The Jihad post-Arab Spring: Contextualising Islamic radicalism in Egypt and Tunisia

Abstract

This article examines the rise in jihadi activity within North Africa in recent years and aims to answer two fundamental questions: first, how have local and foreign jihadi groups capitalised on the unique domestic contexts in Tunisia and Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions to advance their insurgencies? Next, what are the key factors conducive to extremism in both countries that have facilitated this? This study highlights the importance of contending with extremism with respect to the differentiated socio-historical, political and economic circumstances of each country. From a broader perspective, several trends common in the rise of extremism in both countries are identified. First, there is a tendency of extremism to consolidate in proportion to the amount of institutional void. Next, conditions of poverty often supply futile ground for the entrenchment of terrorism; in particular, the study highlights on how jihadi groups have made a concerted effort to damage the economic interests of each country. Finally, the presence of historical grievances provides a conducive environment for extremism. In light of the threat of cell dispersion following the recent defeats faced by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, an understanding of jihadi operations in North Africa becomes increasingly crucial.

Keywords: Terrorism, Radicalism, Jihadism, MENA, Arab Spring, ISIS, al-Qaeda

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Introduction

Islam has been present in North Africa and the Maghreb for well over a thousand years, and has successfully integrated into the diverse range of cultural influences present in the region. Due in large part to its geographical proximity and cultural similarities, North Africa has always been a part of the Arab World. However, this has also meant that North Africa has been affected by the problem of extremist Islam. Within North Africa, the countries of Tunisia and Egypt represent no exception. Indeed, despite the very different political contexts of both countries, incidences of terrorism have been on the rise in these countries over the past few years. While the circumstances of each country are very different, both have a common starting point amidst the power vacuum presented by the Arab Spring which provided the opportunity for local and foreign jihadi groups to recruit sympathisers, expand their sphere of political and territorial influence and advance their own radical visions and ideology. Although some jihadi groups including al-Qaeda and ISIS have been able to capitalise on this phenomenon, they have also encountered significant challenges. ISIS' interest in establishing a presence in Tunisia and Egypt has not been met with open arms, as jihadi groups have grown increasingly prone to infighting over ideological directions and leadership. The lack of an overarching pan-African jihadi ideology[1] has meant that jihadi groups are often operating on the narrowest of shared bases, in spite of all that they appear to have in common. It is for this reason that it is crucial to evaluate the diffusion of jihadism and radicalisation in the region by treating its motivations and ideology in an individualised local context.

To that end, this article seeks to examine the circumstances of the rise of jihadist activity in North Africa within the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, and aims to answer two fundamental questions: first, how have local and foreign jihadi groups capitalised on the unique domestic contexts in Tunisia and Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions to advance their insurgencies in both countries? Next, what are some of the key factors conducive to extremism in both countries that have facilitated this? This study highlights the importance of contending with the issue of extremism with respect to the differentiated socio-historical, political and economic circumstances of each country, and underlines the challenge of ideological infighting and contestation faced by some of these groups. Crucially, it sheds light on the dynamics between the largest local and foreign jihadi groups active in both countries, and how they have adapted their recruitment and radicalising strategies to suit the local environment.

The rest of the article is organised as such. The first section briefly reviews key literature and debates regarding explanatory and causal factors behind the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, or radical Islam.

Next, the ensuing two sections examine the cases of Tunisia and Egypt respectively. The analyses would first review the socio-political situation of each country before focusing on the dynamics between local jihadi groups active in each country, and how various groups adapted their recruitment and radicalising strategies to fit the local environment. The final section discusses the implications of this article and reviews key trends identified in both cases before a conclusion ties together this article's key findings.

The roots of Islamic radicalisation

While there exists divergent and competing scholarly accounts as to what Islamic extremism definitively represents and how and why it has taken root in society[2], contemporary academic research into the casual factors explaining Islamic extremism may be categorised within the literature into four main subsets – the theory of colonialism, the upheaval theory, socio-political movement concept, and religiosity theory[3] – each advancing different understandings about the rise and development of this phenomenon. To begin with, the socio-political movement theory argues that the phenomenon should be comprehended as a contemporary socio-political movement precipitated by an intricate range of societal conditions and events[4]. In particular, it advances that specific political, social and economic stresses prevalent within Muslim societies in contemporary times have provided a conducive environment which can lead to the unleashing of local forces that seek to change the status quo. Such stress factors are proposed to stem from key factors such as failed states, the lack of fair and equitable Western democratic governance as well as the ill-treatment of minority communities. In addition, corruption, poverty, and the rise of ethno-religious tensions and violence are also considered key explanatory factors behind Islamic radicalisation[5]. Such conditions are therefore postulated to be responsible within the broad global context for the rise in radical Islam[6].

