdal Anjar*, (Beirut: Al Gherbe Publishing House, 1992)165-166

Anjar, from the agricultural lifestyle to **a hub for regional trade** without going through an intermediate phase. Traders from Lebanese regions and from Syria flocked to the town, introducing new ideas and diverse cultures.[87] Al-Masnaa transformed the general character of a Majdaline from a simple farmer to a skilled and witty merchant. In addition, the customs were another source of income for the Majdalines through **smuggling**. For instance, after the Lebanese General Security prevented displaced Syrians from entering Lebanon in May 2014, "human smuggling" became a trend,[88] in addition to smuggling gasoline and diesel to Syria (before 2021). The interviewees claim that the long history of smuggling may have contributed to shaping the personality of an average Majdaline.[89] The smuggler's personality is a deceiver of the law and a hater of the regimes that stands in the way of gains. It is a rebellious personality and a smooth one in terms of its methods of deceit. It possesses the art of manipulation and deceit by virtue of engaging in this practice. This character can see anything as tradable and often likes overcoming risks.[90]

Through al-Masnaa border point **townspeople witnessed the movement of fighters from Hezbollah to Syria since 2011**. This became **a source of tension between the population of the town who support the Syrian 'revolution' and those loyal to the Syrian regime** including politicians and popular supporters.[91] For instance, the Lebanese journalist Joseph Abu Fadel, who was an outspoken supporter of the Syrian regime, was violently attacked by the townspeople.[92] The movement of Hezbollah fighters without accountability and without being considered "terrorists", "extremists" or "foreign fighters" by the Lebanese state created further grievances among Sunnis in Lebanon in general and the people of Majdal Anjar in specific who felt targeted and victimised.

- ***Ideology***

After the emergence of the Islamic Awakening movement[93] and the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements, ideologies in Majdal Anjar took a new turn, which eventually led to fighters from Majdal joining al-Qaeda and other Islamic and non-Islamic movements (such as the Iraqi Baath Party) in Iraq post-2003, and to many joining al-Nusra, the Islamic State in Syria and other movements on emotional and ideological grounds post-2011.

The turning point in the religious landscape in Majdal Anjar began with the return of a group of Beqaais who graduated from the Islamic University of Medina in Saudi Arabia in 1986.[94] Most prominent among them were Sheikh Adnan Umama and Sheikh Hassan Abdul Rahman. The **Salafi preaching and discourse spread the sectarian and doctrinal views of the Salafi school**, whose ideology bares part of the responsibility for spreading extremist thought.[95] The Salafis also started enforcing Sharia law in public

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[87] See https://www.marefa.org/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84_%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1

[88] An interview with a Majdaline who was working in the factory by Youssef Salloum, October 1, 2021.

[89] Interviews with several Majdalines.

[90] Samantha Mann, "How does a smuggler behave?", *Crest Research Centre*, (2018). https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/how-does-a-smuggler-behave/

[91] A meeting with a social activist from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

[92] "Joseph Abu Fadel confirms that he was attacked at the factory", *Nahar Net*, August 16, 2021. https://www.naharnet.com/stories/ar/50260

[93] See: Hani Nasira, (2017), the Hakimiyyah Maze, T2, p193, Arab Unity studies centre, Beirut.

[94] Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of Faith: Migration, Education and the Wahhabi Mission* (California: Stanford University Press, 2016).

[95] Raphael Lefèvre, "The Sociopolitical Undercurrent of Lebanon's Salafi Militancy", *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre*, (2018). https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/03/27/sociopolitical-undercurrent-of-lebanon-s-salafi-militancy-pub-75744 and also validated by an Interview with a group of social activists in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

and policed public gatherings. The **Salafi trend** created an intellectual confusion and divisions in Majdal Anjar; nonetheless, the Salafis were more convincing because of the religious evidence they brought forward as well as their capitalisation on existing frustrations to provoke sectarian grievances.[96] Some interviewees believe that the strength of the **Salafi movement in Majdal Anjar was related to its financial strength and capabilities**. The large number of mosques affiliated with the Salafi movement, al-Manahil school, clinic and various other facilities, are a testimony to this funding. However, the co-founder of the Salafist movement in Majdal Anjar, Sheikh Adnan Umama, denied this, calling them alms from those interested in social and religious affairs.[97]

The Salafi modus operandi in Majdal Anjar then transformed from scattered occasional proselytisation to an organisational nature, especially since Sheikh Adnan Umama was previously a member of the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyyah.[98] [99] This resulted in a Salafi ideology with an organisational nature which distinguished Majdal Anjar from other areas. This was manifested through organising religious study circles in private locations far from the town's mosque to avoid dispute with the Imam of the town. The construction of the Abd al-Rahman ibn Auf Mosque in 1997 is considered the most important event that perpetuated the general ideological division in the town, as there was only one mosque in the town prior to that. This made Majdal Anjar the second Salafi hub in Lebanon after the city of Tripoli.[100] The new mosque became also a centre for preaching and Sharia education. Pamphlets and brochures, along with audio tapes and books – particularly contemporary ones written by Saudi Salafi scholars like Sheikh Ibn Uthaymin and the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Ibn Baz who professed a Salafi ideology[101] - were also distributed. With the spread of the Internet, those interested started reading books from the website "Platform of Monotheism and Jihad",[102] which remains the most widespread in jihadist communities. The book 'Millat Ibrahim' by the jihadi Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi also attracted a large number of readers from among those interested in jihadist Salafi thought, along with the book 'Milestones' by Sayyed Qutb. The most important pillars that distinguished this school of thought and that had a significant impact in attracting the youth of Majdal Anjar or justifying their violence can be classified into five main issues: 1) Monotheism, based on the book "Unity" of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab;[103] 2) Division between the Abode of Islam and the Abode of Infidelity, whereby this requires not recognizing international man-made laws.[104] Accordingly, Salafis in Majdal Anjar prohibited participation in any municipal or parliamentary elections. It

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[96] Interview with an expert in religious and political affairs from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, July 7, 2021.
[97] Interview with Sheikh Adnan Umama during the focus group by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.
[98] See https://civilsociety-centre.org/party/jamaa-islamiyya
[99] Omayma Abdel-Latif, (2008), "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* retrieved from: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec6_abdellatif_lebanon_final.pdf
[100] Saoud al-Mawla, "The Salafists in Lebanon oscillate between advocacy and arms", *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*, November 15, 2012. https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2012/11/2012111593541563647.html
[101] Alsaif, "Relationship between State and Religion in Saudi Arabia: The Role of Wahhabism in Governance." *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2013): 376–403. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48600156.
[102] Aaron Y. Zelin, "Living Long Enough to See Yourself Become the Villain: The Case of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, (2020). https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/living-long-enough-see-yourself-become-villain-case-abu-muhammad-al-maqdisi
[103] Mohammad bin Abdel Wahab, *Kitab al-Tawhid,* (Cairo: Library of Science and Governance), 2008.
[104] Hani Nasira, *The Hakimiyyah maze, research on the rulings of the homeland and the division of the world into Islam and unbelief* (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies Centre, 2017), 247.

was also forbidden to join the military.[105] Religious education and preaching was based on the afore-mentioned vision in the Abdul Rahman bin Auf mosque until Sheikh Adnan Umama participated in the municipal elections in 2004, based on transformations and revisions he introduced to his previously-held doctrine. This pushed a group of his colleagues and students to split from him and formed a splinter group led by Mohammad Yassin aka "Abu Hudhayfa".[106] In addition, the young men who joined al-Qaeda after 2003 adopted fatwas, religious edicts, from these leaders on the legitimacy and necessity of Jihad or holy war there. They also **received a fatwa that the whole country is an arena for jihad because it is not the Abode of Islam**, and accordingly, they can fight inside Lebanon. Therefore, they **considered all the Lebanese security forces "tyrants" and should be fought against**, as evidenced in some of the security incidents that Majdal Anjar witnessed.[107] The concept of Hakimiyyah (The Rule of God) was introduced to the Salafi ideology in Majdal Anjar after Sheikhs Adnan Umama, Hassan Abdel Rahman and Abu Hudhayfa split from al Jamaa al-Islamiyyah.[108] They thus established a Salafist organisation in Majdal Anjar, applying the concept Hakimiyyah or allegiance to one leader, based on the premise that the Lebanese state is not an Islamic state and Muslims should only be led by and pay allegiance to a Muslim leader.[109] This concept shifted the group's modus operandi from mere indoctrination to the revolutionary field, declaring the imperative of deposing the ruler, the obligation to appoint a caliph and establish the caliphate, the necessity of liberating the usurped Muslim lands, and declaring jihad as an obligation on Muslims.[110] Nevertheless, the 'revolution' was never made public because of the prevailing political situation; but with the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, Abu Hudhayfah wanted to declare jihad in Iraq in order to achieve the concept of Hakimiyyah there and support the Islamic State of Iraq, but Sheikh Adnan and Sheikh Hassan disagreed with him, justifying that the circumstances are not permitting. This led to Abu Hudhayfah and his followers to announce the split after a series of previous disputes with the two Sheikhs, such as Umama's participation in municipality elections, the issue of the army's infidelity and excommunicating government employees, which was also rejected by the two Sheikhs. This stage in 2004 (also the same year Ismail al-Khatib was killed in detention) is considered the beginning of the establishment of the extremist jihadist Salafist movement in Majdal Anjar, and Sheikh Adnan Umama was among the first to be targeted through an assassination attempt by placing an explosive device in his car.[111] When asked about the discourse that both Sheikhs had adopted, Sheikh Umama said that he adopted such a discourse because "the [Islamic] nation is being slaughtered and such injustice cannot be ignored", but that he did not incite anyone to go to war.[112] And when asked about the young men who fought in Iraq with al-Qaeda, he replied that the one responsible for recruitment was Mustafa Ramadan aka Abu Muhammad al-Lubnani,[113] who

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[105] This is one of the causes of the division of the Salafi trend. While Umama did not consider a person who joins the military an infidel, others, led by Abu Hudhayfa, excommunicated them. See Book of Atonement and its Regulations, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Rahili, Dar Al-Imam Ahmad).

[106] Interview with a social and religious activist in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum, October 8, 2021.

[107] Interview with Sheikh Adnan Umama by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 14, 2021.

[108] Omayma Abdel-Latif, "Lebanon's Sunni Islamists—A Growing Force", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* (2008). https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec6_abdellatif_lebanon_final.pdf

[109] Lina Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding", *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre,* (2015). https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding-pub-60511

[110] Moatazz Al Khatib, *Allowed Violence, Hakimiyyah unity research*, (Cairo: Dar al Mashrek), 202.

[111] Interview with a social and religious activist from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, August 10, 2021.

[112] Interview with Sheikh Adnan Umama in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

[113] Abu Muhammad Al Lubnani: A Beiruti of Kurdish origin. He formed a group of supporters and his relationship with al-Zarqawi developed through his activity with the Ansar al-Sunna group led by Mullah Krekar, who resides in Norway. He was killed in an American raid in Iraq.

was in direct contact with Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq.[114] Through him, some of al-Majdal's youth were introduced to al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi, from whom some received fatwas on the legitimacy to fight in Iraq alongside al-Qaeda.[115] It is noteworthy that Abu Muhammad al-Lubnani had not acquired any religious credentials or gone through systematic religious education.[116] The discord between Sheikh Adnan and Abu Hudhayfah was not ideological but discretionary and circumstantial. **Sheikh Umama believed that the declaration of Abu Hudhayfah to confront the state and withdraw from society exposes about 400 Salafi families in Majdal Anjar to danger**. As for Abu Hudhayfa, he believed that, as long as it is in the name of God, there is no problem if families are killed, tortured, or displaced;[117]

According to the concept of Allegiance and Disavowal:[118] "accusation of disbelief" becomes an inevitable principle, which the followers of Abu Hudhayfah often applied in the town's society.[119] Implementing the concept of Jihad[120], the followers of Abu Hudhayfa were engaged in the fights in Iraq and later in Syria.[121] Other combatants who joined the two wars with religious or extremist groups did not necessarily do it out of religious conviction, but out of solidarity coupled with deep-seated grievances. Subsequently, **two religious discourses divided Majdal Anjar**: the discourse of a Levantine, Azhari-Ash'ari school that has a wide presence, especially after the establishment of a religious institute in the outlying area of Azhar al-Beqaa town in 1986 (affiliated with Egypt's al-Azhar); and the second discourse of a Salafi school that is divided between educational/quietist Salafism and jihadist Salafism.

