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Article

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Abstract

In Tunisia, the 2016 national strategy against terrorism introduced the concept of preventive measures, which legitimized tighter state control over religious discourses and practices. To bring a local perspective to the study of international preventative measures, I build upon the concept of "vernacular security" to examine how Tunisian imams involved in preventing violent extremism (PVE) programs understand security, violent extremism, radicalization, and their role as non-traditional security actors. To achieve this, I observe how imams describe their own experiences of security, in their own words and through their own understandings. Through ethnographic interviews conducted with local imams between 2019 and 2020, this research focuses on the way in which they perceive, re-enact, and influence security practices, with a particular focus on the relationship between religion and security, a central subject in post-revolutionary Tunisia. In so doing, this paper argues that local imams involved in PVE programs reproduce local and global security discourses, while at the same challenging their role in community policing.

Introduction

The emergence of vernacular approaches to security studies has opened the space for observing non-western contexts and non-traditional actors operating in the security field (Baker and Lekunze 2019; Benzing 2019; Bubandt 2004; Jarvis 2019; Luckham and Kirk 2013). Building upon this scholarship, this article examines the role of imams in Tunisia in reproducing or challenging global and national narratives surrounding the prevention of violent extremism in the country. Until the 2011 revolution, the authoritarian governments in Tunisia used a narrative that juxtaposed a moderate and a radical Islam to legitimize the repression of dissident groups. Since 2013, post-authoritarian governments have done the same, with the goal of controlling—rather than repressing—religiously oriented groups, by positioning measures of surveillance under the international umbrella of preventing and countering violent extremism.

In the aftermath of numerous violent attacks in the early 2000s, Tunisian narratives around the division between a moderate and a radical Islam (Blanc 2020; Hibou 2009) intersected with a similar global narrative,

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which juxtaposed "good" and "bad" Muslims worldwide (Maira 2009). This narrative was used to legitimize security policies and programs aimed at preventing violent extremism (PVE). Under the guise of "bringing security into the community," PVE brought community actors into security measures instead. As a result, civil actors now stand at the edge between social work and security enforcement, as several sectors of everyday life become parts of an all-encompassing system of surveillance, as highlighted by Monaghan (2014) and Breidlid (2021). Security and surveillance now incorporate most aspects of an individual's life, including health, education, beliefs, and work (De Goede 2008). By focusing on Tunisian imams, this research highlights the way in which civil actors deal with the influence of international institutions and national governments.

In recent years, several scholars have highlighted how international PVE programs implemented in Tunisia led to a reproduction of international narratives of development and security as a legitimation for strict national security measures (Cuccu 2024; Letsch 2023; Simoncini 2024a). I define reproduction as the repetition of exogenous narratives, tropes, and ideas. Through ethnographic interviews (Hockey and Forsey 2012; Winchatz 2006) with Tunisian imams involved in PVE training between 2018 and 2020, I observed whether and how local imams reproduce these global security narratives based on the moderate-radical divide and the concepts of radicalization and violent extremism. Examining security through the words and understanding of imams, I claim that they shape local policies and programs of prevention. They do so by reproducing some elements of the international and local narratives and practices of security while challenging others. This way, imams became co-producers of preventive policies at the local level. By co-production, I indicate the process of shaping and modifying pre-existing narratives, tropes, and ideas.

Following Browning and McDonald's (2013: 248) suggestion that we should "recognize and interrogate the role of different security discourses and their effects in different settings," this work looks at Tunisia to highlight the role of local imams in the reproduction of global and national security narratives. To that end, this article examines how security narratives are understood and interpreted by imams through the observation of their own ideas of what security means (Crawford and Hutchinson 2016). In his article, Bubandt (2005: 276) described "vernacular security" as the outcome of "complex processes of accommodation, rejection and reformulation [that] take place in the interstices between global, national and local representations of the problem of security." Bubandt (2005: 276) added that "these processes…are related to the local ontological ways in which danger, risk and (in)security are defined." In simpler terms, vernacular security "seek[s] to understand non-elite knowledge, categories of experience and articulations of the self and other in relation to broader cultural contexts" (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017: 23).

In my research, adopting an approach based on vernacular security studies meant paying attention to security "enactors" (Holland and Higham-James 2024) such as imams, bringing unheard voices into the discussion on global security. Looking at how security enactors understand their role within a larger security apparatus is in line with Croft and Vaughan-Williams's (2017) idea of vernacular securities, which focuses on observing how citizens understand their experiences of security through an examination of their own words, and of their categories of knowledge and understanding.

Imams are usually not considered to be ordinary citizens nor "traditional" security professionals such as police or armed forces. Due to their central role in the community and in the reproduction of an official Islam, they have been at the heart of preventing violent extremism programs since their emergence. Building upon Luckham's (2017: 112) suggestion, I aimed to observe whether there are any differences between the dominant narratives of security, violent extremism, and radicalization and the narratives and practices enacted by imams. In so doing, my goal is to demonstrate how different layers of narratives stratify in the implementation of security programs, and how local actors are able to adapt to, or sometimes challenge, dominant and transnational narratives of security.

Vernacular Security Studies, a Methodological Note

Numerous scholars highlight the multiplicity of actors involved in shaping security measures in the Tunisian context (Cuccu 2024; Santini 2018; Santini and Tholens 2018; Simoncini 2024b). These actors include the national government, international organizations, and local actors such as NGOs, community leaders, and religious leaders. In a similar context, examining individual understandings of security allows us to reflect on different perceptions of security in the local context (Benzing 2020: 100). This is especially important in the study of PVE, which transforms community actors into security enforcers. Security measures are a context in which "the voice and the agency of end-users… is often drowned out" (Luckham and Kirk 2013: 341).