Next, the theory of colonialism proposes that radical Islam is a response to colonising nations that had previously conquered Muslim-majority societies since the past centuries. This theory considers the development of radical Islam as directly linked to societal conditions imposed on Muslim societies by these colonial powers and that radical Islam has consequently been employed as means to fight for liberation against Western hegemony which continues to prevail in the post-colonial times. Hroub argues that[7] 'Even in the post-colonial era, the various faces of Western domination – mostly seen in the backing of authoritarian regimes and support for Israel – provide the root causes of anti-Western sentiment, and continue to feed waves of Islamic radicalism.' The third theory, the upheaval theory, advances that the rise of radical Islam can best be conceptualised as a consequence

of several and sudden paradigm-shifting upheavals which had occurred within the Muslim world over the past centuries[8]. Amongst others, they include the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, rapid industrialisation, modernisation and hegemonic Westernisation, as well as the adoption of the nation-state as the primary sovereign mode of governance, perceived as a Euro-centric political construct that seeks to demolish Muslim societies. It asserts that the dismantling of previously dominant modes of Muslim governance left deep cleavages, causing groups to turn to radical Islam as a form of hope that past glories may be revived. Finally, the last theory, religiosity theory, asserts that radical Islam's development can be primarily explained through the lens of religion, rather than societal conditions and occurrences[9]. It asserts that radical Islam is fostered by a shift within Islam pertinent to ideology from a religion-based ideological framework to one that is centred on politics, therefore resulting in the religious-centric form of Islam being subsumed by one that is more politically conscious. This relates to in particular the cause-and-effect logic related to an individual's beliefs and the overarching Islamic principles via which the person legitimises his viewpoints, understandings and actions. While this alone does not causally account for the rise of radical Islam, the theory does emphasise religion as a critical lens through which to conceive and analyse the developments of radical Islam.

In sum, these four frameworks encompass key debates within the academic literature on the causal factors explaining the rise in radical Islam. All but the last theory posit that contextual socio-economic and political factors are crucial to comprehending the phenomenon of radical Islam in present times, while the religiosity theory identifies shifts in religious ideology as the chief factor. Despite their varying emphases and differences, each theory contributes towards an understanding of the complex factors that can influence the development of Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary times. In particular, they point to various socio-political and economic as well as ideological developments as the key causal factors – and thus avenues of inquiry – crucial to acquiring a more in-depth understanding of radical Islam in modern society[10]. In that light, this study would be informed by key concepts from each supporting theory, which cumulatively contribute a more complete explanation that captures the complex dimensions that can explain contemporary radical Islam. Methodologically, this study's data sampling approach aims to identify political, social, economic, and ideological conditions contributing to the rise in the radicalism in contemporary times within the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, sourcing qualitative data from a variety of outlets including academic research, policy papers by think-tanks, political statements, policies, social media data and key news articles. This method thus allows for the critical analysis of the circumstances of the rise in radicalism in both countries.

Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution

Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution' in 2010-11 would prove to be the main spark that ignited the series of revolutions in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region termed the Arab Spring. After an intense campaign of civil resistance, President Ben Ali was ousted from government in January 2011. This marked the first time an Arab dictator had been removed from power by a grassroots revolutionary movement, rather than a coup d'etat. Since then, Tunisia's path to democracy has met significant challenges. Despite being hailed as the success story of the Arab Spring, jihadism has threatened the new regime's existence since its inception. Three days before the first legislative election in October 2011, security forces uncovered terrorist plots in the south, as well as near Tunis, and killed several suspected terrorists[11]. The results of the election saw the moderate Islamic Ennahda Movement winning with a plurality of seats, and the party declared its intention of maintaining a moderate and secular political system. More than fifteen years after the Ghriba synagogue bombing in 2002 which al-Qaeda had claimed responsibility for[12], jihadism remains far from gone in Tunisia. The terror attacks on tourists in Sousse in June 2015[13] and more recently in October 2018[14] demonstrates the importance of examining the spread of jihadism in the country and how jihadi groups are constantly seeking to exploit underlying tensions in the country.

