



# State Religious Institutions in the MENA: Can They Prevent Violent Radicalization?

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Europe's External Action and the Dual Challenges  
of Limited Statehood and Contested Orders

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## ABSTRACT

In Egypt and Tunisia, where violent radicalization has increased in recent years, official religious institutions have been tasked by the governments with the mission of countering ‘deviant’ ideas by preaching ‘moderate’ Islam. In order for religious institutions to play a positive role in preventing violent radicalization, they should start by consolidating their status as legitimate religious actors independent of political authorities, and then compete with their ideas in a plural religious sphere, rather than impose them on Muslims as ‘the true Islam’. While the EU could encourage the political regimes in both countries to ensure the independence of these religious institutions, it should engage cautiously with state religious institutions so as to not unintentionally damage their legitimacy in the religious sphere.

**KEYWORDS:** radicalization, religion, Islam, MENA, Egypt, Tunisia, jihadism, EU religion policy, extremism, Global Exchange on Religion in Society

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## INTRODUCTION

Egypt and Tunisia, both of which are exemplary cases of strong state religious institutions and countries of first-tier importance to the EU, have over the past few years been witnessing a new wave of violent radicalization. Egyptian and Tunisian youths have been engaged in political violence, either with local groups or abroad, as in the case of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). This challenge has highlighted the role of state religious institutions in both countries in facing this current wave of violent radicalization, even though it is not only and not primarily in mosques that radicalization happens. Nevertheless, mosques can play an important role in refuting the religious foundations of these radical groups. In both countries, official religious institutions have been tasked with the mission of countering these radical groups' 'deviant' ideas, such as excommunication and jihad, by preaching 'moderate' Islam, as it is defined by these political regimes themselves. Although, ideas can play an important role in any strategy to prevent violent radicalization, this ideational element by itself is not enough. Regardless of how moderate these ideas are, they need legitimate religious voices to transmit them. In order for religious institutions to play a positive role in preventing violent radicalization, they should start by consolidating their status as legitimate religious actors independent of political authorities and then compete with their ideas in a plural religious sphere, rather than impose them on Muslims as 'the true Islam.' While the EU could encourage the political regimes in both countries to ensure the independence of these religious institutions, it should engage cautiously with state religious institutions so as to not unintentionally harm their legitimacy in the religious sphere.

## VIOLENT RADICALIZATION IN EGYPT AND TUNISIA AFTER 2011

In Egypt, after the ousting of Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, terrorist attacks gradually spread from Sinai to the mainland. Although the country had witnessed various waves of Islamist insurgency in the past, the violent wave that followed the ousting of Morsi is considered "the deadliest and most complex insurgency in its [Egypt's] modern history" (Awad and Hashem 2015, 1). The number of terrorist attacks reached a peak in 2015 with around 700 attacks. It decreased to around 250 in 2017, and to only 54 in 2018. Three categories of violent Islamists became active: ones affiliated with Islamic State (IS); ones linked to Al-Qaeda; and ones emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood. While all these groups seek to topple the current regime, they adopt different ideological frames and apply different strategies to achieve this goal. The groups affiliated to both Islamic State and al-Qaeda rely on the principle of *takfir* – the process of excommunication as the basis for the military struggle against state institutions to establish Islamic governance based on sharia. Groups emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood like Hassam and Liwa al-Thawra, however, reject the concept of excommunication and offer an alternative religious justification for the use of violence by underlining the religious concept of *dafa' al-sa'el* (repelling the assailant). According to this approach, state officials should be resisted not because of their faith but for their actions.

The Salafi jihadist movement grew in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali in January 2011. This is evidenced by the number of deaths due to terrorism each year, which increased from 4 in 2011 to 81 in 2015, according to the Global Terrorism Index. The number of terrorist attacks reached its peak in 2013 with 29 attacks. It decreased to 4 in 2017, before increasing again to 19 in 2018.