Security is inherently a political construct, intertwined with power relations, and serves to shape rather than merely reflect social reality (Vaughan-Williams 2021: 8). Building on this perspective, a vernacular approach examines how various publics conceptualize security in their everyday lives and explores the political implications of these perceptions (Vaughan-Williams 2021: 9). The notion of vernacular security enables us to understand how specific groups interpret, react to, and engage with security issues in their daily experiences (Luckham 2017: 112). By examining how different individuals construct and utilize their own vocabularies and draw upon broader cultural knowledge and categories of understanding, we can observe how diverse publics articulate and narrate their personal experiences of (in)security (Vaughan-Williams 2021: 9). This approach provides us with a lens for analyzing transnational power and security assemblages, highlighting how individuals at the intersection of global and local security narratives, discourses, and understandings produce, reproduce, or reshape dominant ideas and hegemonic narratives of security.

This research is grounded in the conviction that security analysis must reframe its focus to consider what security entails and whose security is being examined. It is imperative to address the prevalent tendency to speak for non-traditional security actors and ordinary people rather than engaging with them directly, as noted by Jarvis and Lister (2013: 158). This approach is not an end in itself; rather, it facilitates the exploration of "the kinds of individual and collective responses to particular understandings of security, institutions, and policies put in place" (Bajc 2013: 616), thereby linking national and global politics with the lived experiences of individuals in a specific place and time. This perspective is particularly relevant for security enactors involved in PVE, such as imams, who, while perpetuating mainstream religious and security narratives, may also have the agency and possibility of challenging them.

In fact, adopting a vernacular understanding of security and listening to the voices of people in the field sheds light on the agency of local actors. Engaging with these non-traditional security actors, and discussing their life stories and understanding of their roles within a larger security apparatus, reveals the social contexts that informs whether and how (and why) local actors might engage with, challenge, or adopt transnational security narratives. In this context, understanding policies and programs as horizontal does not imply a lack of asymmetries of power between different actors, but rather highlights the fact that processes and entities "only exist as they are enacted in daily practices, relations and entanglements" (Guillaime and Huysmans 2019: 283). In trying to analyze whether and how imams shape global and local security narratives, this work uses ethnographic interviews to examine how imams perceive their role in the prevention of violent extremism, and how this understanding of their role informs the way in which they enact security in their day-to-day.

In analyzing the perspectives shared by the imams I interviewed, I drew upon a critical approach to political narratives, influenced by scholars such as Campbell (1998), Howarth (2000), and Jackson (2005). These scholars emphasize how discursive practices and tropes, perpetuated by both governmental and non-governmental actors, construct specific conceptions of "security issues." In this process, narratives play a central role by normalizing and legitimizing certain ideas and practices related to security. Consequently,

security policies and programs often reinforce particular notions of security threats and validate corresponding responses from security institutions (Bajc 2011). To grasp these processes of norm creation and enactment, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the policy cycle and the actors involved.

To achieve this, my interviews with Tunisian imams engaged in PVE programs focused on identifying recurring themes, categories, representations, and discourse objects. This approach aimed to uncover patterns and recurring elements that underpin specific global and national security narratives. These narratives often rely on familiar tropes, such as the dichotomy between "moderate" and "radical" Muslims. At the national level, this narrative evolved throughout the years into a distinction between a "modern and Tunisian" approach to Islam and a "radical and foreign" one. Similarly, a recurring global and national narrative revolves around the concept of radicalization, often depicted through predefined "steps" outlined in various "radicalization models" emerging in the mid-2000s, which focused on the psychological or behavioral processes that supposedly lead to the decision to join violent groups or to conduct violent attacks, while at the same time de-emphasizing "the circumstances—the 'root causes' that it became so difficult to talk about" (Sedgwick 2010: 481).

Crucially, my interviews sought to elucidate how imams perceive security, radicalization, and violent extremism in their own terms, and through their unique frameworks of understanding. This exploration was essential for discerning whether local imams passively reproduce externally constructed security narratives from global or national levels (or both), or if they actively challenge these narratives, thereby contributing to the co-production of new narratives disseminated within their local communities. Moreover, through sharing their stories and perspectives, imams revealed not only the "how" but also the "why" behind their specific approaches to their security roles. In so doing, our interviews connected local, everyday security practices with broader transnational security processes.

This article stems from my ethnographic work in Tunisia between 2019 and 2020 as part of a broader project. To observe the role of imams in preventative measures, I focused on imams who participated in two pilot projects based on PVE training for religious leaders. To that end, I contacted the two NGOs (the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy and the Fondation Ahmed Tlili pour la Culture Démocratique), both of which ran pilot projects on PVE training for imams. These PVE projects aimed to provide a non-securitarian approach to the fight against violent extremism by training imams to disseminate democratic discourses and values. With the help of the two organizations, I was able to contact imams that underwent PVE training and conduct interviews with them. I concentrated on the governorates of Bizerte, which "has seen a significant number of fighters travel to join extremist groups" (Soufan and Schoenfeld 2016: 21), and Grand Tunis, whose peripheries are considered to be a hotbed for radicalization (Colombo 2016: 110).

Conducting ethnographic research and arranging access required substantial time, particularly due to disruptions caused by the 2020 pandemic. As a result, I was able to interview only a limited number of imams—ten in total. These interviews, however, were comprehensive and often extended over multiple days. I approached this research as a non-Muslim, European scholar from a European university. This positionality sometimes necessitated building trust over time with the imams, particularly regarding sensitive discussions on security and preventing violent extremism (PVE) programs. The extended duration of the interviews facilitated deeper connections and allowed for extensive engagement with each participant, enabling a thorough exploration of various topics. The imams I interviewed were not only religious leaders but also influential figures in civil society organizations and political circles, often affiliated with key political parties. Their dual roles positioned them as pivotal community actors capable of influencing local policy implementation. The objective of my research was not to generalize the behavior of imams involved in PVE programs, but to illuminate the specific strategies employed by these imams as they navigate their roles within the evolving security landscape.

