

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience

Policy Brief for Tunisia



The PAVE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870769.

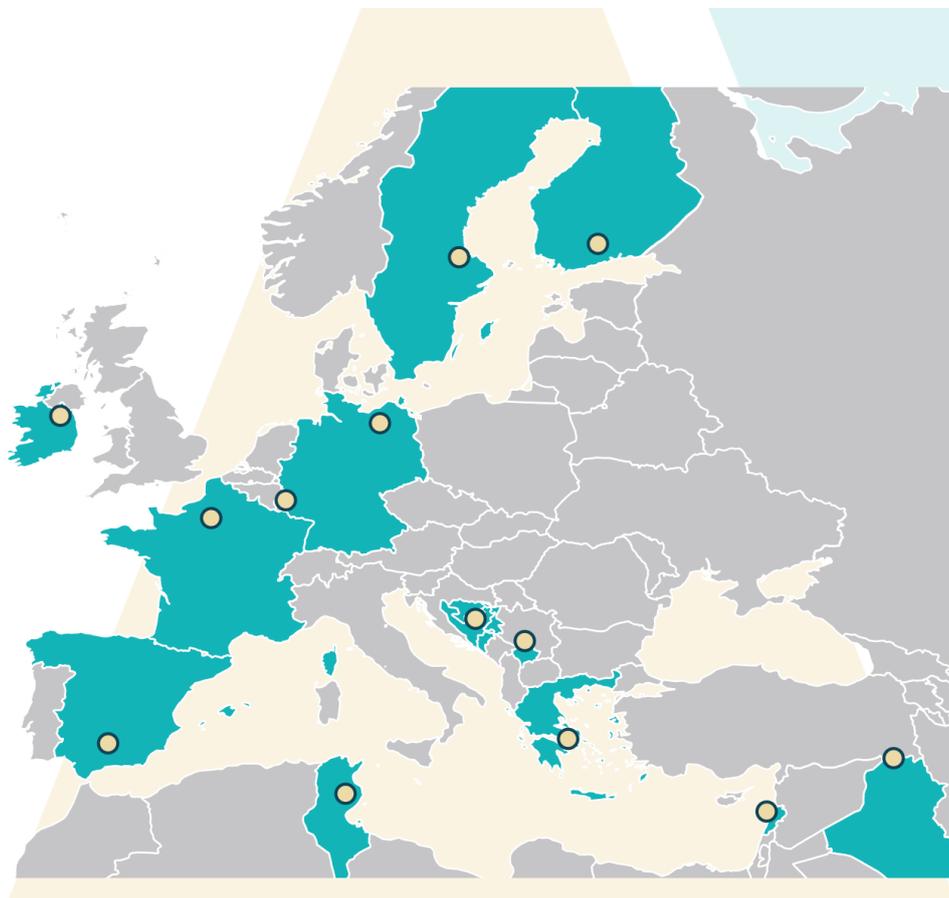


Introduction to the PAVE project

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

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

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





Introduction to PAVE research in Tunisia

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

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

Conceived in two parts, the fieldwork was conducted in two phases, the first of which was devoted to individual face-to-face, semi-directed interviews with actors operating in the two sites, namely the Northwest (represented by the city of El Kef) and the Center-West (represented by the cities of Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid). The fieldwork was conducted in three periods of time: First, from 26 to 29 December 2020; second, from 20 to 24 May 2021; and third, from 28 October to 3 November 2021.

Forty-four interviews in total were carried out at the two sites with both independent people and people belonging to institutional, associative, organizational responsibilities.

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

It turns out that there are three levels or degrees of resilience, ranging decreasingly from the strongest, in the city of Kef (North-West site), to the less significant, in the city of Kairouan, then to the faintest, in that of Sidi Bouzid (Central-West site).²

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

¹Mohamed Djaziri, 2021, Les chiffres clés des réseaux sociaux en Tunisie, web.