The most organized group on the Tunisian post-2011 Salafi jihadism scene was Ansar al-Sharia, which took control of a number of mosques in order to preach its ideas and recruit new members. After the Tunisian government declared it a terrorist organization in 2013, 6,500 young Tunisians, members or sympathizers, were arrested. Others left for Libya or Syria and joined ISIS. Tunisia has been one of the top exporters of Salafi jihadist fighters, with more than 5,500 Tunisians fighting with jihadist groups in Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria and Yemen, as estimated by the UN in 2015 (OHCHR, 2015). The vacuum left by Ansar al-Sharia allowed other violent groups to expand. This is the case of the Al Qaeda-affiliated group the Uqba Bin Nafa' brigade operating along the Algeria-Tunisia border and ISIS in Libya, which established a camp near the Tunisian border focusing on training Tunisian fighters. Among this group were the individuals responsible for attacks in 2015 on two prominent tourist destinations: the Bardo Museum in Tunis (where 22 civilians were killed) and the beach resort of Sousse (where 38 civilians were killed). Tunisians who had joined ISIS in Libya also led the armed attack on the Tunisian border town of Ben Gardane in March 2016.

The drivers of this wave of radicalization in the two countries are multiple, ranging from socio-economic to political grievances. Although, the Salafi jihadist doctrine is only introduced in the second phase, where already radicalized youths are looking for a normative frame to follow, this ideological factor plays a decisive role in justifying the use of indiscriminate violence in these groups' struggle against state institutions.

## STATE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION RESPONSES TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Despite the different political paths that the two countries have followed since 2013, both Egypt and Tunisia have responded to the Salafi jihadist threat in almost the same way. Together with security measures, the two regimes have answered this wave of radicalization by tightening their grip on mosques and unlicensed imams. Both regimes have publicly urged their official imams to disseminate messages of moderation and tolerance to counter the discourse of violent groups and prevent youths from joining them.

Between 2011 and 2013 the Egyptian state was effectively controlling and supervising fewer than half of Egypt's mosques (Goma 2013). The new political regime, like its predecessors, consequently sought to acquire an absolute monopoly over the religious sphere. It issued decision no. 64 to bring all mosques in Egypt under its control and promulgated law no. 51, which prohibited people that did not have official authorisation from delivering sermons. Those authorized to preach included graduates of al-Azhar, the country's primary religious institution, and preachers trained by institutes affiliated with the Ministry of Religious Endowments. In consequence 12,000 preachers who had no religious education at al-Azhar were banned, although there was no proof that they had been disseminating extremist ideas. Likewise, the content of Friday sermons was standardized across Egypt, with the ministry setting the topic and main themes of sermons before prayers. Moreover, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi insisted that religious bodies should preach against radical Islamic philosophies. In January 2015, he leaned on Al-Azhar to undertake what he called a "religious revolution" to reform the institution's Islamic thought and correct the concepts it teaches.

Tunisia too has been following the same path. After the Ben Ali regime was toppled in 2011, the security apparatus lost control of the religious sphere. Estimates point to approximately half of the mosques in the country having had their imams expelled during this period (Donker 2019, 507). About 400 of Tunisia's 5685 mosques (2017 statistics) are believed to have come under Salafi control, and about 50 under that of Salafi jihadists (Petré, 2015). Secular parties called for tight state control of the religious sphere to ban any Islamist or Salafi groups from preaching in mosques. Before 2011, Ennahda used to criticize the state-controlled Islam. However, the religious chaos that accompanied the Tunisian uprising – together with political pressure from secular groups – led the Ennahda leadership to change its position. Since 2013, successive ministers of religious endowments have been determined to extend the ministry's control over all mosques and imams and close all illegal mosques. The ministry has relieved a number of unlicensed Salafi preachers from their duties and appointed other imams affiliated with the ministry in their place. The ministry suggests themes for Friday sermons and has employed 600 people tasked with ensuring that the imams' rhetoric is in accordance with the law.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

State religious institutions in both Egypt and Tunisia could play an important role in refuting the discourse of religious extremism that calls for violence, but the foremost problem of these institutions lies not in their religious discourse but in their religious legitimacy. Young people who are disaffected by the political and economic conditions in the countries and who wish to join jihadist organizations consider official religious institutions merely mouthpieces of the ruling regime. In order for official religious institutions to play an effective role in confronting the rhetoric of violence in the name of religion propagated by terrorist organizations, they must first start by consolidating their religious legitimacy, and only then adapt their religious discourse. Strengthening their religious legitimacy requires two main measures: for the official religious establishment to maintain its independence from the political system; and for the political system to not monopolize the religious sphere.