During interviews, my aim was to give value to their understanding of security and violent extremism, treating them not "as objects of study, but as partners in the gathering of material" (Toros 2008: 289). To facilitate this collaborative approach, the interviews were primarily conducted in French, a language familiar to all parties involved. Conscious of the potential biases associated with loaded terminology, such as "violent extremist," "radicalized," or "terrorist," I opted instead for a language that did not use the concepts of radicalization or violent extremism. I referred to "individuals who embrace violence," a term that sometimes emerged through my interviews and participant observation, allowing the imams to articulate their own conceptualizations without the influence of preconceived labels. This approach aimed to capture the nuances of their perceptions and interpretations.

Non-traditional Security Actors in the International Discourse on Violent Extremism

In the aftermath of the attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), the discourse on terrorism in western countries shifted its focus. While previous analyses focused on Islamist organized networks such as al-Qaeda, a theme that gained prominence in the 2000s was that of so-called homegrown terrorism. Homegrown terrorists differed from al-Qaeda and similar groups due to the attackers' western or European birth and upbringing (Nesser 2008: 234). In response to these new attacks, analysts and policymakers sought to explain why and how individuals change and embrace more "radical" views (e.g., Hoffman and Dryer 2007; Wiktorowicz 2005). "Salafi" and "Salafi-jihadi" ideologies, indicated as a new "global threat" since the early 2000s (Wiktorowicz 2001), become central in international discourses on religious extremism, and were described as "the ideological matrix of those who join the ranks of organizations such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State" (Amghar 2023: 206). This discourse presumes a linear connection between Salafism and jihadism, despite the existence of various forms of Salafism, each with distinct political ideologies (Bishara 2022). Furthermore, as western governments and international organizations began to focus on how to eradicate homegrown Islamist violence, the concept of radicalization, despite still being a contested concept with a non-agreed upon meaning (Della Porta 2018; Githens-Mazer 2012; Sedgwick 2010), became the cornerstone of policymaking during the war on terror, providing new approaches to counterterrorism. In early studies, radicalization referred to a vague and ill-defined process by which a person becomes an extremist through the adoption of radical views and ideas (e.g., Post and Sheffer 2007; Silke 2008).

In trying to create a comprehensive theory describing how some individuals could become violent extremists, scholars, analysts, and practitioners provided several different models. Among the most famous of these, Moghaddam's (2005) staircase model, the NYPD model (Silber and Bhatt 2007), Sageman's (2008) worldview approach, and Gill's (2008) pathway model, focused only on so-called religious or Islamic terrorism, leading to counterterrorism measures that specifically targeted Muslim populations. Early studies on radicalization processes were limited to the single question, "why do some individual Muslims support an extremist interpretation of Islam that leads to violence" (Kundnani 2012: 5), reinforcing the discursive creation of a division between extremists and moderates within Muslim communities.

The idea of radicalization as a recognizable process led to the creation of policies that try to prevent violent extremism "through anticipatory regimes of knowledge and practice" by acting upon the "imaginary process" of becoming a violent extremist (Heath-Kelly 2012: 71). In fact, the focus on psychological or behavioral processes emerged at the expense of the analysis of what Crenshaw (1981) defined as "root causes," namely, the social and political grievances at the foundation of political violence. With few exceptions, the research on radicalization in the 2000s was "characterized by its focus on individuals, on ideological and psychological processes, and on examining violent groups in isolation from their social and political context" (Della Porta and LaFree 2012: 6). In this way, the emergence of the concepts of radicalization and violent extremism led analysts and policymakers to focus on a pre-criminal space in the belief that creating pre-emptive policies, which could prevent a process of radicalization rather than stop it, was the best solution to the problem of homegrown terrorism. Consequently, measures aimed at preventing violent extremism and radicalization were built on epidemiological approaches, based on "localized

interventions performed upon individuals and groups showing early symptoms of disease or at high likelihood of contracting illness" (Heath-Kelly 2017: 302).

To this day, most analyses of radicalization remain primarily targeted towards individual, psychological, and behavioral processes, overlooking the societal and political causes pushing individuals and groups toward violent practices. As a consequence, PVE programs require the help of key community actors such as social workers, teachers, educators, and religious leaders. These actors are understood to be able to identify early signs of radicalization and recruitment before intelligence and police forces, due to their closer contact with ordinary individuals. Thus, the PVE framework encourages community members to participate in the identification and reporting of individuals perceived to be at risk of radicalization, leading to a co-production of policing and surveillance practices. In this way, national governments transform non-traditional security actors into co-producers of public safety (Nguyen 2019: 324). By contributing to the formation of security practices, non-traditional security actors are "tasked with the surveillance of those showing 'signs' of radicalization" and, because of this, they "shape and are shaped by the security agendas that co-opt them" (Bastani and Gazzotti 2021: 4).