- *Personality factor*

Many interviewees from Majdal Anjar emphasise the Majdali personality and its implications as factors of vulnerability that *may* facilitate a resort to violent extremism in the name of religion. They believe that individuals from Majdal Anjar are generally impulsive, overly enthusiastic, chivalrous and masculine—elements that can be confirmed through Majdal Anjar's history of fighting.[122] An average Majdali, they state, loves difficulties and power, and "can sometimes be barbaric".[123] One interviewee described the town as "the town of ignorance", with many of its men having an excessive desire for money that would dictate their life.[124] When asked about their opinions on the reason behind the surge of violent incidents in Majdal Anjar compared to other villages, many cited the "peculiar personality" of Majdalis, their impulsive and enthusiastic "innate" tendencies to defend the community, "which some may refer to as extremism", and one added: "you may want to ask the other villages why they

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[114] Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (born Isam Bin Muhammad Bin Tahir al-Barqawi) is of Jordanian-Palestinian origin and is known as the "most important jihadi ideologue alive". He has popularised many of the most common themes of radical Islam today, like the theological impetus given to the notion of Allegiance and Dsavowal, being the first to declare the Saudi royal family to be apostates, and thus whoever believes in it to be an apostate. He is also best known as the spiritual mentor of Jordanian Jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the initial leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.
[115] Interview with Sheikh Adnan Umama by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 14, 2021.
[116] Interview with Abu Mohammad al-Lubnani's father by Youssef Salloum, October 5, 2021.
[117] Interview with Sheikh Adnan Umama by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 14, 2021.
[118] Nasim Belhoul, *The Jihadi Combative Salafi Doctrine, A Study of Basic Milestones in the Doctrine of Allegiance and Disavowal* (Beirut: Dar al Rawafed, 2013).
[119] Interview with a historian from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.
[120] Nasim Belhoul, *The Jihadi Combative Salafi Doctrine, A Study of Basic Milestones in the Doctrine of Allegiance and Disavowal* (Beirut: Dar al Rawafed, 2013).
[121] An interview with a social and religious activist from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum, August 10, 2021.
[122] A meeting with a group of social activists in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.
[123] A meeting with a social activist from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.
[124] A meeting with a group of social activists in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

are not that [chivalrous]".[125] Others justified the Majdalines' involvement in violence based on the town's history that went through the "shock of successive events" in the Arab world because of the town's geographical location, which helped shape the Majdaline personality. This, the interviewees say, caused an obsession with appearance and fame.[126] They also mention dominant "Bedouin" values and traditions in the town claiming that the "Bedouin habits" persist in the patterns of thought and emotions as in most Arab communities. They exemplify municipality elections where the elected mayors usually only hail from two big families, the Ajami the Yassin families.[127]

Two major incidents in the town that had repercussions throughout the country highlight the above-mentioned features of the personality of a Majdaline, that links it with a readiness or predisposition for violence. These are a) the **kidnapping of seven Estonian tourists by Majdalines in 2011 upon arrival to Lebanon from Syria via al-Masnaa road**.[128] Herein, it is important to examine the personality of Wael Abbas from Majdal Anjar, who led the kidnapping. In a group interview which included three people from the town, they stated that Wael was not religiously committed, but was obsessed with fame and power.[129] His relative said that he was **obsessed with the personality of the powerful and violent character Murad Alam-Dar from the famous Turkish TV series "Wadi al-Thi'ab"**[130] to the extent of impersonating him.[131] Interestingly, in Olivier Roy's study of the profiles of Muslim Western radicals who committed violent extremist attacks, he notes that one of their common traits is being fond of violent American movies such as *Scarface*.[132] Wael Abbas also had a direct connection with Khaled Malaka, nicknamed Abu al-Walid, who holds a "jihadi" record in Majdal Anjar and played important roles with jihadist groups in post-2003 Iraq. Abu al-Walid and Wael Abbas used to meet at the former's gymnasium, along with other peers who used to go to that gym because of Abu al-Walid's powerful influence among young people as he used **to mediate in their favour with the security forces when they got in trouble**.[133] The interviewees elaborated that when Wael was assigned the task of the kidnapping, he found in it the opportunity for glory and fame. According to the testimony of these three people, especially his relative, Wael was not religious or practicing, but he was sympathetic with the Syrian 'revolution' and influenced by the appeal of the jihadist ideology that he had heard from Khaled Malakah;[134] b) The **self-fabricated kidnapping of Sheikh Muhammad Al-Majzoub** in 2010:[135] Following the events of May 7, 2008, Sheikh Majzoub, who hails from Majdal Anjar, started delivering sermons that incited against Hezbollah and the Shiites, exerting considerable influence.[136] However, it is claimed that after the Sheikh came under attack from his followers when it emerged that he had bought with the money luxury cars and houses, he planned his kidnapping to try to ease the financial

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[125] A focus group meeting with, held by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[126] An interview with a notable of the town of Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

[127] A meeting with a group of social activists in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

[128] Afif Dian, "3 Groups Kidnap the Estonians", *Al Akhbar,* April 1, 2011. https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/86041

[129] Interview with three people from Majdal Anjar: a security officer, a relative of Wael Abbas and an activist in Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

[130] "The Valley of the Wolves", IMDB, accessed September 23, 2021. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0421384/

[131] Interview with three people from Majdal Anjar: a security officer, a relative of Wael Abbas and an activist Anjar on

[132] Olivier Roy, *Jihad and Death the Global Appeal of Islamic State* (London: Hurst & Company 2017), 28.

[133] Interview with three people from Majdal Anjar: a security officer, a relative of Wael Abbas and an activist Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

[134] "The arrival of the commander of the Islamists in Roumieh to his hometown." *Lebanon Debate,* August 11, 2014. https://www.lebanondebate.com/news/177837

[135] See www.al-akhbar.com. Arrest of Sheikh Majzoub: investigations are ongoing.

[136] The interviewees claim that his anti-Hezbollah sympathisers paid him to buy weapons and train men to take part in future battles against Hezbollah. Interview with security officer from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.

scandal and to gain public sympathy.[137] During the "kidnapping", he threw his turban on a junction road in Majdal Anjar. **The news of the kidnapping spread as Majdalines took to the street, blocking al-Masnaa road and demanding the security forces to reveal the fate of the kidnapped Sheik, with many accusing Hezbollah of the kidnapping**. However, on the same night, the Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces announced the arrest of Sheikh Majzoub disguised in the home of a friend in the town of Lala in the western Beqaa.[138] This incident almost ignited popular Sunni strife at the level of the Beqaa and all over Lebanon, as it occurred at a moment of intense sectarian tensions and sharp political divisions between March 8 and 14 camps.[139]

While the research team believes that the findings on the "personality factor" within the framework of this research project capable of supporting a general "violent extremist" or "jihadist" profile for the townspeople of Majdal Anjar are inconclusive, inhabitants of this town, as well as key stakeholders from the Beqaa region as a whole, expressed an interest in learning more about it and understanding who was especially susceptible to radicalisation and committing violent acts. When it comes to analyzing the implications of personality traits on factors of vulnerability, analysis generally relies on the scholarship and research based on psychological theories of violent extremism, political violence and terrorism which are all primarily concerned with understanding the mental functioning and personality of the individuals that resort to violent acts fueled by extremist beliefs.[140] To that end, authors of this field draw their conclusions on psychological responses to sociological influences and may even zoom in on the result of individual mental illness and/or trauma.[141] Simple socioeconomic explanations of radicalisation are also unable to account for this variety and we cannot assume that this theory presumes that violent extremism is instrumentalist and solely financially motivated.[142] In the case of Majdal Anjar and based on the data collected, a combination of intertwined internal (political, geographic) and external factors can be observed.

- *External factors*

Many interviewees mentioned the **role of injustice against Sunnis and Islamic movement youth in Lebanon and the world**, and its contribution to radicalisation processes in Majdal Anjar. These varied from the **Palestinian cause**, and the support of the international actors, especially the US, for Israel. Moreover, they state that **Western powers were supporting the Arab regimes, which are oppressive and dictatorial**. They added that the **past events of Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the **killing of Muslims in different parts of the world, and their persecution** had an effect led to pent-up frustration for the "committed Muslim youth who are protective of their religion".[143] One interviewee said: "Wasn't what happened in Iraq provoking the feelings of Muslims, whether by the Americans whose president declared a crusader war on Iraq or **the Shiites that provoked the Sunnis by killing**

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[137] Ibid.

[138] Usama Al-Kadri, "Arrest of Sheikh Majzoub: Investigations are continuing", *Al-Akhbar,* Januar8, 2010. https://al-akhbar.com/Archive_Justice/81635

[139] Afif Diab, "The Sheikh who kidnapped himself!", *Khiyam,* January 30 2010, retrieved from: http://www.khiyam.com/news/article.php?articleID=8241

[140] Minerva Nasser-Eddine; Bridget Garnham, Katerina Agostino, and Gilbert Caluya, "Countering Violent Extremism", *Counter Terrorism and Security Technology Centre*, Defense Science and Technology Organization, (2011). https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA543686.pdf

[141] Lia Brynjar and H-W Katja Skjølberg, "Facts and Fiction in Theories of Terrorism - An Expanded and Updated Review of the Literature on Causes of Terrorism" (2005), 57.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Interviews with several Sheikhs from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum, April 17, 2021.

Saddam Hussein on the morning of Eid al-Adha."[144] In this regard, the interviewees also cite **Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria** and the **'injustices' against Sunnis that were circulated through eyewitnesses and the media**.[145]

The Majdalines' linking between local (Hezbollah) and regional (in Iraq and Syria) injustices is related to their **perceived Hezbollah dominance over state and security institutions** which "inflicted injustice against Sunni Islamists."[146] Therefore, they believe that the lack of support for the Sunnis in the neighbouring countries will later lead to the weakness of the Lebanese Sunnis, and that **the demise of the Syrian regime will strengthen Sunnis in Lebanon, and eliminate Hezbollah's hegemony**.[147] This shows the Lebanese Sunnis' loss of faith in the Lebanese state. Similarly, they **lost faith in Dar Al-Fatwa**, the official Muslim institution, which is in harmony with the general discourse of the Lebanese state. Even Sunni political parties, whether Islamic or secular, are perceived in the same light. Therefore, the youth who participated in the fighting in Iraq and Syria, saw the jihadist groups as an opportunity to seize their rights and lift the oppression against Sunnis. This was coupled with the material factor that exploited the underprivileged and young people from broken families with little hope for the future. Consequently, **religious ideology per se was not a main factor** that pushed these youth to violent extremism. In a study that analysed the personality of violent extremists, it was found that the vast majority of them have **general ignorance of the official teachings of Islam**, in addition to **weak cultural and educational knowledge**.[148] Many responded to a mobilisation that was stirred by some Sheikhs[149] or to the calls of movements that are not Islamic, such as the Future Movement that supported the Syrian opposition and had a significant role in mobilizing Sunni public opinion against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah.[150]

4.2.3   Offline dynamics contributing to the dissemination of the violent extremist ideology

After the victory of the "Afghan Mujahideen" over the Soviet Union in 1989 and the latter's exit from Afghanistan, jihadist movements started to be on the rise, especially with the return of the so-called Afghan Arabs, which coincided with the surge of the Islamic Awakening Movement.[151] Among those influenced by the movement were a group of graduates of religious institutes in Medina, such as Sheikh Adnan Umama and Sheikh Hassan Abdel Rahman who played a very active role in spreading Salafi belief in Majdal Anjar in the early nineties. This period had also witnessed the powerful emergence of the Salafist movement all over the Islamic world **through mosques, institutions, associations, and**

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[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Interviews with several Sheikhs from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum, April 17, 2021.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Youssef Salloum, "Educational and Doctrinal Factors in Extremist Personality Formation" (PhD. Diss., Lebanese University, 2020), 171.