In addition to active militant groups, there is an extensive network of Salafi[15] preachers in Tunisia, who preach on the need for an Islamic state. The vast majority of these associations and preachers openly advocate against violence, and are more involved in education and social issues than they are in mainstream politics. However, the Tunisian government are becoming increasingly concerned over the number of mosques deemed by the Interior Ministry to be 'outside state control'.[16] In light of the Sousse and Bardo attacks in 2015, mosques and Islamist associations have received increased state regulation. Whilst the international community has a picture of the largest jihadi groups operating in Tunisia, the lack of a structure regulating the relationship between groups makes it difficult to get a clear view of the exact nature and composition of the jihadist network in the country. However, due to the groups' operations on social media, it is possible to get a picture of some key traits.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the largest radical Islamist group active in Tunisia. It was founded in 2007 with a view to establishing an Islamic State in the Maghreb region. The group is deeply rooted in Algeria's deadly civil wars in the early 1990s, having been borne out of a group that had splintered from the Islamic Armed Group (GIA) in Algeria[17]. AQIM is also active in Algeria and Mali, particularly along the Algerian-Tunisian border. Very little is known about the membership of

this group in Tunisia, and estimates range from hundreds to thousands of fighters[18]. The first attack they claimed responsibility for in Tunisia was an attack on security forces in Jendouba on 16th February 2014. The group declared its support for ISIS a few months later in June, breaking away from other branches of the al-Qaeda network[19]. It was one of AQIM's brigades who carried out the attack on the Bardo Museum in 2015 which killed 22 people. Even though the Tunisian Ministry has stated that AQIM is an independent group and rejected ISIS' claim of responsibility for the attack as opportunistic[20], AQIM's affiliation with ISIS is explicit enough to consider ISIS as having an official and active presence in terror operations in Tunisia – even if the operation was not centrally directed from their leadership. This is significant in that it shows ISIS' transnational ability[21] to exploit local jihadi groups to carry out its ideological mission in Tunisia.

Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) in Tunisia is another radical group officially listed as a terrorist organisation by the Tunisian government and the United Nations. The group was founded in 2011, almost immediately after the ousting of President Ben Ali and fought for the implementation of Sharia law in Tunisia. Subsequent to its designation as a terrorist group in 2013, many members were arrested, and many others left Tunisia to join Ansar al-Sharia in Libya or to fight for ISIS in Syria[22]. They were responsible for attacks on the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012, and are also blamed for the assassination of left-wing politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi in 2013. As well as engaging in militancy, the group are keen to be seen as a charitable organisation, placing an emphasis on *dawa* (preaching) to convey their ideological message.[23] In July 2014, however, the group declared its affiliation and solidarity with ISIS.

ISIS and the Spread of Jihadism in Tunisia

Whilst ISIS was quick to claim responsibility for the major 2015 attacks on Tunisian soil as well as a smaller-scale attack against a security patrol in Kasserine in December 2018, there is little evidence that they had direct control over the operation of the cells who actually carried out the attacks. ISIS are clearly hugely influential to militant jihadi groups, not just in Tunisia, but across North Africa, and the upsurge in violent attacks can partly be attributed to the spread of radical ideology perpetuated by ISIS. It has also been pointed out that ISIS does not actually need to establish de facto control over jihadi groups in order to benefit from their operations. Attacks carried out by affiliates, or localised 'franchises' of the group[24], can benefit ISIS' image as a serious threat without requiring them to engage in a coordinated leadership strategy. Bousquet advances the concept of a 'leaderless jihad' in which individuals or small militias conducted attacks independently from each other.[25] Such a strategy has

clear advantages for ISIS, which in this way are able to focus their efforts on campaigns in Iraq and Syria, whilst being able to rely on affiliates carrying out terrorist attacks in their name in territories difficult for them to access.

Nonetheless, to entirely attribute the spread of radical Islam in Tunisia to the infiltration of ISIS ignores the roles played by domestic jihadi groups. Since the 2011 revolution, Tunisia has become a state with a functional democracy and judicial system, a largely secular government which protects diverse cultural expression. Research has shown that the majority of Tunisians have great antipathy towards ISIS and extremism in general and that jihadism has remained consistently alien to public opinion.[26] Despite this, local groups such as Ansar-al Sharia and AQIM have managed to exploit the institutional vacuum provided by the Arab Spring events to establish themselves in the country (Ansar al-Sharia being founded as a direct response). Researchers have pointed to the lapse in security that followed the ousting of Ben Ali. Prisoners of the old regime were pardoned and restrictions lifted, which meant that a number of hard-line Islamists were released into an unstable political climate.[27] The Ennahda party's desire to integrate extremists rather than suppress them meant that there were few concrete plans or strategies developed to combat extremism. This coincided with the successful importing of Salafist and Wahhabi ideology into Tunisia via schools and mosques (some of which were funded by Saudi Arabia). This can be seen as a reaction against the new democratic processes begun in 2011. Many Salafists were suspicious of democracy on principle, as its Western associations made it seem inherently hostile to religious practices, particularly given the new government's secular identity.[28]