Consequently, collaboration with local religious leaders and educators has been a core feature of PVE programs since their early days. An example is the Saudi campaign, which "strives to prevent exposure to takfiri beliefs; to refute those ideas and encourage the rehabilitation of offenders; and to promote policies that prevent relapses" (Boucek 2011: 71).[2] Clerics and places of worship play a pivotal role in the Saudi program. For instance, "the Ministry of Islamic Affairs sponsors lectures and classes at mosques throughout the country, utilizing speakers and materials recommended by experts on extremism" (Boucek 2011: 75). Most PVE programs focus on, among other things, education and the creation of a moderate counter-narrative that contrasts radical views. In Egypt, imprisoned Islamic militants "were offered lectures on jurisprudence as well as intensive seminars on religion" to "reorient members of Jihad and other Islamic militant groups" (Blaydes and Rubin 2008: 471). In the UK, "Muslims were actively recruited to play a part in the implementation of the counterterrorism 'Prevent' policy, which included initiatives to train Imams" (Francis and van Eck Duymaer van Twist 2015: 116). Within the Prevent program, the training of imams was a core concern that guided the regulation of British mosques (Ali 2023). The next section examines how the recurring narratives in Tunisia about counter-radicalization reflect, or do not reflect, those at the global level. This analysis builds toward my larger examination of the role of imams in Tunisia as non-traditional security actors.

Recurring Narratives of Religion and Security in Tunisia

Throughout the history of Tunisia as an independent republic, a societal cleavage between two different approaches to Islam has played a pivotal role in the country's politics. One of these approaches is based on the idea of reformism, characterized by "openness to the West without denying Muslim religion and culture," while the other is "above all concerned with a return to an original Islam" (Hibou 2009: 14, 17). In the 1950s, these two different positions were exemplified by Habib Bourguiba and Salah Ben Youssef, founders of the Neo Destour Party. The clash between the two exacerbated pre-existing societal divisions.

After becoming president in 1956, Bourguiba incorporated "Islam into the production of 'modern Tunisian citizens'" (Webb 2013: 17), using religion as a source of legitimacy, and painted himself as a promoter of modernity and moderation. He was concerned that Islamist groups such as the Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique (Movement of Islamic Tendency [MTI], later renamed Ennahda) could challenge his rule as Ben

[2] The concept of *takfir* can be described as "a kind of 'otherness'" whereby radical Muslim groups or individuals define "other Muslims as *kafir* or *murtad* (apostate)" (Kadivar 2020: 259).

Youssef once did. In 1981, the leaders of the MTI asked for official recognition, as Bourguiba called for elections to address growing social unrest. He did not, however, recognize the MTI as a legitimate party.

In 1987, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ousted Bourguiba and became the Republic's second president. The new ruler immediately adopted Bourguiba's commitment to the idea of *laïcité* and several of his policies (Cavatorta and Haugbølle 2012: 190), but he also distanced himself from Bourguiba's more unpopular secular policies by reviving the idea of an Arab and Islamic Tunisian identity. He created a university for religious studies and reorganized the High Islamic Council, comprised of twenty-five Islamic scholars with a consultative role on laws related to religion (Donker and Netterstrøm 2017: 142). Ben Ali maintained strict control over religion and religious authorities through the Department of Religious Affairs, which was under the control of the Prime Minister's office and became the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1991 (Donker and Netterstrøm 2017: 142). The Ministry oversaw the functioning of mosques and religious education, the nomination and the training of imams and preachers, and the supervision of religious narratives and practices in the country (Frégosi 2003: 27–28). In this way, imams became state-appointed officials working under the Ministry.

By controlling religious leaders, the authoritarian ruler supported the narrative of an official and "Tunisian" Islam. In this way, Ben Ali legitimized state authority by using religious messages (Donker and Netterstrøm 2017: 142). In the 1990s and the 2000s, Ben Ali legitimized repression against Islamist groups and other dissidents by acting within the framework of the international fight against so-called Islamic terrorism. The logic of repression was tied to the "priority of maintaining the stability needed to attract investment and a free trade deal with Europe" (McCarthy 2018: 70). In this context, repressive measures were justified by the international discourse of the time, which identified radical Islamists as international security threats (Ben Rejeb 2013: 86). In this context, Tunisia quickly became a crucial ally of the western coalition in the fight against Islamic terrorism (Durac and Cavatorta 2009: 14). By framing his repression within the framework of the global war on terror, Ben Ali depicted dissidents as terrorists, and himself as a defense against the Islamist threat.

The 2011 Tunisian revolution opened the space for new religious ideas and practices in the country. The fall of Ben Ali's regime and Ennahda's subsequent legalization were followed by the return of numerous party members who had lived in exile until then. The regime change allowed different ideologies to emerge, granting religious leaders and groups, as well as places of worship, unprecedented freedom (Fortier 2019: 141). Among these groups, Ansar al Sharia Tunisia (AST), a Salafi-jihadi group, proved to be one of the most popular. AST was able to gather large numbers of followers in a short time by harnessing the dissatisfaction of marginalized social classes with the transitional process (Merone 2017: 1132). These groups were frustrated by the persistent lack of job opportunities and the ongoing economic crisis, which the shift to democracy had failed to alleviate. In this context, Salafism changed "from a quietist religiosity solely concerned with individual behavior" to being "open to social and political activism" (Merone, Blanc, and Sigillò 2021: 8). AST "organized 'occupy mosques' campaigns to chase out imams who were accused of having been too loyal to the regime" (Torelli, Merone, and Cavatorta 2012: 149). This "battle for mosques" was motivated by, among other things, the search for further "representation and influence on the part of disenfranchised youth" (Marks 2013: 112).

The situation was exacerbated in 2013, after a Jihadi group allegedly linked to AST assassinated Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi, two prominent political figures. In the aftermath of the assassinations, several members of the Constitutional Assembly resigned and protests against the government spread across the country (Donker and Netterstrøm 2017: 148), increasing the pressure on Ennahda to declare AST illegal. The political crisis led to the formation of a new government in January 2014. This new government decided to opt for a return to the old security apparatus, backed by a recently emerged nationalist party, Nidaa Tounes, which pressured Ennahda into compliance (Cavatorta and Torelli 2021: 11). The return of the old security apparatus was backed using international narratives depicting Salafi movements and groups as a

national and global security threat. Tunisia witnessed, in fact, a significant number of individuals leaving to fight in Syria in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution (Macdonald and Waggoner 2018).