[149] "Al-Rafi'i announces the general mobilisation and Al-Asir is issuing a fatwa for jihad in Al-Qusayr", *Lebanon Files,* April 15, 2013. https://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/535603/javascript(0/ and Radwan, Murtada "Calls from Tripoli to support the Sunnis in Syria", *Al-Akhbar,* April 23, 2013. https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/49844

[150] Muhammad Allouch, "The Future Movement and the Syrian Accusations", *Al-Jazeera,* April 25, 2011. https://www.aljazeera.net/opinions/2011/4/25/%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-2

[151] Nasim Belhoul, *The Jihadi Combative Salafi Doctrine, A Study of Basic Milestones in the Doctrine of Allegiance and Disavowal,* (Beirut: Dar al Rawafed, 2013).

missionaries. Among the associations that are linked to the Salafi movement was the Ghiras Al-Khayr Association,[152] which was founded by Sheikh Adnan Umama, spreading the Salafi doctrine in Majdal Anjar through his **speeches and teachings** that were supported by Islamic evidence and references from the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet as stressed by the followers of the Salafi movement. The most prominent means of spreading the Salafi belief were **religious lessons, Friday sermons, and the distribution of (Salafi) books, publications, and audiotapes**.[153]

With the fall of Baghdad in 2003, Jamia'at Tawhid wal Jihad, or the Monotheism and Jihad Organisation led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi[154] emerged, initially targeting the American forces, shifting later against the Shiites as the "close enemy", and describing them as apostates.[155] Al-Zarqawi's organisation was known for documenting the killings by filming them and broadcasting videos via mobile phones and through the traditional media. The youth of Majdal Anjar were circulating these videos that contained violent scenes and new methods of killing, such as beheading with knives then placing the head on the chest of the victim. These scenes were satisfying to some who believed that the Shiites are the enemy based on the **videos circulated** and **selected Television stations relaying crimes against Sunnis** during the Iraqi civil war.[156] At the same time, **books written by jihadist theorists** like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada the Palestinian gained popularity.[157] In 1994, with the early spread of the Internet in Lebanon, the Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad was set up to disseminate Salafi-jihadi ideology.[158]

4.3 Conclusion on vulnerability factors

The field study conducted in Tunisia and Lebanon shows that vulnerability factors can mainly be classified into two groups: **external/internal** and **more/less intertwined**. The first is due to a strong external influence, even interference, in a country's affairs – and/or in the affairs of one of its localities – because of the importance of its regional and international geostrategic location. Salafism was gradually introduced in Tunisia over the past three decades and was brandishing the slogan: "The Caliphate is the Solution." It was not only instrumentalised by Islamist political parties of all types, but it also aggravated the country's multidimensional crisis. Most often led by unemployed young people and school dropouts in search of social and cultural recognition, this ideology, which was **financed by money coming from many countries of the Arab Gulf via local networks**, fueled violent extremism, led to the assassination of politicians and military figures, and accelerated the decline of the educational edifice that was a source of pride for modern Tunisia.

The influence of that same factor was even more striking in Lebanon. Victim of its **geographical location between two military powers hostile to each other (Syria and Israel), and under the influence**

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[152] "Association in the name of 'Ghiras Al-Khayr'", *Lebanon Knowledge Development Gateway.* https://lkdg.org/node/1234
[153] Youssef Salloum(2020), Educational and Doctrinal Factors in Extremist Personality Formation, p.171, *unpublished doctoral thesis*
[154] Rabasa, Angel, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin A. O'Brien, and William Rosenau (2006). "The Al-Zarqawi Network: Jordanian and Iraqi Jihadis." In *Beyond Al-Qaeda: Part 1, The Global Jihadist Movement*, 135–46. RAND Corporation, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg429af.18.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Interview with social and political activist from Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.
[157] Joas Wagemakers, (2008), "Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi", *Combating Terrorism Centre, Volume 1, Issue 6,* retrieved from: https://ctc.usma.edu/abu-muhammad-al-maqdisi-a-counter-terrorism-asset/
[158] Youssef Salloum, "Educational and Doctrinal Factors in Extremist Personality Formation" (PhD. Diss. Lebanese University, 2020), 171.

of an ancestral Wahabi/Shiite rivalry (Saudi Arabia/Iran), Lebanon is continually forced to pay the price of wars that are not its own.

However, these external hostilities are not without consequences on the Lebanese people, hence the reason why the second group of factors resonates with external actors**: pan-Arabism and the support given to the Palestinian cause** by large sections of its population on the one hand, and the Muslim and Christian **confessional system** on the other hand. There is a subtle difference to the case of Tunisia: The radicalised Salafism that reached Tunisia is either a utopia of ignorant and economically marginalised groups of young people, or an ideology instrumentalised by political parties in search of power, while radicalised Salafism in Lebanon is more a form of allegiance to regional Sunnism, remotely guided by Wahabism, than being an ideology of national political parties.

5   Resilience Factors

The following section traces the factors that foster resilience against radicalisation and violent extremism in the two studied country cases Tunisia and Lebanon.

5.1   Tunisia

Numerous resilience factors emerge from the research. However, they remain contingent on private and/or associations' initiatives, whose success varies from one region to another. The contribution of government institutions to resilience also differs according to the will and dynamism of certain officials in each region, even if administrative centralism, the lack of means and coordination between ministries, and the political-ideological tug-of-war are still burdensome and hinder the installation of a climate of social pacification and the prevalence of a culture of "coexistence" that guarantees everyone the right to difference and autonomy, as well as material well-being.

Thus, for individuals, especially women, **resilience translates into an awareness that leads them to take charge of themselves**, in order to **guarantee their financial autonomy and to overcome social and cultural adversity**. As for the resilience of young people who were tempted by radicalisation after the Tunisian Revolution, it can be seen in the way they are giving up on fanaticism: this is most evident among young people who willingly abandon the dress code specific to Salafism, which is generally worn to distinguish oneself and display one's religious ideology. The latter seems to have lost its appeal among these people and is attracting less and less of them.

More generally, the potential for resilience in these two categories, and in many others, can be summarised in the following five factors:

5.1.1   The state regains the initiative for public order

It is an established maxim: there can be no pacification and social contract without a state that monopolises the legitimate use of violence. Since the **designation of Ansar Al Sharia as a "terrorist group"**

in 2013, the declined laxity by the Ennahdha government, which was in control of all sovereign ministries related to Ansar Al Sharia, then the access to power in 2014 of Nida Tunes and its leader Béji Caïd Essebsi, the two ministries responsible for terrorism have changed their approach. This approach is split along two main lines: the first seeks to increase the ministries' budget in order to provide the Armed Forces with the means to anticipate terrorist attacks. The offensive tactic, strongly supported by public opinion and successive governments, has not only virtually ended assaults by Jihadist groups, but also **cut food and weapons supplies** that used to reach them through internal breeding grounds and **across the Algerian and/or Libyan borders**. Even the messages of congratulations and encouragement sent to them via the networks by sympathisers using **fake profiles were removed and their authors identified and arrested**.

The **second line of action is rather preventive**. The two ministries have joined forces with various university research centres and structures in order to counter this unprecedented scourge of violence.[159] The aim is not only to **understand the motives** behind the radicalisation of young people and the **reasons for their vulnerability to extremist speeches and calls for violence**, but also to bring together the **synergies of all stakeholders** responsible for the education and socialisation of children and youth.

Despite the **government's instability** and the **political turmoil** that has plagued the country since the revolution, thereby delaying substantive reforms in this area, there have been many initiatives. The field research in the two sites revealed a new state of mind, based on moderation and a desire to tame the impulses of violence and to develop a commitment to life and personal development.

5.1.2   The Ministry of Religious Affairs regains control of deviant mosques

It is true that the process initiated since 2013 has been undeniably successful: the majority of mosques have **moderate imams**, who *"reject religious fanaticism and dogmatism coming from elsewhere."* In the same vein, the two radio channels *Al Zaitouna* and *Al Korâan Al Karim*, too politically and ideologically involved and refusing – with help from the political coverage of *Ennahdha* and *Itilaf Al Karama* – to comply with the regulations of the HAICA,[160] were **banned from broadcasting**. Sabra FM, a local radio station in Kairouan, *"ended a programme whose tone is reminiscent of the radicalised and violent religious discourse held by Ansar Al Sharia,"* said the president of the Reproductive Health Association. He also mentioned, during our interview with him, the reputation of trust and moderation, of which he is a prime example: *"I receive phone calls from people from all over Tunisia requesting consultations about religious issues. And I answer them on the basis of my scientific knowledge in the matter, but also by taking into account contemporary developments and the need for adaptation to the new social reality."*[161]

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[159] National Counterterrorism Commission.
[160] HAICA (the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication): officially established on May 3, 2013, is a constitutional body with regulatory and consultative powers. It seeks to promote the culture of regulation and plurality and to instill a new mode of governance in the audiovisual sector.
[161] Interview with R.B, Op. Cit.

5.1.3 Children's rights to the rescue of resilience

The **Children's Rights Code** is one of the advances at the level of human rights in Tunisia. Thanks to this Code, the Delegate for Children under the Ministry of Women, Family and Seniors has gained considerable power to intervene at any time when these rights are violated. Its work is closely linked to the media, the Ministry of Justice and civil society. Being the target of many forms of extreme violence, especially religious radicalisation, the **education of children** stirs many conflicts. The case of the Quranic school of Regueb (near Sidi Bouzid) is a prime example testifying both to the extent of the damage caused by Wahabism and the synergies of various actors from institutions and associations who have engaged – in search of a journalistic scoop – in the cause and anticipated other serious incidents of implicit violence.

5.1.4 The legislative arsenal and association dynamics

Tunisia has some unique characteristics compared to other countries in the MENA region. The ideal of gender equality had been a main theme since the beginning of the 20th century among Tunisian modernist and reformist elites. The new independent State drew inspiration from this culture to institutionalise this ideal through an ambitious and even voluntarist **legal system**, given the prevalence of traditional culture. One could say that the new State's will to effect change has radically changed the way Tunisians think about this matter. Thus, the Code of Personal Status saw the light in 1956, well before the proclamation of the Republic in 1957 and the ratification of the first Constitution in 1959. The reforms continued over the years, certainly not without resistance, but with giant steps such as the abolition of polygamy, the need to have women's explicit and free consent for marriage, and judicial divorce, as well as other laws recognizing women's rights in the fields of work, education, political life, and health, including abortion, etc.

Tunisia is also known for having ratified most of the international conventions related to women's rights, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The 2014 Constitution enshrined equality between male and female citizens in rights and duties without discrimination. The Electoral Law affirmed parity in electoral lists, and the Law against Trafficking Persons was passed 2016, with another law forbidding violence against women in 2017.

5.1.5 Youth action: cultural spaces and initiatives

Given the **near-total absence of public initiatives to provide young people with spaces for cultural exchange and artistic expression** that can promote resilience in the field sites, it is up to individuals and **civil society** who are aware of this void to take on this task. These work hard to raise awareness on radicalisation to guide the youth in the surveyed areas, either through sports or cultural activities, or through the medical, legal and financial aid they provide.