### **STATE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD IDENTIFY WITH THE STATE, NOT WITH THE GOVERNMENT**

Official religious institutions are part of the state's institutions, but they should maintain a distance from all political forces, including the ruling regime, in order to ensure their independence and regain their legitimacy within the religious sphere. It might be difficult to imagine a complete separation between the religious and the political but a lack of clear boundaries undermines them both. The involvement of political figures in the religious sphere renders their religious discourse and activities less credible, while the interference of religious figures in political activities makes political actions appear manipulated. There is no easy policy solution to get there other than religious leaders – of Al-Azhar, Zaytouna and other prominent mosques – explaining publicly how legitimacy through independence can make them relevant actors in social affairs, including de-radicalization. State religious institutions vary in their dependence on the government. Ministries of endowments are part of the government while scholarly institutions (universities and councils of senior scholars) enjoy slightly more independence. If a government calls on the latter to reform their discourse then they should use it as an opportunity for a new contract with the rulers: independence in exchange for reform, because any effective reform is conditional on these institutions' independence. Religious leaders – there are a capable few – applying this narrative in their public discourse would exert pressure on the

government and test its intentions. The European role in this process can only be limited. However, the channel between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyeb, is useful in this regard because it increases Al-Azhar's independence through international exposure. His dialogue with the Vatican allows al-Azhar to claim to represent all Muslims. Hence, instead of being merely a state employee, the relation with the Vatican allows the Grand Imam of al-Azhar to claim an international status.

### **RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD MANAGE THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE, NOT MONOPOLIZE IT**

The official religious 'moderate' discourse should not be imposed on society as the 'correct image of Islam' because there is none. Such rhetoric only alienates parts of society toward non-moderate ideas. Great religions are not controllable, and a large popular Islam is always present and alive (Sasnal, 2016). Instead, each party must represent its religious ideas in a religious environment characterized by pluralism and freedom.

Both states, represented by the Ministry of Religious Endowments in Egypt and the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Tunisia, should change their current policies and aim to not monopolize their religious spheres and introduce new rules that seek to manage them in accordance with neutral rules that apply to all parties operating without exception as long as they adhere to non-violent discourse. The OIC charter and the UN, of which Muslim countries are members, espouse the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including arts. 18 and 19, which stipulate a free religious sphere. Within this plural religious sphere, official imams should be trained to compete for the hearts and minds of believers, and not just dictate their vision of Islam to them. In an environment monopolized by official institutions, parallel religious spheres can create breeding grounds for jihadist groups to preach their ideas and recruit new members. In pluralist environments, where many voices are heard, the extreme lose ground.

### **THE MAXIMUM THE EU CAN DO IS TO CAUTIOUSLY ENGAGE WITH RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN THE MENA**

There is a political penchant in the EU and its Member States to help social actors in neighbouring countries who have a direct and real impact on their societies, thus expanding the civil society sector. Some European leaders also welcome the calls for the reform of religious discourse issued by several MENA governments and rush to support them without realizing the problematic (and instrumental in radicalization) dependence that exists between state religious institutions and governments. In 2019 the EU launched its Global Exchange on Religion in Society (EEAS, 2019), while its Member States have established offices with special representatives on freedom of religion and belief. This increased diplomatic interest in religion should not translate into direct attempts at financially aiding or influencing religious actors in the MENA, be they state or non-state actors, regardless of intentions, so as not to further diminish their legitimacy. 'Foreign interference' is commonly used by MENA regimes to discredit local civil society. However, increased contact by European religious civil society actors – associations, local churches, congregations – with their state and non-state religious counterparts in the MENA is highly beneficial in diminishing the xenophobic aspect of hardline religious dogma. The EU project – Global Exchange on Religion in Society – could be used as a facilitator of such communication and contact.

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