In response, the deal between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda led to a redefinition of the space for religious approaches and practices. For both actors, "the most sensitive issue…was control of mosques and public Islamic spaces" (Merone, Sigillò, and De Facci 2018: 191). Several mosques and religious associations were shut down due to accusations that they had spread nefarious discourse or participated in extremist behavior (Feuer 2017: 196; McCarthy 2015: 455), while others were "brought under the state's control and regulated under a more stringent legal framework" (Merone, Blanc, and Sigillò 2021: 2). The Ministry of Religious Affairs "had control over almost all mosques in Tunisia by late 2015" (Muhanna-Matar 2017: 456).

The crackdown on Salafi activities and groups was legitimized by a narrative celebrating a moderate and state-sanctioned version of Islam, thus reproducing the discursive tropes of the Ben Ali presidency. Ennahda quickly joined this narrative, promoting a moderate and "Tunisian" version of Islam, leading the party to adopt the label of "Muslim democrats" (Ghannouchi 2016). The party played a pivotal role in the restoration of the Al-Zaytuna mosque and the promotion of its role in reproducing narratives of religious moderation (Merone, Blanc, and Sigillò 2021: 12). These years were marked by an intense escalation in arrests and repression of Salafi groups, culminating in the publication of the new antiterrorism law of 2015 in response to the attacks at the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March and the coastal city of Sousse in June.

In response to the attacks, the government, led by Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, passed law n°26/2015, regulating the fight against terrorism and the repression of money laundering (République Tunisienne 2015). In addition to more traditional repressive measures re-appropriated from the previous regime, which "proved to be no longer sufficient to stem terrorism, Tunisian authorities started to apply preventive methods" (Simoncini 2024a: 735). The new law created a national commission against terrorism (Commission Nationale de Lutte Contre le Terrorisme [CNLCT]), a supervisory organism consisting of representatives from the different ministries. The prerogatives of the Commission include issuing guidelines on preventing and countering terrorism, collecting data regarding terrorism throughout the country to create a national dossier, and supervising the implementation of the antiterrorism law. In 2016 Beji Caïd Essebsi, then President of the Republic, signed the new national counterterrorism strategy (Stratégie Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Extrémisme et le Terrorisme [SNLCET]). The strategy responded to the UN Security Council resolution 2178 of 2014, which stressed the necessity for all member states to implement national PVE programs. Since 2016, operating in line with the international framework of preventing violent extremism (UN General Assembly 2015; Martini 2021), Tunisia moved from the frame of the global war on terror to the international approach to PVE, utilizing its narratives and practices.

Modelled upon the EU 2005 counterterrorism strategy (Council of the EU 2005) and the 2015 UN Action Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism (UN General Assembly 2015), the Tunisian strategy comprises four pillars: prevention, protection, pursuit, and response. The first pillar represents a novelty in the Tunisian security system and includes programs that focus on community engagement and soft counterterrorism measures. The Tunisian document reproduces almost verbatim the language of the EU strategy and the UN action plan. Following the structure these two documents, the Tunisian strategy highlights the importance of creating measures that target the motivational and structural factors that might lead to violent extremism (Council of the EU 2005: 7; République Tunisienne 2016; UN General Assembly 2015: 2).

All three documents stress the necessity to ensure that mainstream moderate voices and values, such as tolerance and acceptance of diversity, prevail over extremist voices (Council of the EU 2005: 8; République Tunisienne 2016; UN General Assembly 2015: 14). To that end, preventive measures must pay special attention to spaces considered to be at risk, such as prisons and places of religious worship (Council of the EU 2005: 9; République Tunisienne 2016; UN General Assembly 2015: 15). In this context, imams played a pivotal role as religious educators and crucial members of their communities. By adopting the international

language of PVE, the Tunisian government legitimized its control over religion and its discourse on moderate and radical Islam within the framework of the international fight against violent extremism, just as Ben Ali did during the global war on terror. In fact, the years between 2015 and 2016 "saw a significative number of inter-national donors competing to fund PVE activities in the country" (Simoncini 2024a: 735). As Letsch (2023: 488) highlights, "most civil society activities with a P/CVE- label…started in 2016." For the most part, these internationally funded projects included "cultural activities, citizenship education, increased community work, capacity-building, training sessions, awareness-raising activities and dialogue sessions between youth and security forces" (Letsch 2023: 488), focusing on key community actors at the local level. Within this context, projects focusing on the training of religious leaders emerged, in line with the guidelines of the UN plan against violent extremism (UN General Assembly 2015).

Despite the stronger return to authoritarian rule that Tunisia has undergone since July 2021 (Mutlu and Yasun 2024), the National Strategy for the fight against terrorism is still in place. In the last few years, Saied used the 2015 counterterrorism law to conduct an arrest campaign targeting opposition figures and solidifying his authoritarian control over the country (Emig and Schumacher 2024), particularly to "restrict the movements of former ministers, lawyers, journalists, activists, and members of the former parliament" (Simoncini 2024b: 132).

"We Have Two Ways of Dealing with Violence": Do Imams Reproduce or Challenge Security Narratives?