Such is the case of the **cultural centre launched by a resident of El Kef**. Aware of the need to offer young people the opportunity to expend their energy on extracurricular activities, he created his own cultural centre, in a way, housing a library, a small auditorium, and a gallery equipped with Wi-Fi. The

centre also serves as a meeting place and a place of conviviality, which welcomes young people in search of entertainment that they lack outside the centre's walls. In particular, the centre has allowed the creation of dance, theater, and music groups, as well as a film club.

Similarly, the **Femmes et Progrès (Women and Progress) Association in El Kef** diversifies its activities in the same spirit. Not only does it help young women and accompany them in their efforts to gain financial autonomy, it also regularly organises breast cancer screening campaigns or, even more daringly, hikes in the mountains, as if to taunt the terrorists in their own stronghold in the local mountain pastures.

The **association Joussour Al-Mouâtana (Bridges for Citizenship),** though lacking financial resources, frequently offers young people in poor neighborhoods in El Kef meetings for **debates and round tables that aim primarily to raise awareness of the harmful effects of radicalisation**. The main goal of these meetings is to make young people realise what they could lose because of radicalisation. In other words, the meetings help them grasp the seriousness of the impasse they would face at the end of such a path and, in particular, the consequences and harm it could have for their future.

5.2 Lebanon

While the Salafi ideology emerged in Majdal Anjar and overtook the traditional popular Sufi tradition, **Kherbet Rouha was able to preserve the historical Sufi tradition** in vis-à-vis the expansion of the Salafi movement. The town's religious and political officials actively prevented the graduates from Salafi institutes in Saudi Arabia from spreading their newly-acquired ideology in the town, while also resisting the expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood and the movement of the Association of Islamic Charitable Projects known as Al-Ahbash.[162] [163] Even after the emergence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and of violent Islamic movements in Syria after 2011, when the Salafi-jihadi ideology infiltrated Majdal Anjar's individual, intellectual and security dynamics, Kherbet Rouha did not witness such an influence. The dominant Ash'ari religious narratives and teachings remained mainstream.

5.2.1 Resilience factors in Kherbet Rouha

Based on the fieldwork input, resilience factors in Kherbet Rouha can be summarised as follows:

- *The leadership factor*

The people of Kherbet Rouha consider that the "devotion" to **the elderly** and the high respect, appreciation, and obedience to them is a positive resilience factor. Any general dispute or divisive issue in the town is raised before them, or they interfere out of their own initiative knowing that they have the final word.[164] The elderly includes the notables of the town especially the Imam of the town and senior religious figures. They consider that their town is disciplined and coherent, enjoying an immunity that

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[162] "Al-Ahbash" is an association which is opposed to Islamic revival movements and to the use of violence against established authority. It sees Syria as the protector of Lebanon (East West Record 29 Oct. 2001).

[163] A focus group discussion with the townspeople of Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[164] A meeting with a group of people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipality by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021.

resists external religious and intellectual distortions, be it new religious ideas of the violent extremist or political Islamist nature. This discipline mostly comes from the people's **faithfulness to the Imam of the town** for they consider him the moral ruler whose words cannot be reversed. For example, the former Imam of the town, Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Khatib, has forbidden anyone from giving religious lessons in the mosque or on public or private occasions without his permission. Moreover, he closely supervised the summer courses for teaching the Holy Quran.[165] Following the **flow of Syrian refugees to Lebanon**, they had a significant presence in the town, which coincided with a rise in robbery incidents. The Imam of the town at the time, Sheikh Haider Thuraya, formed in 2013 a voluntary committee of young people called the Disciplinary Committee to carry out night vigilance and inspect the general needs of the residents in cooperation with the municipality.[166] The committee was also tasked with conducting annual surveys of the families' needs and help, helping to provide aid through the Aid Fund Committee. The town's Imam and its elders also directly contributed to fostering resilience among the townspeople during the collective recruitment in Beqaa of the youth to fight in Iraq and later in Syria. One of the interviewees mentioned that when he thought about going to Iraq in 2003 to fight alongside the Iraqis against the international coalition forces, he consulted the Imam who advised him not to go based on religious and practical arguments.[167] He complied.

- ***Relations with Damascus***

The interviewees from the town recount a spiritual relation that links their town to the city of Damascus. Most of those who studied Sharia in the town have graduated from Damascene religious institutes and schools and forged good relations with many of the Sheikhs of Damascus and Damascene families. Despite the relative distance between the town and Damascus, the constant contact gave its people the character of the Damascus civilisation. The interviewees affirmed that this relationship is historical: Sheikhs from Damascus used to visit the town for long periods where they bought houses and played a guiding and educational role.[168]

- ***The expatriation factor***

The history of expatriation in the town dates back to 1890. Since then, the town has witnessed **waves of immigration** that reached its peak between 1989 and 2000 when over two-thirds of the people of the town were considered expatriates.[169] Expatriation was an important factor that affected the formation of the collective mindset of the people in terms of **openness to others and acceptance of different cultures** through direct contact with them. Meeting with others means to find common denominators that embed in the soul the principle of pluralism and acceptance.[170] [171] The expatriates maintained close relations with the townspeople through inter-marriages, creation of trust funds to help the needy and sending financial support to the municipality of the town.[172] Expatriation also has an important role in **giving hope to young people** who do not find employment opportunities, therefore

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[165] Meeting a group of people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021.
[166] Ibid.
[167] A statement made by one of the town's local mayors during the the focus group for Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.
[168] A meeting with someone of the Sharqia family Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum, April 9, 2021.
[169] Based on the meeting with the townspeople of Kherbet Rouha and the president of the municipality by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 22, 2021.
[170] Meeting with people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 22, 2021.
[171] Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
[172] A meeting of the focus group for Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021.

it is an available alternative source of living, given that **most of the people of the town have relatives or contacts living abroad**. Another motive to refrain from violence is keeping a clear criminal record to ensure clearance for emigrating when the opportunity arises.[173]

- ***The popular Sufi mindset***

The Sufi movement dominates the religious behavioural patterns in the town. It has been maintained despite the waves of political Islam and jihadist Islam movements[174]. It is a historical lifestyle that influences the collective mind, even those who do not consider themselves systematic followers of Sufi tariqas.[175] The Sufi approach focuses on refining morals, "purifying" the heart with love and forgiveness, and working to elevate the seven states of mind, which are companionship, knowledge, self-fighting, remembrance, repentance, honesty and asceticism.[176]

- ***Tolerance and social cohesion***

An atmosphere of brotherhood and tolerance prevails among the people, due to the high rate of intermarriages among them, residents and expatriates alike.[177] As for municipal elections in the town, the authority is easily transferred without any violence or disputes recorded.[178] This atmosphere of kinship and tolerance extended to the residents of the town from other towns, where the town **hosted a huge number of displaced Syrians**,[179] and the townspeople were keen on providing them with aid and shelter. The town even buries Syrians in its cemeteries in any grave that belongs to the town's families[180] when other towns of the Beqaa had refused it.[181] **Social solidarity** is also common as financial funds were created in which the expatriates and the wealthy of the towns contribute to spend regularly on needy families under the supervision of the Imam of the town.[182]

- ***High literacy rate***

Education is accorded a great value in the town. For instance, a committee was formed to provide financial support for the school of the town. A school director mentioned that she had asked the Imam for a large sum to improve and develop the school, and he complied by allocating a special fund to

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[173] A meeting with people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021.

[174] A meeting with people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021. Same ideas were evoked in the meeting of the focus group for Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021

[175] A teacher in the meeting of the focus group for Majdal Anjar on by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021

[176] Al-Qushayri's message of Imam Zain Al-Abidin Al-Qushayri, Chapter of Explanation of the Maqamat, p. 95, Dar Jami` Al-Kalm, Cairo.

[177] Meeting with people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021

[178] Meeting with the mokhtar of Kherbet Rouha at the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021

[179] Aref Maghames, "The villages of Rashaya receive new Syrian families", *Khiyam,* June 4, 2013. http://www.khiyam.com/news/article.php?articleID=15451

[180] Input of an engineer from Kherbet Rouha during the focus group by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[181] Fatima Haidar, "The dead Syrians in Lebanon cannot find a cemetery", *Al Modon,* September 29, 2019.https://www.almodon.com/society/2019/9/29/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A9

[182] A meeting with head of associations who established his charitable social institution in the town by Youssef Salloum, September 6, 2021.

support education.[183] Another fund was created by a group of engineers, doctors, professors, and financiers from the town to help university students, and established a centre for continuing education, an institute of vocational sciences, and another for nursing.[184]

- ***Role of political parties***

Generally, the townspeople **view political parties in a negative light**, though some may be affiliated with political parties, but this does not negatively affect their relationship with each other.[185] The town has withstood all the crises in Lebanon, and none of the political upheavals and ideologies found breeding ground in the town, including the Islamist parties. Moreover, political differences did not play any role in polarising society. To confirm this idea, a person from the town said that even in the darkest days of the town, during the Israeli occupation and the political parties' expansion during the civil war, the resistance of the townspeople was limited to the town and its outskirts, and none of them went to fight in other areas, such as the martyr Muhammad al-Ladan, who was killed within his area.[186] This indicates that the people of Kherbet Rouha's loyalty is to the homeland and the country and not to the party and politics. Regarding their view on extremism, the overwhelming response was that violent extremism is the result of religious ignorance and lack of social justice.[187]

5.2.2   Initiatives to prevent extremism in the town of Majdal Anjar

Against the backdrop of the wars in Iraq and Syria, and the resulting increase of clashes with personnel and assassinations in Majdal Anjar, [188] the Sunni mainstream religious "mood" in the Beqaa in general and in Majdal Anjar in specific – including that of non-adherents of the Salafi creed – was in harmony with the Salafi (aforementioned) revolutionary discourse. **Most inhabitants agreed with the Salafi trend in the event of mobilisation and anger discourse, without agreeing with them in the religious justifications**. This was considered the first apparent rapprochement between the Salafist movement and its opponents, which further increased following the events of May 7, 2008.[189] This prompted the **establishment of online and offline initiatives to explore prevention strategies and build community resilience** in Majdal Anjar. The main actors were the mayor of Majdal Anjar, municipality officials, religious figures from Dar al-Fatwa and beyond, community leaders and activists. The initiatives are summarised as follows:

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[183] Intermediate School Principal the focus group in Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[184] A meeting with the President of the Beqaa Youth Association, Dr. Abdullah Al-Taseh by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, September 28, 2021. See also "The Beqaa Youth Association launches a health unit to bury Coronavirus victims", *Al Madar Net,* October 24, 2020. https://almadarnet.com/%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%82-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84/

[185] As part of a meeting with a group of people from Kherbet Rouha in the Municipal House by Youssef Salloum, June 15, 2021 . Same ideas were repeated during the focus group meeting by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[186] Meeting of the focus group for the people of Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[187] Input during the meeting f the focus group in Kherbet Rouha by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 22, 2021.