Ansar al-Sharia, for example, reportedly had up to 10,000 members at the beginning of 2013.[29] Despite its extremist ideology, the group recognised the need to adopt a non-violent strategy in order to recruit members. Up until late 2013, the group was keen to present itself as a humanitarian organisation with a socio-cultural agenda instead of a terrorist group operating outside the political system. It had organised public demonstrations calling for the implementation of Islamic legislation, demonstrating Ansar al-Sharia's willingness to become a political actor in a secular system.[30] This is very different than the tactics of groups such as ISIS and goes against Salafist thinking that rejects participation in political processes that are not based on sharia law.[31] Ansar al-Sharia's operational flexibility appears to have played a large part in winning over recruits who might otherwise have been alienated by an exclusively violent mode of operations. Nonetheless, since its designation as a terrorist organisation, Ansar al-Sharia has moved increasingly towards the kind of militant operation favoured by ISIS, but this has arguably not aided them in identifying as a popular movement.

Beyond that, studies have shown that Tunisia is amongst largest producer of foreign fighters in the world, with some 3,000 travelling to Iraq and Syria to fight with ISIS.[32] A study by Boukhars[33] points to the impact of Tunisia's fragile economy, still limited four years after the revolution and constrained still further in light of the 2015 and more recent 2018 terrorist attacks. If reports of dissatisfaction amongst the working class and poorer factions of Tunisian society, who believe that they have yet to reap the fruits and profits of the revolution are true[34], the impact of socio-economic marginalisation on Tunisia's youth must be particularly marked. In a study in 2011 on the labour market dynamics in Tunisia, Stampini and Verdier-Chouchane note that around 15% of the overall population are unemployed, and that over 30% of university graduates remain without jobs.[35] The wave of fighters leaving to fight for ISIS abroad were almost exclusively young men who, particularly in the poorest sections of the country, have few other opportunities. This has been an observed feature of jihadi membership for some time, with AQIM and Ansar cells being discovered in the least developed parts of the country.[36] Media reports suggest that in socio-economically disadvantaged areas particularly in the border regions which feature small communities, jihadi groups are able to at least rely on the silence of those who are suspicious of the Tunisian government, even if they are not willing to join the ranks of fighters.[37] This is significant, because it shows how fairly extensive radicalisation was able to occur essentially 'off the radar'.

Overall, if socio-economic deprivation is significantly contributing to jihadi membership and recruitment, then the recent terrorist attacks of 2015 can be considered as part of a long-term strategy.[38] The Sousse and Bardo attacks targeted large tourist sites, which has resulted in a severe impact on tourism in Tunisia. After the Sousse attack, the UK Foreign Office warned against all travel to Tunisia, and laid on extra flights to extract British holiday-makers still in the country. In response, the Tunisian government emphasised that constricting tourism to Tunisia would only contribute to the socio-economic issues and unemployment currently fuelling radicalisation, and the influence of jihadi groups in general.[39] Given the fragile state of Tunisia's economy, an attack on the tourism industry is an attack on the economy as a whole. In spite of the lack of mass support for ISIS, extremism or jihadism in Tunisia, destabilising the country is a key part of the jihadis' campaign to advocate for the existence of an Islamic state. If Tunisia's new secular democracy can be significantly destabilised, it will provide an environment conducive for the entrenchment of extremist Islam.

The Egyptian uprising and decline of Political Islam

Similarly, Egypt experienced a wave of popular revolution as part of the 2011 Arab Spring protests. Inspired by the ongoing uprisings in neighbouring Libya and Tunisia, Egyptian youth groups had mobilised to demand free elections, taking hold in the capital and other cities. The demonstrations gathered strength and eventually forced President Mubarak, after three decades in power, to resign in February 2011. Following his resignation, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces assumed interim governance. Subsequent parliamentary elections in 2012 saw the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party coming into power in a landslide victory. In June 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's (now deceased) leader Mohammed Morsi was elected president.