The work of imams in Tunisia is part of a larger security architecture based on state control over religion. The creation of, first, the Department of Religious Affairs and, later, the Ministry of Religious Affairs transformed imams into state officials working under the Ministry's surveillance. One of the priorities of the 2014 government was "that of rendering mosques politically neutral" (Grasso 2016: 207). "Partisan neutrality" is a strategy brought forward by Tunisian governments, which involves "full detachment of mosques from political affairs, as the opposite would mean the transgression of mosques' specialized functional boundaries" (Donker 2018: 509). The purpose of this stance is to protect "religion from corrupting influences" (Donker 2018: 509). The state supervision of mosques "is directly linked to a view of the mosque and its activities as providing a specialized public service to a Tunisian defined citizenry" (Donker 2018: 510). This led to a renewed governmental surveillance over religious approaches and narratives.

Consequently, imams are subject to a strict system of control, the purpose of which is to monitor religious narratives and practices throughout the country. The Ministry of Religious Affairs relies on several control figures, usually called preachers.[3] These are civil servants whose responsibilities include the control of the Friday imam's discourse and the submission of regular reports to the Ministry. This control system is a legacy of the authoritarian years, which impacts the work of imams in PVE (Cuccu and Bonci 2024). Furthermore, local imams are strongly influenced by national narratives on religion. Most of the time, my interviewees identified more radical individuals as Salafi, thereby reproducing global security narratives that the post-revolutionary government appropriated. In this highly securitized context, my goal was to observe how local imams undergoing PVE training navigate their role as community actors and religious leaders while being part of a security architecture aimed at controlling religious narratives. In the following sections, I present parts of the interviews with the imams I met, highlighting their understandings of security.

[3] In Arabic, they are called *wa'dh* (masculine plural) or *wa'ydhat* (feminine plural). My interviewees referred to them with the French terms *prédicateurs* (masculine plural) and *prédicatrices* (feminine plural).

"An Islamist Is Someone Who Thinks He Has to Protect God": Mixing Global and Local Security Narratives

The PVE projects examined here were created to train Friday imams to adopt a moderate approach to religion, solve conflicts in their milieu, recognize active processes of radicalization, and possibly prevent them from happening. To examine this, I discussed with my interviewees how they recognize individuals embracing violence and how they deal with them. In so doing, my objective was to understand whether imams reproduce international and national security narratives and practices or whether they challenge them.

K is an imam I met in Bizerte, the capital of the governorate, a region in the north of the country with a high number of arrests related to counterterrorism before the revolution (Pargeter 2009: 1044), as well as fighters who joined armed groups in Syria and Iraq after 2011 (Soufan and Schoenfeld 2016: 21). We met in a café in front of the old port, in the heart of town, in July 2019. He underwent the same training as the other imams I interviewed and decided to become one of the trainers. He has past connections with Ennahda from before the revolution. As with the other imams, I asked him when and how he started this job. He stated, "I became an imam in 1988. After four years as an imam, I decided to stop. I was at risk of being arrested. After 2011, I started to work again as an imam in my governorate" (K, personal interview, July 2019).

As a former affiliate with a religious party, K is familiar with the country's history of control over religion. In order to examine how K approaches individuals embracing violence as a viable option, I asked him what, in his opinion, the signs were that someone is undergoing a process leading to an acceptance of violence. He replied:

> This kind of violence has an ideological origin and goes through several steps. It starts with isolation and alienation, and the individual only associates with a small circle of people, the way of speaking, the discourses, and even the clothing changes. We might not have one single sign calling for attention, but maybe several. […] When the individual does not pray with other people, it is a sign that things are escalating. […] An imam has to recognize the signs of such a process, but beyond a certain point, there is nothing we can do. (K, personal interview, July 2019)

In explaining his own understanding, K reproduces mainstream global narratives on radicalization: by describing the process as comprising different "steps."

As previously discussed, policymakers and mainstream literature generally agree that radicalization involves a gradual marginalization from conventional society towards a narrower, extremist-focused community where extremism becomes all-encompassing (Horgan 2008: 89). The idea of radicalization as a process marked by stages that are easily recognizable has achieved international acceptance throughout the years precisely because it gives a simple solution to a complex issue (Kundnani 2012: 15). Through international and national influences, K reproduces this discourse and uses it to inform his work as an imam. Continuing our conversation, I was curious about K's perception of his role in preventing or addressing violence. K was close to Ennahda during the authoritarian years and became an imam around a year after Ben Ali took power. Being an Ennahda activist under Ben Ali made his situation especially dangerous. Given the country's historical division between supposedly moderate and radical approaches to Islam, I asked him how he behaves as an imam when someone has ideas about religion that deviate from the standard moderate discourse. He answered:

> The imam is like a professor. He has a duty within his class but also outside to attract new students and dialogue with them. If I see someone moving away from this discourse [the moderate discourse], I try to reach out and talk to this person, to have a more specialized discourse. It depends whether it is a fellow imam or a young person. In the

> former case, I will focus on rationality and knowledge. In the latter, I will focus on a more emotional level, a behavioral and affective one. (K, personal interview, July 2019)

Again, K reproduces global narratives on radicalization. In this context, he acknowledges his duty to educate and establish a dialogue with young individuals, a category often associated with vulnerability and risk (Brown 2017). In his account, K does not use those two words to describe the young people in his community. However, the idea of a dialogue between rationality on one side and emotionality on the other is closely linked to the idea of vulnerability and the moderate/extreme binary. This concept reproduces power dynamics that create a disconnect between the imams and the "non-moderate" community members.