[188] The killing of a major and a captain in the Lebanese army during raids in Majdal Anjar www.alraimedia.com

[189] Nabila Ghosein, "Anniversary of May 7: The censure of the Sunnis and the tyranny of the Shiites", *Al Modon,* May 7, 2020.https://www.almodon.com/society/2020/5/7/%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%89-7-%D8%A3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9

- *The role of the municipality*

Mayor Sami Al-Ajami and his predecessor Hassan Deeb Saleh played a **coordinating** role with the town's Sheikhs, including the Salafi sheikhs, **to end the clashes with the security forces**. **The mayor and other municipality officials also mediated between the official authorities and the fugitives**. In one case, a young fugitive agreed to surrender and settle the case with eased sentences, provided that none of the persons has had any practical participation in fighting against the security forces.[190] In another notable case, Abu Hudhayfa surrendered to the security forces, and was later released following a short period without any charges being proven against him. Yet, several refused to surrender for their lack of trust in the security forces and their conviction that what they have perpetrated was correct.[191] **Saeed Yassin, who became mayor of Majdal Anjar in 2016, adopted his predecessors' strategy of communication and mediation between the security forces and the fugitives to settle their cases and help with their reintegration in society**. He also established an association called "Youth Initiatives", with the support of the Danish government and the aim of **activating a community prevention network** that includes representatives of the municipality, clergymen, youth, professors and businessmen.[192] [193] "Youth Initiatives" association issued a guide for preventing and countering extremism and organised a series of community dialogue on prevention of extremism and de-radicalisation.[194] [195] Another objective of this **initiative is to break the stereotype against Majdal Anjar** that has characterised the town since the killing of Ismail al-Khatib in prison in 2004 on charges of extremism, the road blocking on 7 May 2008 and the kidnapping of Estonian tourists until today. It aims at a **creating new religious discourse** that tackles social change, taking into consideration the rising challenge of online radicalisation through social media channels that are "invaded" by Salafi jihadist movements.[196]

- *The role of religious figures*

Intensive coordination meetings began to take place between all the Sheikhs of Majdal Anjar beginning in 2004 following the killing of Ismail al-Khatib and the subsequent security events in the town. These coordination efforts took place between the Sheikhs affiliated with the official religious institution, Dar al-Fatwa, and the influential Salafi sheikhs of the town to curb extremism and excommunication. These meetings eased the severity of the previous differences and clashes between religious figures form different schools of thought, where they eventually reached a tacit agreement to stop any religious accusations and ease the public religious tensions by creating an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance.[197]

- *The role of the joint initiatives between the municipality and the Sheikhs*

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[190] An interview with the former mayor of Majdal Anjar, Hassan Dib Saleh by Youssef Salloum, October 13, 2021.

[191] A statement by Sheikh Bilal Abdel Rahman during multiple meetings by Youssef Salloum, October 16, 2021.

[192] "Majdal Anjar", *Strong Cities Network.* https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/ar/city/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/

[193] See also https://m.facebook.com/YIAmajdalanjar/?locale2=ar_AR

[194] Said Yassin, Mayor of Majdal Anjar at the focus group for Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, October 6, 2021.

[195] Majdal Anjar", *Strong Cities Network.* https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/ar/city/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/

[196] A meeting with a group of notables from the town of Majdal Anjar, including Nidal Khaled, director of the Social Protection Network in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 14, 2021.

[197] Meeting with Salafi and Dar al-Fatwa Sheikhs in Majdal Anjar, where they provided the minutes of their meetings from 2015 to 2021.

The municipal council's initiatives evolved into **permanent coordination with the town's Sheikhs** by holding meetings when violent cases arise. The topics of these meetings also expanded to cover the town's public affairs, with a focus on the youth's needs and concerns. The two sides also agreed to hold seminars and lectures to raise awareness on the issue of extremism, in addition to agreeing to work jointly to lobby for settling the cases of some young defendants and to develop reintegration strategies. For instance, they worked together to **ensure employment opportunities for young people** to curb their inclinations towards violence or extremism. These meetings also included coordination with the political and security authorities to explore ways to tackle the underlying problems and push factors using soft strategies rather than hard security measures.[198]

5.2.3 The gender dimension

The role of gender in relation to violent extremism in the Beqaa did not appear as either a vulnerability or resilience factor. Generally, the role of women in the Beqaa region—a typically conservative area—is limited to **traditional gender roles associated with a heavily patriarchal system**. This is especially true in the town of Majdal Anjar where women are active in **religious preaching in women-only circles**. In these circles, the religious discourse of these preachers (often the wives or daughters of prominent Sheikhs) was consistent with the Salafi discourse of Sheikhs Adnan Umama and Hassan Abdel-Rahman. However, they are **generally absent (or made absent) from prevention and mitigation efforts and activities**. This begs the question of the influence of the perceived dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, wherein the men of the town were seen to exude machismo and women were seen as subordinates to their male counterparts. There is a **critical link between masculinity and violence**, especially within societies that equate "what it means to be male" with engaging in violent or destructive behavior to prove one's manliness.[199] Similarly, in societies where the use of violence is closely associated with manliness, this link can fuel conflict and make armed responses to disagreements appear "legitimate, inevitable and natural".[200] And while some scholarship suggests that violent extremism tends to be committed by men and its enactment is linked to traditional notions of manhood,[201] it is still unclear whether the townspeople's perception of masculinity, as well as perceptions and aspirations of 'manhood' have—either directly or indirectly—contributed to a higher incidence in violent extremism. With that said, literature on the subject of the symbiotic relationship existing between misogyny and violent extremism has put into question the impact of the subjugation of women on both ideological and tactical levels in relation to the most active extremist groups. Based on Kate Manne's definition of misogyny as "a political phenomenon whose purpose is to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance",[202] this trait is shared by many actors in mainstream society and more virulently and overtly expressed and acted on by violent extremists.[203] It is

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[198] A meeting with many of Majdal Anjar's personalities and sheikhs by Youssef Salloum on October 23, 2021.

[199] Cynthia Cockburn, "2. The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace" In *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 24-44. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520937055-004

[200] David J. Duriesmith, "Building Peace with Warlords in South Sudan: A Gendered Structure," in *African Frontiers: Insurgency, Governance and Peacebuilding in Postcolonial States* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 157-166, David J. Duriesmith, *Masculinity and New War: The Gendered Dynamics of Contemporary Armed Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2016)

[201] Michael Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into–and Out of–Violent Extremism* (University of California Press, 2018).

[202] Kate Mann, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 33

[203] Pablo Castillo Diaz and Nahla Valji, "Symbiosis of Misogyny and Violent Extremism: *Journal of International Affairs,* Vol. 72, No.2 (2019), Dynamics of Global Feminism, 37-56

worth noting that the **interviewees did not acknowledge or even recognise the gender dimension when it comes to violent extremism and de-radicalisation**. To that end, it is critical to further this research to better understand, not only the role of women in violent extremism and de-radicalisation, but the overall impact of perceived masculinities and femininities on the resort to violence in the Be-qaa. It is also important to differentiate between **multiple contested forms of masculinity and femininity in any given space**, knowing that the articulation is likely to vary depending on the region, which, in turn, produces palpable differences in the acts in which men are willing to engage in.

5.3 Conclusion on resilience factors

The sites surveyed in Tunisia and Lebanon revealed a significant and diverse potential for resilience among young people and many other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. An inherent **openness and tolerance** were identified in El Kef and Kherbet Rouha: an inclusive character based on "coexistence" and diversity, transmitted through migratory traditions abroad, particularly in Kherbet Rouha, and through the fertile cultural mix that is very visible in El Kef, which is the repository of a rich heritage ranging from the Roman era to the French colonial era.

Endowed with a character said to be "impulsive" and committed to all causes, the youth of Majdal Anjar or those of Kairouan/Sidi Bouzid are not hopeless victims of vulnerability. They do not lack influential figures nor moderate religious institutions. The sheikhs and *mukhtars* (local mayors), with the support of the local municipal authorities, have shown skill in **negotiating compromises** with the Army and the central Lebanese authorities in order to contain and channel the anger of these young people, due in large part to their sense of injustice and humiliation resulting from the perception of marginalization of their Sunni faith. In Kairouan, the network of associations (especially feminist associations) and certain religious institutions seem to have been very successful in their attempt to rehabilitate the image of "authentic and moderate Malekite Islam," for which the city and Tunisia were renowned. For them, eliminating poverty, ignorance, unemployment, which hit new records in Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid, and **distancing religion from political issues**, would be the main bulwarks against violence and in favour of resilience.

Despite the persistence of vulnerability factors mainly related to traditions and poverty, both Tunisian sites show an undeniable reticence towards violent extremism. However, the north-west region is still more prone to resilience, thanks to relational practices that are well rooted in its history and in the **various artistic activities** that mark the cultural life of the region.

The presence of women in both civil and political society bears witness to the overwhelming male domination, but also to the potential for resilience and the undeniable capacity of this 'community' to compensate for the shortcomings of political actors. The two sites have, to varying degrees, highlighted these skills, as have those in Lebanon. **In Lebanon, the way youth radicalisation is addressed and the governance of charitable aid by local religious figures and the *mukhtars* are the equivalent of what civil associations do in Tunisia.**

6 Online (de)radicalisation

Since the beginning of the 1990s, online (de)radicalisation has found in satellite channels and then in the multiple social networks on the internet an excellent vehicle for the dissemination of influential messages, not only through words and images but also through instantaneity and their cross-border character. The fieldwork carried out in the four sites in Tunisia and Lebanon confirms the effects produced by these technological developments on both countries. In this regard, the testimonies collected in all the sites mention the main Salafist movements, including Wahabism, which, during the last three decades, shook their territories and shaped the minds of large sections of their population, especially the youth.

6.1 Tunisia

Facebook pages and websites of some political parties and/or personalities in Tunisia show a strong instrumentalisation of religion, more particularly of the radicalised Salafist ideology, by politicians. Certainly, there are nuances in the intensity of religious discourse from one political affiliation to another, but the overall agreement on an Islamic societal model is almost universal. In the face of this is a **mosaic of modernist discourses**, carried by Bourguibist, social democrat, pan-Arab, and left-wing parties, held in a more or less radicalised way.

Without eliminating the reasons for this polarisation and its manifestations, the **coup de force legitimised by Chapter 80 of the Constitution undertaken by the President of the Republic on July 25, 2021, inaugurated a second divide** between his supporters – still without any defined institutional party affiliation – and those of the "others." This split involved the parties of the hegemonic coalition in the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) before its work was suspended. These were the parties that were not or were only marginally represented in it, and figures from all sides who identified themselves as defenders of the "cause of democracy and the freedoms acquired" by the revolution. The supporters of Kaïs Saïd respond to this slogan with that of "sovereignty and the interests of the people," undermined during a dark decade by absurd political fights, corruption, and economic decline aggravating the misery of the people and bringing the country to the edge of bankruptcy.

The **suspension of the ARP, which had served as the main stage for the protagonists of decades-long polarisation**, the spontaneous popular support for the end of the "political circus," and the assumption of all powers by the President have apparently **shifted the bulk of the confrontations to the new divide, the media, and social networks**.

This section will start with a brief definition of the notions of radicalisation and de-radicalisation. It will then move on to an evaluation of the influence exerted by social media and traditional media, then the way in which the main political-ideological divides are seen, and, finally, the nature of the groups or communities that are made, unmade, or remade through these media.

6.1.1   Notions of radicalisation and (de)radicalisation

Radicalisation and de-radicalisation represent two closely related attitudes. Some researchers see de-radicalisation as the recovery of those who are already radicalised by changing their beliefs or moving away from extremism.[204] It is actually a process of "becoming less radical" in both behavior and beliefs. Thus, the de-radicalisation of behaviours implies the complete cessation of violence. De-radicalisation of beliefs thus translates into reintegrative attitudes with a clear tendency to regain faith in the system and an "increased desire to reintegrate into society and the rejection of undemocratic means," as the study by Demant et al.[205] on this issue so clearly shows. On the other hand, there are those who see de-radicalisation as a measure that prevents radicalisation in the first place. They therefore explain de-radicalisation more in terms of preventive action.[206]

That said, in the digital age, there are many ways to spread radical messages. In the framework of WP5, our investigation is also devoted to the propaganda that circulates on the internet. In Tunisia, the aim was to examine propaganda containing messages of radicalisation[207] and propaganda seeking to challenge or counter ideological messages capable of generating verbal and physical violence. To do this, our investigation has also taken into account the political change in Tunisia triggered on July 25, 2021, whose decisions turned the tides and changed the web of social networks.