As president, Morsi issued a temporary constitutional declaration in late November that granted him the unilateral power to legislate without judicial oversight, justifying such a move as necessary in order for him to see the nation through a fragile democratic transition.[40] This precipitated a new tide of public opposition that decried the unprecedented act as an 'Islamist coup'.[41] On 30 June 2013, on the anniversary of Morsi's electoral victory, protests once again erupted across Egypt, with protestors demanding for the president's resignation. He was removed from power on 03 July 2013 by a military coup council. The military suspended the constitution, established a new interim administration and outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, designating it a terrorist organisation. Security forces then launched a brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. According to an Egyptian presidency's fact-finding committee, at least 600 Morsi supporters were killed during the dispersal of two pro-Morsi protests in Cairo due to excessive use of force by security forces.[42] In December 2013, a constituent assembly finished drafting a new constitution, paving the way for new presidential elections. The hugely popular armed forces chief General el-Sisi ran with a secular manifesto and won by a large margin, assuming office on 08 June 2014.

Islamist insurgency in Egypt is not unprecedented – a low-level jihadi insurgency against then president Hosni Mubarak had taken place in the 1980s along the Nile valley.[43] However, it is within this context of institutional chaos and instability post-Arab Spring that the current largest Islamist militant group in Egypt Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM) emerged and was founded upon. The group had gained momentum amidst the mass releases and escapes of detained extremists from prison during the protests,[44] as well as from neighbouring Libya's political chaos that led to the proliferation of arms in the region.[45] With the government historically constrained from deploying an adequate security presence in the Sinai Peninsula as part of the peace treaty with Israel, the resulting security vacuum had led to the Sinai region becoming a locus of jihadi mobilisation post-Arab Spring. Since 2017

however, this restriction has eased somewhat after negotiated concessions allowed the Egyptians to increase its troop deployment in response to the entrenchment of terror cells in the Sinai province.[46]

As the group's name (Champions of Jerusalem) suggests, their initial operations in early 2012 were chiefly targeted at Israeli interests, with hit-and-run attacks on Israel oil pipelines forming a staple of their modus operandi.[47] Although ABM ideologically disagrees with the Muslim Brotherhood for submitting to democratic governance,[48] the group shifted its activity from attacking Israeli forces to the Egyptian government in the aftermath of Muslim Brotherhood Morsi's oust from power in which crackdowns against Morsi supporters had led to widespread casualties from the perceived indiscriminate use of force. The objective of ABM is to topple the military-backed government of President el-Sisi in order to establish an Islamic state.[49] In video statements that had been released, ABM has reiterated calls for jihad against the government for taking innocent lives and 'violating the people's dignity'.[50] Attacks against the Egyptian government that have been attributed to ABM include an attempted assassination of the Interior Minister in September 2013, and the downing of an Egyptian helicopter in January 2014.

ABM had managed to leverage on two critical factors to consolidate its support base and gain momentum within the Sinai province. The first is by discursively exploiting the coup – which is to an extent popularly mandated – that removed the Muslim Brotherhood leaders from political power. ABM has framed the decline and subsequent oppression of political Islam in Egypt as an exemplification of the futility of moderation, positioning it as a clear demonstration of how cooperation is untenable and that violence is the only solution. Indeed, researchers have noted how ABM seeks to draw disenfranchised supporters of moderate Islam on the basis that their main tactic of dissent – peaceful protests – seems only to end in Muslim Brothers getting arrested and killed.[51] Beyond that, more crucially, ABM has also been able to shrewdly exploit the legitimate grievances borne by the Bedouins – a population of nomadic tribes who comprise a large majority of the Sinai's population.

A history of grievances

The Bedouin has suffered a brutal history of oppression under the Egyptian state that has fragmented their trust of the government. An interview with a local *Shaykh* (chieftain) expressed how Bedouin continue to bear unresolved grievances, from the wars waged by Egyptian Viceroy Muhammad Ali over a century ago to the indiscriminate arrests and torture ordered by the subsequent regimes of al-Nasser and Mubarak.[52] More recently, a tide of popular anger has been generated against the state due to the heavy-handed approach towards jihadi groups in Sinai under el-Sisi's administration. Although

the military operations launched were touted as a success, they failed to differentiate between militants and innocent civilians, resulting in high civilian casualties caught in the cross-fire. Military airstrikes throughout 2018 in North Sinai was reported to have caused destruction of civilian property and the deaths of six civilians.[53]

Another driver of Bedouin grievance is their deprived citizen rights and systematic exclusion by the Egyptian state from police colleges or the Egyptian military.[54] The dearth of Bedouin presence in the Egyptian security forces further highlights the cleavage between Egyptian authorities and the local population in issues concerning their own security. Indeed, ABM has been able to radicalise and recruit amongst the Bedouin's disenfranchised population, of whom just 10% had found formal employment.[55] Such ties to local tribes have allowed ABM to pivot their attacks away from perceived own kinsmen and instead target 'outsiders' – the Egyptian authorities. Beyond co-opting Bedouin tribes, ABM has also increasingly employed tactics of intimidation and violence against the *Shaykhs* of Sinai. Jihadi fighters in Sinai have increasingly challenged the authority of Bedouin leadership. There have been reports of Bedouin *Shaykhs* assassinated for having strong ties to Egyptian state security or for advocating tribal mobilisation against militant Salafist fighters based in the Sinai. Recently, the group has released a statement threatening anyone assisting government forces.[56]