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



1. Recommendations for national and local state institutions

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

- **Revise the educational programmes** in such a way as to encourage socialisation to the universal values of individual freedom and respect for others; this could be done for instance by replacing religious education with moral education, since the issue at stake is education in tolerance and acceptance of others, whatever their differences. This recommendation is in line with the concern expressed by educational inspectors who point to the urgent need for a reform of the school system. Such a reform would put future citizens in tune with scientific and technological innovations and allow them to benefit from troves of tolerance should they open to other languages and cultures. To this end, it will be necessary to rehabilitate the tradition of **training courses for inspectors and teachers on human rights and cultural diversity**– by updating knowledge, strengthening participatory pedagogies and eliminating the asymmetrical and paternalistic methods of the past.
- In joint efforts by the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, and CSOs, provide more space to **arts and cultural activities** that cultivate and fertilise citizenship (e. g. devote afternoons to school club activities).
- Improve programme for **sports activities in schools**, by revising timetables (e.g. avoid juxtaposing them with language and science sessions and try to place them at the end of the day), ensuring that girls are not exempted from these activities, and providing all schools with the same sports equipment so as not to deprive some children of this important education, under the pretext of lacking equipment. This applies especially to working-class neighbourhoods and inland regions.
- **Improve coordination among the different ministries involved in the educational process** (Social Affairs, Women and the Family, Youth and Sports, National Education, Religious Affairs), in order to avoid the blurring of responsibilities and diverging approaches to the education of future citizens;
- **Reallocate the supervision of private schools** (often called Koranic schools) to the Ministry of Family and Children and the Ministry of Education – instead of the Ministry of Religious Affairs under which they are currently placed. This will help to harmonise the curricula for all children educated in public and public schools, to ensure oversight on the curricula, and to protect children from the abuses of private schools which evade institutional control over their education programmes.
- Ensure that only educational institutions under the dual supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Higher Education are entitled to **train imams** and to formulate the official discourse on religion and faith.
- Adapt higher education to the needs of the labour market, and rehabilitate vocational education from secondary school onwards, in order to **improve the professional integration of school drop-outs**, whose numbers are close to 100,000 per year.

- Revisit the **development model** that has been in place for decades: equal distribution of public and private investments between regions and inclusion of marginalised and impoverished social groups. Given that radicalised young people are recruited from economically marginalised regions, the application of “positive” discrimination – as endorsed by in the Constitution – in favor of these regions should begin with the upgrading of their educational and cultural establishments.



2. Recommendations for the international community

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

- Provide financial and institutional **support programmes for the employment of young people in precarious situations**, which would facilitate their inclusion into the job market.
- Within the framework of solidarity economy, provide financial and logistical assistance for **mini-projects to support vulnerable women**. Their financial autonomy would reduce the risks of vulnerability and radical temptation.
- Pay particular attention to the city of Kairouan as a major repository of a historical and religious heritage. The **promotion and profiling of Kairouan as a hub for religious tourism** can support its economic development and counter the risks of vulnerability and religious radicalisation.
- Pay specific attention to the city of Le Kef as a city with strong archaeological and natural potential. **International funds invested in the field of cultural and/or winter tourism** could ensure the transition of the Tunisian tourism sector, which has so far been concentrated on the country's coastline with low added value.
- Strengthen cooperation programmes to **enhance free movement between the countries of the North and the South**, in order to relieve the bad memories not only of the colonial era across the Tunisian South (including Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid) but also those of recent dates in relation to the massive interventions in Arab and Muslim countries (such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, etc.), often with the complicity of Arab and Muslim regimes that are the backers of religious fanaticism and act as the sworn enemies of freedoms and democracy. Earnest cooperation would consist in the promotion of inter-country relations based on mutual respect, the recognition of human rights without double standards and above all the establishment of win-win exchanges.



3. Recommendations for civil society

- Given the modest prerogatives granted to municipalities, civil society organisations (CSOs) benefiting from greater freedom and flexibility are called upon to compensate for these limitations. Thus, CSOs should mobilise and advocate for a **greater implementation of the principle of positive discrimination in favour of disadvantaged regions** of central and southern Tunisia – especially as this principle was not only included in the 2014 constitution but is also part and parcel now of the new Tunisian constitution that has just been ratified after the July 25, 2022 referendum.
- Associations and media outlets are called upon to play a key role in **supporting feminist aspirations**, particularly with regard to equal pay and mobility and parity in inheritance rights.
- **Networking between CSOs working for human rights, migrants, women, as well as cultural associations** strengthens the potential for resilience.
- On the other hand, **charities and media outlets involved in the propagation of violent extremist discourse should be better controlled** and, if necessary, banned.
- Citizen associations, media and academic institutions (such as the Institute of Sport and Physical Education in Kef and the Institute of Islamic Studies in Kairouan) are best placed to **build bridges of dialogue with radicalised groups**. They can be an additional source of information on how to better combat violent extremism.
- Civil society, because of its proximity to vulnerable communities, can **draw the attention of public authorities to forms of vulnerability and injustice and to proposals for social reform** (especially) generated by those who suffer injustice on a daily basis;
- CSOs should undertake **outreach programmes, such as sports or artistic activities** that are dedicated to protecting against – or channelling – risks of violence.
- Civil society leaders and academics should **call out on radical political parties and their media branches** to realise the harmful impact of their discourse on young people.



References

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

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