6.1.2   Social media and traditional media: What role do they play in (de)radicalisation?

We have seen above that both social media and traditional media mark turning points in the evolution of information and communication in the world and especially in Tunisia. However, what is interesting, as Marcel Gauchet points out, is that these media platforms relay information[208] and do not duplicate it, but rather rework it and retransmit it during 'downtime.' Thus, for example, people can be informed, during commutes in private and public transport, of what they would have missed the day before on television or what would have happened at the very moment.

However, what is impressive in post-revolution Tunisia is that the traditional and digital media windfall that fed the dream of freedom of expression within a democratic society tolerating plurality has often degenerated into scenes where massive amounts of extreme and multiform violence are exchanged and amplified. Some of our partners from associations have reported the paradox in Kairouan, which was known to be a city of anchored, moderate Islam and proven scientific reputation. However, the city has not only served as a public space for the great demonstration of the radicalised Islamist group Ansar Al Sharia, but also saw "*its **local radio station**, Sabra FM, put itself at the service of this group by disseminating its ideology and relaying its radicalised messages targeting young people on social networks."*[209]

Some civil society actors or officials working in government institutions[210] are aware of the strong influence of this "harmful" **synergy between media of all kinds**. This has contributed to the relative

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[204] Demant et al. 2008, 157; 170; Schmid 2013, 41-42; Pettinger 2017, 4-5.
[205] 2008, 13.
[206] Pettinger 2017, 3.
[207] Zgryziewicz2018.
[208] Marcel Gauchet, *Penser la société des médias*, éditions de l'Aube, 2007, p.15.
[209] Interview with R.C, Ob. Cit.
[210] Director of the Centre of Quranic Studies in Kairouan.

improvement of the situation. "By wanting to create the 'Association of Reproductive Health' and join-ing the radio station Sabra FM as a broadcaster, I have not only used my reputation as a former teacher of Islamic education to counter radicalised speeches on sex education to schoolchildren, but also to open direct channels of 'moderate' advice to listeners soliciting me live."

This is not about showing to what extent the ideological dimension of radicalisation is used in these media, but rather how it is organically linked to the political dimension in the case of Tunisia. The video of Rached Ghannouchi, widely circulated during the last decade, testifies to the fundamentally political nature of Islamist radicalisation, even in its 'legal institutional' version embodied by the Ennahdha party. Speaking to members of Ansar Al Sharia, the president of Ennahdha who had just assumed office after the elections of October 23, 2011, strived to warn them of euphoria, which could turn against them, all while trying to guarantee their allegiance:

"It is true that the secularists are not in power now, but they still have the media, the economy, and the administration. Moreover, the Destourians (former adherents of the Destour of Bourguiba and then the Democratic Constitutional Rally, as named by Ben Ali) supported by the media are gradually returning to the political scene. In addition, the Army's support is not guaranteed, nor that of the se-curity forces. Therefore, my brethren, do not overestimate your numbers or your current ability to show strength even if you are 10 or 20 thousand, because they still control the main organs of the State. Take advantage of the freedom to launch radio and television stations, to build schools, univer-sities, mosques, and to multiply the preaching tents. What is the point of being in such a hurry? Do you think that this freedom and these achievements are not in danger? Do not take the risk of losing eve-rything, as it was the case in Algeria. We thought that we had won the battle once and for all (during the nineties) and that there would be no risk of returning to the starting point, but it turned out that we had not understood the situation well, as the mosques were immediately reclaimed by the secu-larists."[211]

As we can see from this testimony, **the power of the media is as important as that of armed force**. However, the leader of the party that has governed the country since the revolution and is supposed to promote tolerance and social pacification only sees it as a source of power. He also does not seem bothered by the content circulated through the media and the amount of violence conveyed, especially by the young, radicalised Islamists supporting him.

The second consequence is a frustrated citizenry that justified the constitutional coup of President Kaïs Saïd. However, rather than putting an end to this violent divide, he created a second one whose pro-tagonists are, on one side, his supporters, and, opposed to them, the 'other' corrupt politicians, ban-dits, thieves, etc.

6.1.3 The media and escalation of political-ideological divides: the mark of the influencers

Is the unquestionable success of Kaïs Saïd in the 2019 presidential elections the invisible mark of this super power of the media? **Much has been said and speculated about the 'thousands of Facebook accounts' that have supported the brilliant achievement of a candidate who has no party or financial budget dedicated to his electoral campaign.** Can we consider the electoral campaign conducted by

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[211] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWupUPfH0CY.

young volunteers as a peaceful "counter-message" to the ideological and political violence that preceded his nomination? Yes, if we take into account his willingness to put an end to the absurdity of political quarrels at the expense of the 'interests of the people,' his unquestionable honesty, and his sincere commitment to 'recover the money embezzled from the people from the pockets of the corrupt.' The abysmal failure of the parliamentary system adopted in 2014 under the strong impetus of Ennahdha to redress the economic and social situation and the **image of 'circus' that circulated in the media and on social networks** have given involuntary reason to the president and have justified the suspension of the activities of the ARP on July 25. Moreover, is the abundant literature in political science and sociology on the crisis of representative democracy not sufficient?[212]

However, the president's speech does not seem to put an end to violence of all kinds, including political violence, which is not likely to facilitate social pacification and economic recovery. This is not only because his opponents in parliament – whose activities are suspended – who are presumably responsible for the country's crisis are not willing to resign and call by all means[213] for a return to democracy and even dialogue.[214]

6.1.4 The nature of virtual communities

We see on the web many **pages claiming a 'primary belonging,'** claiming a regional identity, such as Abnaou Al Janoub' (people of southern Tunisia). This claim represents a certain type of solidarity, which is more or less temporary, but can be revived at any time, following any incident, decision or simple event.

The reticular solidarity from which Moncef Marzouki had benefited, during the presidential election that opposed him in 2014 to Béji Caïd Essebsi, was very diverse: The Islamists supported him – despite him being secular – out of aversion towards the Bourguibist candidate; he also benefited from regionalist solidarity, because he is originally from the south, marginalised by the Capital and the Sahel (North East and Centre East) of the independent state. Similarly, the Iranian film Persepolis broadcast on the eve of the 2011 Constituent Assembly election, by the liberal and modernist channel of Nabil Karoui, Nesma TV, had severe consequences for the modernist parties who have supported the freedom of artistic expression. In retaliation, Islamist fanatics – supported by groups from the 'revolution protection' league – set fire to the house of the channel's owner and attacked the channel's staff. Ironically, Nabil Karoui is now supported by Islamist channels – Zitouna and Al Korâan Al Karim – just because his party is allied to Ennahdha and Itilaf Al Karama in the ARP suspended by the president. In 2019, during the second round of elections, these same Islamists and their two channels supported Kaïs Saïd – the providential bird, as named by Ghannouchi – against Nabil Karoui, accused of corruption at the time.

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[212] Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Parliament of the Invisible*, Seuil, 2014, Samiha HAMDI, *The Youth and Political Action, Electoral Behavior, and the New Forms of Engagement in Urban Spaces in Tunisia*, FLSHS, 2017,

[213] Among other means, this included ARP sessions in the presence of MPs representing the three parties that form the coalition controlling the government dissolved by the President on July 25. These sessions, carried out remotely, were the subject of discussion by the media and on social media, as if to say: "here is our counter-message" against the coup-d'état and our call for the return to legitimacy and democracy.

[214] It is worth recalling that while Ennahda is currently in a weakened state, it is calling for dialogue, including political dialogue. A few months before July 25th, it repeatedly rejected calls for multidimensional dialogue by the General Tunisian Labor Union. At the moment, Ennahda, which claims to be open to any dialogue initiative, is persistently refusing the inclusion of a political dimension, although the crisis is largely political and mainly caused by the dispersion of State powers.

There are **many examples of ephemeral 'communities' generating verbal violence**. These incidents are certainly **temporary** and doomed to oblivion, **but have permanent effects** and are still harmful because they **can be revived by political developments**. Another kind of 'community' worth mentioning is 'the **feminist community**,' which is quite disinterested in politics, carries a potential for resilience, and is consistent.

This community is visible through the actions of a **large network of human rights associations, micro-credit associations, and aid and support organisations for exploited and/or abused women, which are often financed by international programmes**. In the three cities surveyed, we were able to identify some of these associations and witnessed thei **big impact in the places where they operate**.[215] This economic and social vocation has earned the women responsible for these associations much more lasting sympathy in social networks than violence. However, as soon as a woman shows a particular interest in politics, she is almost immediately attacked, especially when she has no partisan support. This was the case of MP KE. Loghmani regularly disseminates actions showing her commitment to the city she represents in the ARP, but this hardly immunises her from the patriarchal culture when she approaches the political field. She had resigned from her left-wing party before the 2019 legislative elections in protest against the regional secretary, who had assaulted a fellow woman. She had also resigned from the party Qalb Tunes, under whose banner she was elected to the ARP just after the decision taken by the party president to join the coalition of Ennahdha and Itilaf Al Karama in the ARP. MPs in this coalition have since been targeting her with violent, almost 'misogynistic' terms: "They call me," she told us "Obese, crocodile… and **flood me with insults and immoral slurs all referring to my female gender**."

6.2 **Lebanon**

6.2.1 **Online radicalisation**

When the Syrian war erupted in 2011, the Internet had become widely available, and applications such as **Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and particularly Telegram** became widely popular. The latter played an **important role in communicating violent events**, as jihadist organisations were trying to extend their control and influence over the cyberspace. According to a study published by the SMT Studies Centre, the number of websites affiliated with these groups increased from 12 in 1997 to 150,000 in 2017.[216] For example, the Islamic State currently publishes 38 new messages per day through written claims, video clips and weekly updates via al-Naba' electronic outlet.[217] The official accounts of the Islamic State alone on Twitter reached 46,000 at the end of 2014, while other violent

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[215] Henda Nciri, Henda and AFTD Kairouan.

[216] "Cyber-terrorism: the technological face of extremism," SMT Studies Centre, last modified November 13, 2018, https://smtcentre.net/archives/slider/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%83%D9%86%D9%88%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%8A-%D9%84

[217] Aaron Zelin, "Jihadi Movements 2021: ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (2021).* https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jihadi-movements-2021-isis-al-qaeda-and-hayat-tahrir-al-sham

extremist organisations publish around 9 million short-videos in English, over 47,000 in French, over 20,000 in Russian and over 12,000 in Arabic.[218] The approximate number of violent extremist organisations' websites on the Internet reached about 90,000 websites in 2015.

The huge number of these media outputs and activity shows the organisations' ability to employ social networks for two primary purposes: **ideological propaganda and demonstration of greatness and strength.** This attracted many young people from Majdal Anjar as they were of watching these releases and telling their friends about them. They would **meet to watch together the videos and documentaries issued by IS**, with the same excitement friends gathering to go to the cinema.[219]

The **Telegram** application also had an important impact in providing **direct communication with extremist organisations** that were widely active on it.[220] The application contains different pages with different purposes, including a page that allows **chatting with members of the organisations, to pledge of allegiance**, for instance, or to **infer how to reach the "Caliphate lands"**. Other pages on the application were designed for publishing **books** on which extremists relied, **religious chanting and mobilisation clips, broadcasting scenes of fighting operations, training material to disguise and to deal with the investigation in case of captivity, teaching how to use weapons and installing booby traps**.[221] This online medium had a direct impact on the youth of Majdal Anjar. It has particularly attracted those with new religious inclinations, as they resort mostly to online media and communication in their search for reassurance and guidance. Such target groups are most ardent and fundamental people, as they believe that their new affiliation and fierce fighting will atone for their old sins or provide them with **a sense of belonging and identity** given the void in collective belonging.[222] [223] Online media also represented a haven for people who desired revenge against the practices of the security services that dealt unjustly with Sunni detainees on issues related to the Syrian war. It was also an opportunity for those who dream of the return of the Caliphate and the glory of Islamic history, particularly amid state failure. Islamic movements have always carried out this cause since the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, and it is within the mainstream Sunni religious narrative that official and non-official Sheikhs circulate the **idealisation of an Islamic State, through recalling the "glorious history of Muslims" and their victorious battles against infidels**.