Thus far, ABM and other smaller jihadi factions within Egypt has managed to consolidate support and power in the Sinai province through a combination of co-optation by exploiting the history of Sinai Bedouin disenfranchisement with the Egyptian state, and intimidation against dissenting Bedouin who have expressed willingness cooperate with local security forces.

ISIS's Province of Sinai

At present, ABM has disclosed its allegiance to Islamic State, becoming one of the largest militant bodies to pledge loyalty to ISIS outside its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, justifying its pledge by pointing out atrocities committed by Egyptian authorities.[57] Media releases indicate that although ISIS in Sinai is a military force, it is not in control of the governance of large towns. A set of Sinai Province photos released by ISIS's media shows a convoy of vehicles conveying IS fighters through the countryside – nothing on the scale of the parades ISIS has conducted inside Iraqi strongholds. On the unofficial level, a document surfaced in February 2015 that saw the leadership of Sinai Province urging locals not to collaborate with the government. However, there remains no evidence of ISIS religious enforcement bodies in the Sinai Province, a component that has come to symbolically define ISIS's control. Pertinent to acts of insurgency against the state however, there is a marked trend of escalating

violence and sophistication in attacks. In a dramatic demonstration of its expanding reach, ISIS launched simultaneous attacks in July 2015 on five Egyptian military checkpoints, killing 17 Egyptian soldiers and injuring 30 others. A subsequent missile attack in the same month against an Egyptian military vessel attests to the group's rising sophistication.

A key problem facing the ABM/Sinai Province group is an extent of ideological contestation and disunity within the group and between other jihadi groups in the broader Gaza-Sinai area. Before ABM's rebranding, it was previously thought to align itself more closely with al-Qaeda.[58] Indeed, ABM did not immediately rally around ISIS's proclamation of a Caliphate in June 2014; it was to be four months later that the group finally pledged allegiance to it. As a reflection of the divisions plaguing global jihadi groups, it is believed that the group may have split into two factions - while the Sinai contingent has been in favour of allying with the Islamic State, some of the Nile Valley leadership remains loyal to al-Qaeda.[59] An alleged ABM statement pledging loyalty to Baghdadi in mid-2014 was quickly disavowed by the group, indicating disagreement within the organisation.

The eventual alliance with ABM and ISIS can be, in-part, attributed ironically to the success of Egyptian military operations against the group. Key members of ABM's leadership who were known to be inclined towards al-Qaeda were successively killed in shoot-outs with the Egyptian authorities.[60] This disruption to ABM's leadership cadre spurred ISIS to increase its efforts to lure ABM into its sphere of influence. There have been reports of ISIS leaders in contact with Sinai-based jihadists, as well as offering cash bounties in exchange for oaths of allegiance.[61] Eventually, this culminated in the official pledge of allegiance proclaimed by ABM's leader Abu Osama al-Masri in November 2014.[62]

On a wider front, it is notable that other jihadi groups in the area have yet to pledge allegiance to ISIS. Another group active in the Sinai-Gaza region, the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM), issued a statement of nusra (support) for IS in October 2014.[63] Yet, it has to be emphasised that *nusra* is ideologically distinct from *baya* (allegiance). While MSM eventually pledged *baya* to ISIS later in November 2014, the reality is that the jihadist insurgency in Egypt comprises highly distinct and localised groups. This highlights challenges faced by the movement to unite under a collective identity that can pose a greater threat to the security of Egypt beyond the Sinai province.

The presence of institutional void, grievances and poverty

The cases Tunisia and Egypt shed light into the circumstances surrounding the rise of terrorism within the unique domestic contexts of each country. On the overall, however, several key trends can be