Similarly, other imams demonstrated that they have internalized global narratives of radicalization. L was the first imam I met as part of my fieldwork. He has a history of political activism and worked for a Tunisian imam union that exists under the umbrella of the larger General Labor Union (Grasso 2016: 211). The Tunisian General Labor Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail [UGTT]) is the largest labor union in the country and has historically been a central actor in Tunisian politics (Bishara and Grewal 2022; Netterstrøm 2016; Yousfi 2017). I met L in the northern area of Tunis, close to the sea. He was the youngest imam I had encountered, in his mid-30s, and we met on multiple occasions. At our first encounter, in July 2019, he took pride in telling me the history of his working-class neighborhood as we walked through it, on the outskirts of more prosperous and touristic parts of the capital. The neighborhood was going through a process of pauperization, primarily due to the lack of job opportunities. He told me, "The neighborhood has changed a lot throughout the years. When I was younger, people of this area would work in tourism and hotels nearby, now hotels just call workers from outside" (L, personal interview, July 2019).

I asked him if his relationship with the neighborhood sprang from his work or whether it pre-dated his job as imam. He said, "I have a background as an activist in the neighborhood. I became an imam after the revolution, around 2011, and until 2013 I worked here, in my neighborhood. Then, after two years I became a Friday imam, as well as general secretary of the union of religious officers for northern Tunis, under the UGTT" (L, personal interview, July 2019).

Due to his activism under the UGTT and his particular perspective on the relationship between civic engagement and religion, I asked L about different approaches to religion and about individuals who might join violent groups or embrace the possibility of violence. He responded, "They live among other people but not with other people. […] A Muslim is someone who thinks God will protect him. An Islamist is someone who thinks he has to protect God. These people learn Islam on the internet, following non-Tunisian schools of thought" (L, personal interview, July 2019).

This response from L is fascinating in that it merges recurring international and national narratives: the idea that Salafi, Islamists, or extremists radicalize via the internet is a recurring concept among analysts and policymakers. As previously discussed, the idea of "Tunisian" Islam being inherently moderate (as opposed to a "foreign" and inherently "radical" Islam) is a national narrative reiterated by Bourguiba, Ben Ali, and Ennahda in slightly different ways throughout the years.

Mainstream analyses on radicalization processes highlight how "the internet is largely a facilitative tool that affords greater opportunities for violent radicalization and attack planning" (Gill et al. 2017: 100). However, despite the broadly accepted assumption that the internet is a vehicle of radicalization, "insufficient substantive empirically grounded social science research has been undertaken to date in order to allow us to convincingly answer these questions. The work that has been done is largely focused on analyzing digital content and not its producers or consumers (i.e., the audience), distribution mechanisms, or its functioning and effects" (Conway 2017: 82).

In our interview, L conflates radicalization through the internet with a supposedly non-Tunisian approach to Islam. The emphasis on non-Tunisian approaches is significant, as it continues with the idea of moderate Islam as the Tunisian way of religion. As previously mentioned, the idea of a specifically Tunisian version of Islam, modern and moderate, was strongly sponsored in the years of the first president, Habib Bourguiba. Bourguiba co-opted religion into his project of modernization of the country (Webb 2013: 22), reinforcing the division between these two approaches to Islam. The internet as a combination of a place of radicalization and a place to come across non-Tunisian Islamic thought is fascinating in that it frames local mosques as the main locations for learning the moderate and Tunisian version of Islam.

L was not the only imam to raise this point. Unlike the other imams I interviewed, D has no history of activism or politics, and his journey has been primarily based on the study and teaching of Islam. In his sixties, he works as an imam in the center of Tunis. I met him in January 2020 in a square in an old part of the capital. We sat on a bench and discussed what he did before becoming an imam. Talking about his previous experience as a teacher and educator, I asked him what he thought the role of the imam was within the community. He answered, "The role of imams is to have a dialogue [with the followers], we need to explain that Islam is a realist religion and there is no room for exaggerations. We have to insist on ijtihad, against literal interpretations" (D, personal interview, January 2020).[4]

D's reference to ijtihad, juxtaposed to literal interpretations of the book and the hadiths, leads back to the historical division in Tunisia between a reformist and a fundamentalist approach to Islam. As explained earlier, this juxtaposition still exists in the country, depicting those who defy the moderation narrative as "non-Tunisian" (Bonci 2021: 9). Most imams I interviewed internalized at least some national and international narratives on radicalization and violent extremism. To be more precise, often these two levels (global and national) are intertwined and build upon each other, as demonstrated by the idea that the internet is used to radicalize (global narrative) through contact with "non-Tunisian" approaches to Islam (national narrative).

"First There's the Dialogue": Challenging Community Policing

After focusing on the reproduction of international and national security and religious narratives, I tried to discuss with the imams what strategies they adopted to address individuals who embrace violence as a viable means of action. I met N in a small town in January 2020 in the governorate of Bizerte. N is a middle-aged imam with a past as a political activist for Ennahda. We sat in a café close to his mosque and started talking about his work as an imam. I asked when he became one: "[Before the revolution] I was a political activist and part of Ennahda, and I was arrested as a political opponent under Ben Ali's regime. I was detained for nine years. When I got out, after the revolution, I became an imam" (N, personal interview, January 2020).

N is just one of the many Ennahda members and activists who went to jail, left the country, or maintained a low profile under the authoritarian regime, which halted any kind of political activity (McCarthy 2018: 98–99). Many of the imams I interviewed and met during my fieldwork share a similar history. Some of them started their journeys as imams after the revolution. Others were imams under the authoritarian regime and, at some point, decided to flee the country or refrain from working as imams, starting again after 2011. N, for instance, was arrested under Ben Ali due to his activism. Due to his personal experience, he is well aware of the practical effects that security narratives can have on individuals deemed to be radical. I asked him how he would address the issue of individuals or groups who embrace the use of violence. He said, "We have two ways of dealing with violence. First, there is dialogue, which is necessary. We try to have a discussion on the subject. However, if the dialogue bears no results, the second way is to apply the law and warn the authorities. However, this should not be the first response" (N, personal interview, January 2020).