6.2.2 Online measures to prevent extremism in the town of Majdal Anjar and international cooperation

In the framework of the Berghof Foundation's partnership with Dar al-Fatwa between 2015 and 2018 and with local religious authorities-including in the Beqaa, including in Majdal Anjar – between 2018

[218] Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Todd Helmus C., Madeline Magnuson, and Zev Winkelman "Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter", *Rand Corporation,* (2016). https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1300/RR1328/RAND_RR1328.pdf
[219] Interview with a social and religious activist in Majdal Anjar by Youssef Salloum and Lara Azzam, June 15, 2021.
[220] Youssef Salloum, "Educational and Doctrinal Factors in Extremist Personality Formation" (PhD. Diss., Lebanese University, 2020), 171
[221] Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, "Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram", *The George Washington University,* (2019). https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/EncryptedExtremism.pdf
[222] Michael A. Hogg, and Janice Adelman, "Uncertainty–identity theory: extreme groups, radical behavior, and authoritarian leadership". *J. Soc. Issues* 69 (2013), 436–454. doi: 10.1111/josi.12023
[223] Youssef Salloum, "Educational and Doctrinal Factors in Extremist Personality Formation" (PhD. Diss., Lebanese University, 2020), 171.

and 2021, the foundation supported Dar al-Fatwa in Beirut and its branch in the Beqaa (located in Majdal Anjar) in **developing a media mission and vision to extend its outreach so as to spread the culture of tolerance and moderation**. This support was mostly focused on Dar al-Fatwa's main media outlet, al-Qur`an al-Karim radio stations in Beirut and Beqaa, as well as the **support of social media development and outreach efforts**. It included supporting the development of a Digital Media Strategy for the stations, experts' workshops, media and outreach trainings on religious content and media technicalities with the aim of **offering the youth attractive alternative narratives** to the extremist content online that was prevalent. Trainings from Lebanese and Egyptian experts included the topics of **debunking radical narratives online based on Islamic texts**, **deconstructing and contextualising rulings on Jihad and violence vis-à-vis "the other"** and detecting indicators of extremism in the youth and ways to manage them. On the technical and practical side, coaching sessions were provided to the radio stations' staff, particularly on broadcasting their content on social media and ensuring wide outreach. As a result, an **online programme was produced by the stations broadcasted by the station's social media page with a wide reach**.

7   Comparative Analysis

The qualitative data collected in Tunisia and Lebanon reveals common factors that generate vulnerability and predisposition to radicalisation in both countries, but also specific factors related to the history and configuration of each of the two societies. The resilience factors are no exception to this observation, or rather to the potential immunity against vulnerability and the inclination to violence, which have been and could be made more available to actors acting for resilience.

7.1   External and internal factors of vulnerability to radicalisation

7.1.1   Common factors

The comments collected from the offline interviewees in the surveyed sites in both countries, as well as the selected material from screen captures of traditional media, official websites, and online pages point to two extremely important factors in this evolution. First, there is an **external factor** related to the ties that Tunisia and Lebanon have maintained or still maintain with their geostrategic environments.

- *The Relationship to France and the West*

Independent from France since 1956 and 1943 respectively, the cultural, economic and of course political links of Tunisia and Lebanon with the former metropolis have never been cut. The presence of France in both countries still weighs heavily, and the French language is still used in education and main economic exchanges. This is why many political actors consider that France has never left the

country, especially in Tunisia. Itilaf Al Karama has built its electoral campaign on the **recovery of natu-ral wealth plundered by France**. This refers to the many French companies exploiting oil deposits or monopolising salt. In Lebanon, such accusations are not common. However, **the West, including France, is generally accused of having double standards**. The two wars led by the United States against Iraq and the unconditional support to Israel have left and still take a heavy toll on the Arab and Muslim conscience in the civilisational and identity dimensions. If the animosity of radicalised Tunisian youth vaguely evokes the 'heathen' Western enemy, their Lebanese peers point to the United States of America as the source of the evil targeting only 'the Sunnis'. This is what emerges from the testimonies of the youth of Majdal Anjar, who are subject to arrest and imprisonment by the Lebanese army, in the name of the 'holy' **war launched by the Americans since September 11, 2001**, against terrorism.

Isn't the humiliation, widely publicised, felt, and shared by Tunisian and Lebanese youth one of the components of this vulnerability? In the two **Lebanese sites**, which have benefited greatly from their openness to the West and do not suffer from blatant poverty, **the wound is rather cultural**, if not religious. In the **Tunisian sites**, especially in Kairouan/Sidi Bouzid, **poverty resonates with an externally imposed injustice**. The French language is only really felt as a foreign hegemony insofar as it enshrines regional disparity and excludes young people from the interior from the 'established status.' The map in Annex 1 clearly reflects this divide in the distribution of wealth.

- ***Relationship to the regional environment***

Is it really an external factor? The question is all the more justified since relations with neighboring Arab countries (Libya and Algeria in the case of Tunisia, Syria in the case of Lebanon) were rather fra-ternal despite some temporary differences between the regimes (Bourguiba/Gaddafi). This is also rel-evant considering that more recently, **the porosity of the Libyan border sine 2011** facilitated the pas-sage of weapons to terrorist groups, but without any effect on popular feelings.

This could be said as well about the relationship between Lebanon and Syria, if it were not for Israel, the common enemy of both countries and the occupier of Palestinian lands. However, despite the fraternal relations between the two peoples, the **protracted conflicts between Syria and Israel** have a significant impact on Lebanon. This country has often been used as an **interim war zone by other Arab and Muslim countries**. It is in this sense that we can speak of external factors that are a source of vulnerability.

The fieldwork results have indeed shown that since the emergence of **satellite channels and social networks uncontrollable by the State**, Tunisian and Lebanese societies are subject to strong religious Salafist influences in today's globalised world. This **Salafist influence of Saudi origin** is intended to counter or anticipate the Shiite influence of Iran. In Tunisia, the interviews do not hide a Saudi/Emirati or Qatari obedience of this or that charity to one or another political party. **In Lebanon, the religious confessional system is very old, but the radicalisation of young Sunnis in Majdal Anjar is recent as the testimonies prove and points to a Salafism that came from the Arabian Peninsula**. Being sup-ported by political parties and financed through association accounts, this Salafism has not only dis-torted the political game and jeopardised democratic aspirations, but above all has **destabilised the ancestral potential for religious and educational resilience** in the various research sites and, more generally, in both Tunisian and Lebanese societies.

However, this religious influence is not unilateral. Just as Tunisians and Lebanese migrated to Europe and America to enjoy well-being and the benefits of modernity, migration to the petrodollar countries

was also motivated by the desire to make a fortune and the fascination with the 'authentic' Muslim way of life and the expectation of paradise. **Internal factors have thus interacted with this Salafist influence**.

7.1.2 Country-specific factors

Based on an analysis of recent history and field data collected in the targeted regions, two sets of factors can be identified: The first is of a general nature, while the second is more local and specific to each region.

- *State and society*

Despite the fact that Tunisia gained its independence more than six decades ago and that Lebanon will soon celebrate a century of independence, **the legitimacy of Arab nation-states is challenged by critics who adopt an Islamist or pan-Arab socialist ideology**. While Lebanon's confessional system institutionalises this very weakness, the development model adopted by the central government in Tunisia has revived **regionalist xenophobia**, after such sentiments were in the process of being eradicated through the unification and the democratisation of the educational system. Until the 1980s, this process was at the origin of a homogenous middle class that transcended primary and local affiliations.

The regional developments that rippled through both Tunisia and Lebanon could not have contributed to the "impulsive" radicalisation in Majdal Anjar and Kairouan/Sidi Bouzid had it not been for the widespread discontent prompting people to adopt any ideology that presented itself to them. Before succumbing to the lure of Salafism, the youth of Majdal Anjar experimented with nationalism, pan-Arabism, communism, and peaceful Islamist mysticism. Their **geographic location** impressed on them the need to contribute to all of the region's causes and predisposed them to offer martyrs. Their peers at Kherbet Rouha also could not escape the interactions dictated by Lebanon's sociocultural configuration, as a society of immigrants under **globalisation** and the free movement of individuals. This predisposed them to welcome Palestinian and Syrian migrants with open arms. However, this openness manifests itself differently in every region, given the plurality of Lebanese society and its different ways of connecting with regional and international environments.

The same applies to Tunisia: The saturation of the public service sector, and the **subsequent saturation of the educational system** as a channel of mobility across regions, on the one hand, as well as the **concentration of most private investments in industry and services in coastal regions**, on the other, have driven inland regions towards the informal economy. Given that **informality is outlawed**, it can only be practiced within tight-knit settings, such as families and parental and/or local communities. Therefore, the **institutional professional links of coastal regions** (employers and syndicates) operating within the framework of the State's modernist ideology **are met with primary, "closed, and conservative" links** that resonate with Islamist ideology, which began with Islamist tendencies (Ennahda later on) that are no less conservative. The "radical" character of the youth of inland regions seems to be the product of **social marginalisation and State disengagement**. It remains to be seen why the youth of El Kef are not as "radical" as their peers in Kairouan/Sidi Bouzid.

- *The impact of local characteristics on radicalisation*

It is not inconsequential that the marginalised regions of Tunisia have been followers of Salah ben Youssef. The latter, co-leader alongside Bourguiba of the national liberation movement, was born in

the country's south, and he helped reduce the influence of Tunisian, Moroccan, and African religious figures in Kairouan. Sidi Bouzid, made a provincial capital in the mid-sixties, has largely maintained its tribal structure and conservative mentality. This would explain why all revolts against the State originate in interior regions since the Gafsa events of 1980 up until the revolution of December 17, 2010.

In Lebanon, Majdal Anjar shares this tradition of informal economic activity, without much liability towards the State. In addition to the exchange of merchandise, the people of Majdal Anjar have also partaken in political and military service needed by regional actors (Palestinians, Syrians, etc.). This is why they have a **sense of autonomy with regard to the central government**, which is divided – or rather dispersed – between the country's confessions, i.e. the Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites.

Logically, the relative autonomy of these regions with regard to the State can only lead to the emergence of an "impulsive" character, if not a sense of individual "pride" and a predisposition to take risks. The young people of El Kef and Kherbet Rouha do not hide this sense of "pride" reinforced by economic prosperity due to migration, not their willingness to support others. However, they do not exhibit any "impulsive" tendencies. The people of El Kef are proud of their martyr, Socrates Cherni, because he sacrificed himself for the sake of peace in the face of terrorism.

7.2 Factors of resilience and deradicalisation

Realising the difficulty of truly influencing the external factors that generate political instability, social insecurities, and economic crises, interviewees in both Tunisia and Lebanon are not very hopeful that this reality will change. Nevertheless, certain political and civil society actors urge their States to be more vigilant with regard to the origins and objectives of the massive funds granted to associations. While the fieldwork revealed that in Lebanon the funds wired mostly by migrants living abroad were being used for charitable and social solidarity purposes, the transfer of funds has been a cause of suspicion in Tunisia since 2011. The proof is that many associations, especially charitable ones, were suspended and banned in 2014, due to the fact that the origins of their resources could not be determined and to their lack of transparency.