identified. First, there is a noted tendency of extremism to consolidate in proportion to the amount of institutional void and instability within the host country. This is exacerbated by the inherent limitations faced by state authorities in governing the pockets of vast hostile desert-scape in the North African region. Clearly, a territory lacking a monopoly of legitimate coercion is a vacuum that readily attracts extremist groups. This can be discerned from the rise of jihadi militant groups and ISIS within the Egyptian Sinai province, a battle-scared region that was the battleground of virtually every battle between Egypt and Israel from 1948 until 1973.[64] The security constraints imposed by Egypt's historic peace treaty with Israel meant that militant groups were able to establish strongholds in remote parts of the province uncontested. Further, state infrastructure in the region continues to be crippled as terrorist groups routinely target police checkpoints, state infrastructure, and the Arab Gas Pipeline in north Sinai. Beyond this region, however, there remains an overall lack of institutional vacuum favourable for extremism to fester in Egypt. The administration that had come into power backed by a strong mandate has demonstrated resolve – if excessively heavy-handed – in dealing with the threat of terrorism. Even within the Sinai province, the increased military operations since 2017 have meant that the Camp David accord limiting Egyptian security presence in the region is effectively suspended. Backed by US and Israeli support, the military superiority of the Egyptian army is attested to by reports which pointed out that ABM's contemporary strategy of using bombs was developed in response to the capabilities of the well-equipped Egyptian army which outmanoeuvres them in direct confrontations.[65] In the context of Tunisia, the institutional conditions present remain relatively unconducive for extremism to take roots. State authorities are backed by a popular mandate that has rejected Islamist rule for secular democratic rule. The government has also taken a firm resolve against terrorism, declaring the local Ansar al-Sharia group in a terrorist organisation in 2013 in order to curb its growth. More recently in January 2019, it has approved a more robust anti-terrorist law that was directed at reassuring Tunisians of the government's resolve in countering the threat of terrorism.[66]

In this regard, it is also worth briefly discussing the breakdown of the Libyan state in 2011, which has been an important factor facilitating jihadi groups in the region.[67] Ever since the fall of Gaddafi in Libya, central authority in the country has been weak. Libya's nascent democracy has been unable to amass meaningful power and remained subjugated to the powerful politics of factional tribes. Two key factors contribute to the present scenario of weak state authority: the absence of a unifying Libyan identity and the Libyans' tribally-oriented political culture.[68] These culminate in a lack of fundamental trust in central political institutions, ultimately enfeebling the authority of the state. There is thus an extremely large – nearly absolutely – institutional and territorial vacuum in Libya that allowed jihadi groups advocating for a more radical vision for Libya to consolidate. In contrast, the Tunisian and

Egyptian states both have had a relatively robust institutional legacy, limiting to a certain extent Islamic radicalism's capacity for success.

Next, conditions of poverty often supply fertile ground for the entrenchment of terrorism. Although the direct causal link between socio-economic conditions and terrorism remains obfuscated, research continue to suggest that extremism is at least correlated with conditions of poor social mobility.[69] Empirical reports have also documented how youths lacking employment opportunities have been driven towards terrorism in order to obtain protection, shelter and income.[70] To an extent, this can explain why terrorist attacks have had the general tendency to be pivoted towards avenues of income generation. Sinai's scenic spots including offshore coral reefs offshore and religious structures have become important to the Egyptian tourism industry – a key cornerstone of the national economy that has damaged by the rise of the Sinai insurgency.[71] More ominous is the trend of terrorist attacks in Tunisia focusing on tourists. In March 2015, jihadi militants stormed the Bardo museum, a popular tourist site, leaving over 20 civilians dead. In June 2015, an attack on another tourist site near Sousse that left over 30 tourists dead was attributed to militants acting under ISIS. Such attacks are part of a deliberate strategy to damage the tourism sector of Tunisia – that comprise approximately 17% of the country's economy,[72] with a jeopardised economy fostering in the long-term conditions that are favourable for the rise of extremism. On the overall, while the correlation between poverty and terrorism remains contested,[73] this study does highlight how terror groups are increasingly making a concerted effort to economically damage their target institutions and countries.

Another pivotal condition propitious to the growth of terrorism appears to be the presence of oppression, human rights abuses and historical grievances borne by minority and marginalised communities. This discontent can become susceptible to discursive exploitation by militant or jihadi groups who manipulate it as a vassal to rally popular anger against the state. Indeed within the context of Egypt, the heavy-handed behaviour of Egyptian security forces and particularly the historical and continued marginalisation of the Bedouin played crucial roles in facilitating conditions for the rise of jihadi insurgency and its largest group ABM in the Egyptian Sinai Province. ISIS has shrewdly managed to capitalise on the historical grievances borne by the Bedouin tribes in Egypt to buy expand its sphere of influence there. In Tunisia however, there remains a general absence of historical marginalisation of a class or minority group that jihadi groups can leverage on. This can explain why the modus operandi of the largest jihadi group operating there – Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia – has been in the form of providing social services and community support (*dawa*) to allow them to amass empathy from the general populace.[74]

Conclusion

The case studies of Tunisia and Egypt demonstrate how jihadi groups have been able to capitalise on the unique domestic contexts of each country to advance their jihadi campaigns and insurgency. It sheds light on the challenge of ideological infighting and contestation faced by some of these groups, and highlights the importance of contending with the issue of extremism with respect to the socio-historical, political and economic circumstances in both countries.