[4] Ijtihad refers to the original interpretation or independent reasoning in Islam (see Ramadan 2006).

Due to his personal history as an Ennahda activist under Ben Ali, N is not keen on the idea of referring individuals to police forces. He feels that his role as an imam is to educate the individuals who are part of his community, and that dialogue is the primary way to do that. In this way, N reproduces some of the international narratives on the prevention of radicalization, such as the role of community actors, but challenges the role of imams in community policing, therefore challenging a central component of the PVE approach.

Despite their vastly different personal histories, the discussions I had with most imams led to the same conclusion. They believe that their role as religious leaders and educators is to speak with the members of their communities before using any approach based on policing or referral to local authorities. While no other imam has been as explicit in discussing their security approach as N, most imams told variations of the same story. K, for example, told me of a time when a young man's parents contacted him, stating, "If I see someone moving away from this discourse, I try to reach out and talk to that person […]. Once, I was asked for help by the parent of a young man. He was not attending the mosque, and I went to his house to talk to him" (K, personal interview, July 2019).

As in the story told to me by N, discussing the issue with the young man was prioritized over a referral to the authorities. In my interviews, most imams understood the process of individuals embracing violence as a complex issue. They recognize the roots of the issue to be deeply embedded in a context of inequalities, economic stagnation, unemployment, and a general disillusionment that the revolution did not go as some people had hoped, rather than as solely psychological or behavioral. They also argue that religious discourse is the primary instrument for dealing with individuals accepting violence as a viable option. In so doing, imams do not simply reproduce global and local security narratives but rather participate in the co-production of local security practices. Nonetheless, while imams involved in PVE see the complexity of these kinds of processes in the field, this narrative clashes with a strict social and religious control inherited from the authoritarian years. The security apparatus and the political affiliations of some imams create a barrier between themselves and individuals following so-called non-Tunisian religious ideas, leading to the marginalization of alternative religious approaches.

Local imams see themselves as crucial community actors and are deeply committed to their roles as educators. Imams with backgrounds in activism, whether through the general labor union or the religiously oriented party Ennahda, tend to avoid involving security and police forces whenever possible. Their approach is heavily influenced by personal beliefs shaped by the social, political, and historical context of pre-revolutionary authoritarianism in the country. Despite the growing presence of international organizations and NGOs in their field (Cuccu 2024; Letsch 2023), these imams navigate their work on their own terms, sometimes bypassing aspects of PVE programs they find concerning. By challenging the "security" aspect of their roles, they assert their agency and maintain control over their community engagement.

Alternatively, most of the imams I interviewed perpetuated the local narrative that identifies fundamentalist schools of thought as non-Tunisian, sometimes linking it to international narratives of online radicalization. The idea of the partisan neutrality of mosques seems to be another issue that generates distrust towards imams, at least as indicated by the imams' accounts. In this context, security enactors such as imams are co-opted through preventive security measures and transformed into security enforcers. Their new role includes monitoring alternative religious approaches. Furthermore, most imams I interviewed firmly believe in the existence of "two Islams," one that is moderate and Tunisian, and one that is foreign and extremist. In so doing, they embrace national and global paradigms on the distinction between "bad" and "good" Muslims. Nonetheless, imams do not simply reproduce exogenous narratives of religion and security. They also believe policing religious approaches is not their role and that their primary duty consists of addressing grievances and dealing with individuals undergoing radicalization through dialogue. In doing so, they prioritize community work over security work, challenging the elements of PVE programs that bring

community actors into the security apparatus and shaping the implementation of prevention policies in the country, participating in the co-production of local security practices.

Conclusions

In the aftermath of the 2021 authoritarian turn of the country, and the use of terrorism legislation to solidify the President's control, the role of religious leaders in preventing violent extremism may have fundamentally changed. As the field research on which this article is based ended in 2020, new research looking at the role of religious leaders in post-democratic Tunisia could shed light on the evolving role of imams in the country. Nonetheless, this research has shown how Tunisian imams were part of a larger system of surveillance operated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which led to a continuous supervision over their work and speeches. This was not dissimilar to what happens with most PVE programs worldwide, where local actors, like imams, often find themselves part of a larger system of community policing and surveillance (often unwillingly), even when using non-security measures such as dialogue and education. Although imams challenged these preventative measures through their daily work, soft security strategies in Tunisia largely mirror global PVE approaches, blending local engagement with traditional control and surveillance methods.

In this context, security and PVE narratives in Tunisia conflated global security tropes with national discursive elements, clearly based on the specific way in which Tunisian governments before and after the revolution discursively constructed an "other" in the figure of Islamists movements (before the 2011 revolution) and Salafi-jidahi groups (in the post-revolutionary era). At the local level, Tunisian imams involved in PVE training clearly reproduced some elements of both global and national security narratives within their community and in their everyday work while challenging others.

Looking at how Tunisian imams understood their role as part of this new security framework, this research has highlighted the intersection between global and Tunisian narratives and practices of security, and the role of non-security actors in co-producing them. Going beyond the Tunisian case, the article used vernacular security to highlight how security enactors play a fundamental role in co-producing security practices and discourses, selectively shaping or challenging them. By analyzing the role of imams in the co-production of security narratives and practices, this article has discussed how local actors can adapt to global and local narratives, while at the same time they shape the way in which preventative policies are implemented. This was especially visible in their adoption of narratives based on the moderate-radical divide in their day-to-day approach to radicalization and violent extremism, and in the way they challenged and shaped their role in community policing, ultimately co-producing preventive policies at the local level.

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