For this reason, the focus was shifted towards the internal factors of resilience. The potential for resilience exists, based on the collected data, in the following areas of intervention:

7.2.1 The Role of government institutions

- *The importance of local authorities*

The **reputation of religious figures and *mukhtars* (local mayors)** in Majdal Anjar has enabled communication, and later on dialogue, between the radicalised youth and the central government. Since the army understood the reasons for their discontent, a compromise was reached. That was no doubt a step in the right direction, but it is contingent on the will of the different religious confessions, especially between moderates and Sunnis who subscribe to the ideology of Wahabi Salafism. In Tunisia, there is a lack of this type of figures and local municipal officials. As this domain has been part of the prerogatives of the Ministry of Religious affairs since the independence, the Imams of mosques, largely controlled by the State, are entrusted with this task. However, given that the civil character of the State

is not always interpreted in the same way, some Imams with Islamist political affiliations readily prescribe personal judgements during their sermons on contentious public issues related to personal freedoms.

What counters the influence of these Imams is the vast and well-developed network of associations in Tunisia, particularly local ones. By offering support to financially vulnerable women in the two sites, some associations[224] active on the economic front have often turned into social associations and have managed to prevent a worse situation from arising: i.e. radical religious indoctrination, unlawful marriage (*Orfi*), social media posts praising terrorist attacks against the Army, the police, etc.

- *Synergies between government institutions*

In the case of Lebanon, we have seen how the **confessional nature of State institutions** prevents the emergence of a baseline profile common between all citizens. However, given that local religious and municipal authorities have the advantage of being present on the local scene, they are better equipped to ensure the compromise of "coexistence," even with radicalised young people. In Tunisia, given the decades-long centrality of State power, **municipalities do not have this room for maneuver**. That is why some directors of local institutions were mobilised to stand up to violations, particularly at the level of illegal Quranic schools. In the same vein, the National Counter-Terrorism Commission was established in 2015, which acts under the Prime Minister's supervision. The Commission's preventive approach encouraged it to work in collaboration with specialised university research centres within the framework of large international projects. Similarly, the training provided by Islamic research centres in Kairouan to Imams serves to restore the moderate Tunisian version of Islam, and it is not unrelated to the revitalization of mosques and their role.

7.2.2 The role of civil society

- *Investment in economic prosperity and cultural wealth*

The sites of Kherbet Rouha and El Kef confirm one of the study's hypotheses: In places with migratory traditions, the predisposition to interculturalism and tolerance is higher. In El Kef, there are well-established cultural traditions, particularly in the field of theater. The **lack of infrastructure, equipment and personnel** is often addressed by private initiatives, such as those undertaken by the Cultural Centre. In Kherbet Rouha, the **economic prosperity generated by the migration** of two-thirds of the town's population has financed significant solidarity efforts that have immunised disadvantaged groups against financial vulnerability and hateful tendencies. The resulting high level of education has also reinforced the tradition of tolerance and the rejection of violence.

- *Investment in hidden areas of vulnerability*

In places where people feel neglected by the State and are exposed to uncertainty and stigmatisation, investments by local or religious associations have proven to be beneficial and should be reinforced. In Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid, uneducated women, who are often victims of exploitation at work and male domination in their families, are increasingly benefitting from the **interventions of feminist associations**. The visibility of their actions led to a mobilisation that received extensive media coverage and gave rise to proposals by trade unions to take charge and to the enactment of laws preventing

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[224] Salima Association.

violence against women. Examples in this context include but are not limited to female workers in the agricultural sector and women victims of conjugal violence.

In Majdal Anjar, **informal labor, coupled with a relatively high level of illiteracy**, seems to have increased the individualistic character of young people and their refusal to abide by the rules of public authorities and the State. Nevertheless, as this tendency is reactive, and therefore temporary, it can be channeled meaningfully by religious and local municipal figures. However, this mediation between radicalised young people and the Army, in the hope of achieving durable compromises, could break down into simply ad hoc arrangements due to the strong pressures imposed on Lebanon by its regional environment.

8   Recommendations

The analysis of offline and online factor of vulnerability and resilience in Tunisia and Lebanon leads to several recommendations proposed by the different actors in institutions and associations interviewed for this research.

8.1   Tunisia

Recommendations for local institutions (public authorities, including the regional directorates of ministries, municipalities, etc.):

- Reviewing educational programmes in such a way as to promote universal values, personal freedoms, and the respect of others;
- Allowing more space for arts and cultural activities that cultivate and educate citizens;
- Be more vigilant with regard to private educational establishments and the contents of their curricula, particularly those related to religious education;
- Adapting higher education curricula to the needs of the labor market in order promote job creation and prevent unemployment;
- Addressing the lack of coordination between different ministries (Social Affairs, Women and Family, Youth and Sports, National Education) in order to prevent overlapping responsibilities and the hampering of support initiatives;
- Institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Affairs should be the only party empowered to train imams and to formulate the official faith-related discourse;
- Further support the feminist movement and women's empowerment;
- Organising solidarity economy projects to help vulnerable women establish micro-enterprises in order to ensure their economic independence;
- Fighting against the patriarchal culture through education and the role of the media and civil society;
- Giving vulnerable young people a sense of security;
- Practice affirmative action as mentioned in the 2014 Constitution in favour of interior regions;

- Adopting a development model based on justice and the equal distribution of wealth;
- Offering training to inspectors and teachers on universal rights, human rights, and diversity;
- Developing the city of Kairouan in order to give it a more positive aspect that encourages tourism for example (especially since Kairouan is very close to the touristic city of Sousse).

Recommendations for the international community (UN, EU, etc.):
- Intensifying cooperation efforts;
- Offering logistical support and training on the fight against terrorism;
- Maintaining dialogue with radicalised groups, as they may constitute an additional source of information on how to better combat violent extremism.

Recommendations for civil society (NGOs, media outlets, academic circles, etc.):
- Encourage public authorities to consider social reform proposals submitted by those who suffer from injustice on a daily basis;
- Propose awareness activities on the repercussions of radicalisation targeting vulnerable groups;
- Implement assistance programmes to protect people against violence or to channel violence elsewhere, such as sports or artistic activities;
- Encourage radical political parties and their media outlets to become aware of the negative impact of their discourse on their discourse, given the near-total lack of dialogue between them.

8.2 Lebanon

Recommendations for local institutions (public authorities, including the regional directorates of ministries, municipalities, etc.):
- Dealing with the issues of extremism in an informed and fair manner, resorting to soft measures rather than hard security measures that build more grudge and frustration;
- Combating extremism in prisons and developing reintegrating strategies;
- Referring extremism cases to its corresponding courts and not the military courts;
- Ensuring the independence of the judiciary, expediting trials and compensating those who have not been found guilty but were detained for long periods of time;
- Activating the role of the Ministry of Education and Culture in spreading awareness, fighting delinquency and establishing reintegration programmemes;
- Establishing comprehensive development plans, improving living conditions, and providing job opportunities as key resilience factors against violence and extremism;
- Activating the municipalities' role through enhancing communication with local authorities through joint initiatives. It was suggested to present the town of Kherbet Rouha as a model for successful municipal work;

- Strengthening the role of official religious institutions whose absence leave a gap in religious leadership, often filled by extremist ideologies.
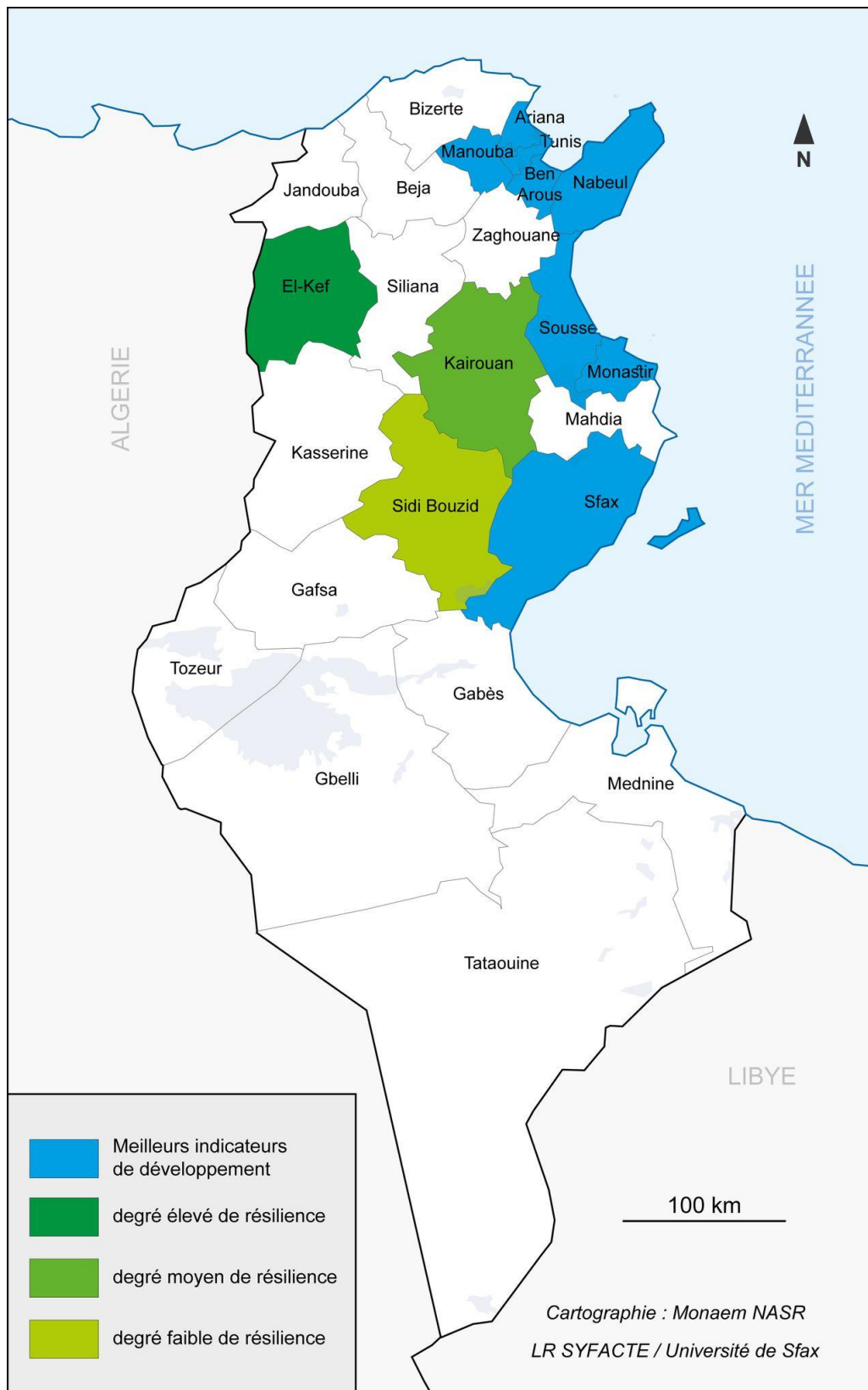
Recommendations for the international community (UN, EU, etc.):

- Helping achieve justice and proper state-building in the Arab States, refraining from supporting corrupt and dictatorial regimes and exposing their actions just as they expose extremist organisations because they are seen as a driver of extremism;
- Supporting the implementing of the Taif Agreement, whose main provisions is the abolition of political sectarianism, a major factor in Lebanon's history of violence;

Recommendations for civil society (NGOs, media outlets, academic circles, etc.):

- Strengthening the capacities of civil society organisations which have the potential of creating resilience that protects society from exploitation to violent extremism.
- Investing in the religious intellectuals (and in networking among them) in the Beqaa and other regions whose progressive religious views are often kept in the dark out of community pressure or fear for personal safety.
- Promoting the role of civil society associations and groups by establishing training courses for them in order to strengthen individuals and create more space for the production of elites.

Annex 1: Map of Tunisia

Cartographie : Monaem NASR

LR SYFACTE / Université de Sfax

Annex 2: Map of Lebanon