From a broader perspective, this article has identified several key trends common in the rise of extremism in both countries. First, there is a noted tendency of extremism to consolidate in proportion to the amount of institutional void and instability within the host country. Next, conditions of poverty often supply futile ground for the entrenchment of terrorism. Finally, the presence of oppression, human rights abuses and historical grievances borne by minority and marginalised communities appears to provide a conducive environment for the growth of terrorism. In light of the heightened threat of cell dispersion following the recent defeats faced by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, an understanding of jihadi operations in North Africa becomes increasingly crucial.

Notes

[1] Matfess, 'In Africa, All Jihad Is Local'.
[2] Hardy, 'Comparing Theories of Radicalisation with Countering Violent Extremism Policy'.
[3] Hroub, 'Political Islam: Context Versus Ideology'.
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[6] Marrouchi, 'Introduction: Colonialism, Islamism, Terrorism'.
[7] Hroub, 'Political Islam: Context Versus Ideology'.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Mandaville, 'Global Political Islam'.
[10] Barton, 'Indonesia's Struggle: Jemaah Islamiyah and the Soul of Islam'.
[11] Romdhani, 'North Africa: Beyond Jihadist Radicalization'.
[12] Zelin, 'Fifteen Years after the Djerba Synagogue Bombing'.
[13] Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, 'Tunisian Jihadism after the Sousse Massacre'.
[14] Mackintosh. '9 Injured When Woman Blows Herself up in Tunisia's Capital'.
[15] The Salafi movement is a reform movement within Sunni Islam that developed in Egypt in the late 19th century as a response to Western European imperialism. It had roots in the 18th-century Wahhabi movement that originated in the Najd region of modern-day Saudi Arabia, and advocates a return to an unadulterated, pure form of Islam. In general, Salafism has become associated with literalist, strict and puritanical approaches to Islam.
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[17] Goerzig, 'Terrorist Learning in Context–the Case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb'.
[18] Mattes. 'Tunisian-Style Jihad'.
[19] Yess. 'Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb Backs Isis'.
[20] Nossia, 'Tunisia Museum Attack: Isis Claims Responsibility'.
[21] Chan, 'The Call of Isis: The Medium and the Message Attracting Southeast Asians'.
[22] Mattes. 'Tunisian-Style Jihad'.
[23] Stanford, 'Ansar Al-Shariah (Tunisia)'.
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[25] Bousquet, 'Complexity Theory and the War on Terror: Understanding the Self-Organising Dynamics of Leaderless Jihad'.
[26] Schmid, 'Public Opinion Survey. Data to Measure Sympathy and Support for Islamist Terrorism'.
[27] Romdhani, 'North Africa: Beyond Jihadist Radicalization'.
[28] Byman, 'Terrorism after the Revolutions: How Secular Uprisings Could Help (or Hurt) Jihadists'.
[29] Steinberg, 'Jihadism in Africa'.
[30] Maher. 'Tunisia's Radical Divide over Salafi Agenda'.
[31] Steinberg, 'Jihadism in Africa'.
[32] Benmelech and Klor, 'What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to Isis?
[33] Boukhars, 'The Fragility of Elite Settlements in Tunisia'.
[34] Eakin, 'Why Tunisia'.
[35] Stampini and Verdier-Chouchane, 'Labor Market Dynamics in Tunisia: The Issue of Youth Unemployment'.
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[38] Lutz and Lutz, 'Terrorism as Economic Warfare'.
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[40] Ahram. 'Egypt President Stresses Constitutional Declaration Is 'Temporary', 'Necessary'.
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[47] Tahrir, 'Wilayat Sinai'.
[48] El-Gundy. 'What We Know About Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis'.
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[50] Kirkpatrick. 'Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to Isis'.
[51] Kingsley. 'Egypt Faces New Threat in Al-Qaida-Linked Group Ansar Beyt Al-Maqdis'.
[52] Marroushi. 'Dark Clouds over the Sinai'.
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[57] Kingsley. 'Egypt Faces New Threat in Al-Qaida-Linked Group Ansar Beyt Al-Maqdis'.
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[59] Kirkpatrick. 'Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to Isis'.
[60] Ross. 'Isil International Expansion'.
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